

Teacher empathy and therapeutic learning environments in higher education

"...a high degree of empathy in a relationship is possibly the most potent and certainly one of the most potent factors in bringing about change and learning. "

Rogers (1995, p.170)

Introduction

This action research will explore the concept of the empathic teacher within the learning environment, examining how empathy can be effectively integrated into higher education. It will investigate the tangible impact of empathic teaching on student engagement, emotional well-being, and academic performance, while also considering those who may not benefit from empathy and the potential limitations of empathic practices on inclusion (Brett, 2024).

For the past year I have been a trainee teacher on a Master's degree in Counselling and Psychotherapy. I am particularly interested in exploring how empathy informs and transforms teaching practice, supports student learning, and enhances classroom dynamics in the field of counselling and psychotherapy.

In the field of counselling and psychotherapy, it is widely acknowledged that trainees often bring with them significant life experience/events and personal motivations that have influenced their decision to enter the profession (Safi et al., 2017). Many have been through life events and challenges, such as trauma, abuse, mental health needs, suicide, self-harm, physical disabilities, experiences of death or birth, and other formative experiences. Counselling and psychotherapy training is very different from traditional degrees with a strong emphasis on personal development and self-awareness.

The phrase "wounded healers" is often used to describe counsellors and psychotherapist, those whose own experience of wounds shape their path toward healing others (Jung, 1973). Counselling and psychotherapy trainees often begin their training journey with unresolved personal wounds, experiences that may remain unprocessed, unhealed, or emotionally raw. As Newcomb et al., (2015) notes, many trainees enter the profession motivated by their own histories of emotional pain, which, while offering potential for deep empathy, can also present challenges for educators if not adequately explored through personal development and reflective practice (Safi et al., 2017).

"The good life is a process, not a state of being. It is a direction, not a destination."
(Rogers, 1961, p. 186)

"The only person who is educated is the one who has learned how to learn and change."
(Rogers, 1961, p. 105)

In recent years, many professions have increasingly recognised the importance of empathy in practice (English, 2016). However, given the personal histories and emotional depth often brought by those entering counselling training, empathy holds particular significance serving not only as a professional competency but also as a vehicle for both learning and personal healing.

What is Action Research?

Action research is a reflective, systematic approach used by practitioners to investigate and improve their own practices (Stringer, 2014). Originating from a desire to link theory with practice, it encourages a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, enabling teachers and other professionals to make evidence-based adjustments to their work (Cao & Yuan, 2020). Action research is distinct from traditional research because it is directly focused on the practitioner's own practice within their unique context, making it highly relevant and adaptable. It is a form of *insider inquiry*, where the researcher is also the practitioner, offering rich contextual understanding and practical insight. While this positioning introduces a degree of subjectivity, the depth of practitioner insight offers a meaningful mitigation against bias. Additionally, the *reiterative* nature of action research, through repeated cycles of inquiry, further supports the development of refined, responsive practice over time. In education, action research empowers teachers to actively engage in improving classroom practices, responding to the immediate needs of their students, and fostering a more effective learning environment (Ashwin, 2020). In adult education, action research holds particular value due to the diverse backgrounds and varied learning styles of adult learners. This process allows educators to respond adaptively to their students' needs, ultimately creating a more responsive and student-centred learning environment (Rapley, 2018). This report represents the *first cycle* of an ongoing action research process, laying the groundwork for further development and reflection.

Picture, Adapted from Mackinnon, et al., (2019)



Metaphor: "The Gardener's Experiment"

(Adapted from; McIntosh, 2010; Torrissen & Lovoll, 2024).

Imagine action research as a gardener who wants to improve the growth of their plants. The gardener begins by observing that some plants are not thriving as well as others. They might try adding different types of fertilizers or adjusting lighting, temperature or how much water each plant receives. After each change, they observe which plants respond well and which do not. They might also adjust based on weather or soil conditions, learning from each spring/summer/winter cycle and refining their approach until the garden flourishes. Just like the gardener, someone conducting an action research project constantly adjusts and refines based on outcomes, aiming for continuous growth and improvement.

Methodology

This research adopts an action research methodology, well-suited to practice-based enquiry in educational settings. Defined by its reflective and iterative nature, action research enables educators to investigate and enhance their teaching within the context of their everyday practice (Stringer, 2014). As a trainee teacher in Post-Compulsory Education and Training (PCET), this approach offers a valuable means of continuous professional development (CPD), supporting evidence-informed adjustments that remain grounded in real classroom experience.

This report represents the first cycle in an ongoing process of inquiry, following the stages of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. It provides a foundation for future cycles aimed at deepening understanding and refining empathic teaching practice over time. The iterative nature of action research offers a sustainable model for professional learning, particularly relevant within the dynamic and diverse contexts of adult and higher education.

The positionality of the practitioner-researcher provides a unique strength. As an insider, I have direct access to the relational dynamics of the classroom, allowing for meaningful insights rooted in lived experience. While this subjective position may introduce potential bias, it also enriches the study. Reflexivity is therefore central, ensuring ongoing critical examination of personal assumptions and emotional responses throughout the research process.

Philosophically, the study is grounded in a constructivist ontology, which views reality as co-constructed through interaction and meaning-making (Jaffe et al., 2024). This aligns with the study of empathy, which is inherently relational and context-dependent (O'Hara, 2005). Epistemologically, the research follows a social constructivist and interpretivist paradigm, where knowledge is shaped by social relationships and context (Rapley, 2018). This perspective supports the use of qualitative methods, which are particularly effective in exploring the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of teaching and learning (Clark et al., 2021).

The research design incorporates a thematic literature review on teacher empathy alongside reflective observation of personal teaching practice. These reflections not only bridge theory and practice but also contribute to the development of a more intentionally empathic teaching presence.

Ethical considerations are integral to the study. Sensitive themes emerging from student interactions will be handled with care, with appropriate support signposted when necessary (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). In summary, this methodology enables a practice-based, contextually rich, and iterative exploration of teacher empathy, supporting both pedagogical development and professional growth within the PCET sector.

Content and Scope

My current teaching placement is on a Master's programme in Counselling and Psychotherapy, where empathy is not only a core curriculum component but also a foundational professional value. It is embedded in the ethical framework and training standards set by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), which accredits these courses and provides professional membership for trainees.

This placement offers a valuable opportunity to examine how empathic teaching supports the development of empathic practitioners. My interest lies in refining my teaching to foster stronger connections with students and create an environment where empathy is both a subject of learning and a guiding classroom principle. Specifically, I aim to explore how empathic teaching contributes to student engagement, reduces classroom tension, and supports both emotional and cognitive aspects of learning.

In practice, empathy shapes not only my interactions with students but also how I structure and deliver course content. This inquiry focuses on small yet impactful aspects of teaching, such as creating a safe and supportive learning environment. Key areas of investigation include:

Defining and Differentiating Teacher Empathy from Therapeutic Empathy

Empathic Pedagogy and Student Self-Awareness

Pedagogical Strategies and Behaviours That Demonstrate Teacher Empathy

Systemic Enablers and Barriers to Empathetic Teaching Environments

Given the diverse personal and psychosocial experiences within this group, lecturers must navigate a complex learning environment teaching trainees to develop empathy while embodying it themselves toward students who may face psychological, behavioural, or socio-emotional challenges. These dynamics are addressed in course interviews, peer discussions, and throughout the personal development elements of the degree (Wolgien & Coady, 1997).

This study places particular emphasis on my own empathic teaching practice and its impact on students' engagement with emotionally complex and personally relevant material. Since trainees are expected to cultivate strong interpersonal and reflective skills, empathy emerges as both a key learning goal and a critical pedagogical approach. This inquiry therefore explores how empathic teaching enhances emotional safety, classroom inclusion, and the capacity to engage with challenging content (O'Connor, 2008), while supporting meaningful learning outcomes and classroom management (Bozkurt & Ozden, 2010).

To inform this exploration, I will draw on a diverse range of literature, including Aldrup et al.'s (2022) review on empathy in teacher-student interactions, Romero's (2024) work on

vulnerability and empathy in education, and Bouton's (2016) discussion of empathy in teacher preparation. I will also consider Low et al.'s (2024) framework for humanising education and social learning theory, alongside broader discussions on pedagogy, student well-being, and the practical challenges of embedding empathy in higher education contexts.

Thematic Literature Review: Key Findings

Overarching Research Question:

What is the relationship between teacher empathy and the formation of therapeutic learning environments?

Defining and Differentiating Teacher Empathy from Therapeutic Empathy

Empathy has long been recognised as a foundational element of both teaching and therapeutic relationships, yet its conceptualisation differs significantly across these fields. Within educational contexts, empathy is often described as a teacher's capacity to understand and respond appropriately to students' emotional and academic needs (Aldrup et al., 2022; Pianta & Hamre, 2009). This manifests in classroom sensitivity, attuned to student well-being, and the creation of a positive emotional climate that supports learning (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Therapeutic empathy, by contrast, is defined by its depth and focus on sustained emotional connection. Grounded in person-centred theory, it aims to foster trust and psychological safety within the therapeutic alliance (Rogers, 1957; Mearns & Thorne, 2013). While both forms of empathy are grounded in understanding and responsiveness, therapeutic empathy typically occurs in one-to-one relational contexts and often involves exploring trauma, identity, and emotional complexity in greater depth than classroom interactions allow.

Teachers often engage in what Bouton (2016) describes as “bounded empathy” a professional form of empathic engagement that balances emotional support with classroom structure and group responsibility. The boundaries inherent in teacher empathy are necessary to preserve authority and classroom coherence while still recognising individual student needs. Meanwhile, therapeutic practitioners may use their empathy to equalise power dynamics, engage with suffering, and facilitate personal insight (Hackney & Cormier, 2012).

Betzler's (2023) critique of Bloom (2017) adds further nuance to the understanding of empathy in both educational and therapeutic contexts. While Bloom warns of empathy's selectivity, bias, and potential to cause harm, Betzler argues for its responsible application. Her analysis is particularly useful in the education sector, where relational dynamics are complex and empathy must be carefully managed to ensure equity. Teachers, for instance, must guard against implicit biases that may lead to empathising more with students who are familiar or likable while overlooking others (Syed & Hadsell, 2020; Wang et al., 2023).

Furthermore, Klapwijk et al. (2016) distinguish between cognitive empathy (understanding others' emotions) and affective empathy (sharing those emotions), a division that holds particular relevance in neurodiverse educational settings. Students

on the Autism spectrum, for instance, may exhibit cognitive empathy challenges, while others may struggle with affective empathy. These distinctions are critical when designing inclusive, supportive learning environments.

Empathic Pedagogy and Student Self-Awareness

A significant body of literature supports the notion that empathic teaching contributes to student self-awareness, emotional safety, and personal development, particularly in post-16 education. Low et al. (2024) argue for “adding the human back into humanity,” advocating for pedagogies that humanise learning through empathic connection. In this context, empathy does not merely support academic progress but also facilitates identity formation, emotional growth, and interpersonal competence.

Students navigating this transitional life stage often face pressures around self-concept, future aspirations, and emotional maturity. Empathic teachers are more attuned to these pressures and can offer tailored encouragement and support, enabling students to become more self-aware and emotionally literate (Pianta & Hamre, 2009). For example, a teacher who recognises a student’s fear of public speaking might provide scaffolding and reassurance, fostering confidence over time (English, 2016).

This process aligns closely with social learning theory, which emphasises modelling and relational dynamics as central to learning (Bandura, 1977). When teachers model empathy through active listening, thoughtful feedback, and non-judgemental responses, they establish relational norms that students are likely to internalise and emulate. English (2016) highlights how empathic interactions in the classroom create a ripple effect, encouraging a classroom culture of mutual respect and collaboration.

Furthermore, the development of empathy and self-awareness can be intentionally embedded into curricula through, reflective journaling, and experiential learning. Romero (2024) and Lu et al. (2005) found that these methods not only enhance students’ academic understanding but also promote introspection, cultural humility, and emotional resilience.

Pedagogical Strategies and Behaviours That Demonstrate Teacher Empathy

Empathic pedagogy manifests through both interpersonal behaviours and structural teaching strategies. These include active listening, personalising feedback, flexibility in instruction, emotional validation, and inclusive classroom management. Teachers who integrate empathy into their daily practices tend to create emotionally safe spaces, where students feel valued, respected, and supported (Andreychik & Migliaccio, 2015; Zembylas, 2012).

The prosocial classroom model proposed by Jennings and Greenberg (2009) underscores the central role of teachers’ social-emotional competence in classroom functioning. Teachers who are emotionally attuned can more effectively manage stress,

resolve conflicts, and respond to student needs. These relational competencies enhance not only student engagement but also class cohesion and academic resilience (Meyers et al., 2019).

Empathetic strategies such as “empathetic projection” (English, 2016), wherein the teacher adopts the student’s perspective to better understand classroom dynamics, are especially effective in promoting understanding and resolving conflict. Similarly, practices such as differentiated instruction and responsive assessment contribute to an environment in which students’ diverse needs are met without reducing academic expectations (Meyers et al., 2019; Ross et al., 2023).

Moreover, positive empathy recognising and celebrating student successes is as crucial as empathising with struggles. This strengths-based approach fosters self-efficacy and helps students internalise a positive academic identity (Bouton, 2016). In turn, these practices contribute to a therapeutic learning environment by affirming the student’s worth and capacity for success.

Systemic Enablers and Barriers to Empathetic Teaching Environments

While individual teaching practices play a significant role in fostering therapeutic learning environments, institutional structures and curricular frameworks can either support or constrain empathy in practice. At the policy level, empathy is often undervalued within outcomes-driven educational systems that prioritise measurable achievement over relational pedagogy (O’Connor, 2008; Watt et al., 2021). Teachers working within these constraints may struggle to prioritise student well-being alongside high-stakes testing and curriculum targets.

Nonetheless, there is increasing recognition of the need for institutional change. Educational research has begun to advocate for systemic frameworks that centre relational pedagogies and emotional literacy (Romero, 2024). In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of emotional safety and well-being in maintaining student engagement and academic success (Ross et al., 2023). During such times, institutions that allowed for greater pedagogical flexibility and invested in pastoral care services were more successful in meeting student needs.

Barriers to empathetic education also include teacher workload, lack of training, and institutional cultures that discourage emotional expression. Without professional development in relational teaching strategies, empathy may be inconsistently applied or misunderstood (English, 2016). Moreover, Bloom’s (2017) critique reminds educators and policymakers that empathy must be monitored for bias and selectivity, particularly in diverse classrooms where teachers may unconsciously favour students who are more relatable to them.

There is also a need for more inclusive and trauma-informed curricula that validate students' lived experiences and identities. Educators must be supported in creating learning environments that are culturally responsive and socially just, which in turn fosters the kinds of relational trust that underpin therapeutic classrooms (Marshall, 2020; Zembylas, 2012).

The relationship between teacher empathy and the formation of therapeutic learning environments is both profound and complex. Empathy serves as the relational bridge through which academic, emotional, and personal development occurs, particularly in post-16 education where students are navigating formative life transitions. While empathy in education shares key principles with therapeutic empathy, it is distinct in scope, purpose, and context. Empathic pedagogy supports inclusive, emotionally safe classrooms that enhance self-awareness, engagement, and resilience. However, its application is not without risk, requiring critical awareness of bias, power, and institutional constraints. For therapeutic learning environments to flourish, teacher empathy must be recognised not merely as a soft skill but as an essential pedagogical tool, supported by systemic frameworks and embedded within professional practice.

Empathy and Neurodiversity

Klapwijk et al. (2016) provide critical insights into the neural underpinnings of empathy, distinguishing between cognitive empathy (the ability to understand others' emotions) and affective empathy (the ability to share others' emotions). Their findings have direct implications for teaching in higher education, particularly in contexts involving neurodiverse learners. Klapwijk et al.'s differentiation between cognitive and affective empathy underscores the importance of understanding empathy as a multifaceted construct. In higher education, recognizing this distinction can help educators tailor their approaches to students with diverse neurocognitive profiles. For example, students on the Autistic Spectrum may struggle with cognitive empathy, manifesting as difficulties in understanding social cues, perspective-taking, or interpreting others' emotions. On the other hand, students with Conduct Disorder and Callous-Unemotional traits may face challenges with affective empathy, potentially leading to behaviours perceived as emotionally detached or disruptive. These insights caution educators against viewing empathy-related difficulties as intentional misbehaviour or disengagement. Instead, they highlight the need for a more nuanced, compassionate approach that focuses on addressing underlying challenges to learning.

Caring for students and fostering positive teacher-student relationships are fundamental aspects of teachers' professional responsibilities (Butler, 2012; O'Connor, 2008; Watt et al., 2021). Additionally, offering high levels of emotional support characterized by a positive emotional climate in the classroom, sensitive responses to students' emotional, social, and academic needs, and attention to their interests is a key component of high-quality educational environments (Pianta & Hamre, 2009).

Empathetic teachers recognize that students may experience anxiety when faced with challenging tasks or feel embarrassed and frustrated when unable to answer questions. Once these negative emotional states are acknowledged, teachers' affective empathy should inspire them to respond sensitively to their students' emotional needs, providing comfort and encouragement (Weisz et al., 2020). The prosocial classroom model (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) encapsulates these concepts and asserts that teachers' social-emotional competence, with empathy as a vital component, should enhance effective classroom management.

While empathy is widely regarded as essential to inclusive teaching, Bloom (2017) offers a compelling critique, warning that empathy can be biased, selective, and even harmful if applied without awareness. He argues that educators may unconsciously feel more empathy toward students they find relatable—those who are well-spoken, struggling visibly, or culturally familiar—while overlooking or misjudging those who appear unmotivated, disruptive, or socially distant. This selective empathy, supported by research on implicit bias (Syed & Hadsell, 2020; Wang et al., 2023), risks reinforcing classroom inequalities. Furthermore, Bloom warns that empathy can be "weaponized" when concern for one group unintentionally fosters exclusion of others (Marshall, 2020). In post-16 education, where learners bring diverse and complex identities, such partiality undermines the inclusive ethos that therapeutic learning environments aim to foster. Educators must therefore engage in critical reflection to ensure empathy is applied equitably and ethically.

The constructivist approach to education complements empathy-based teaching strategies, enabling educators to build knowledge through relational and contextual understanding. By tailoring support to students' specific empathy challenges, educators can foster inclusive environments that promote learning and personal growth. This approach not only enhances teaching effectiveness but also aligns with the broader goals of higher education to nurture diverse talents and perspectives.

Analysis and Findings

Empathy in Classroom Management

Empathy plays a pivotal role in classroom management, particularly in post-16 education where students often bring mature perspectives, complex life experiences, and evolving identities. Empathy-driven classroom management emphasises respect, collaboration, and psychological safety; qualities that are essential in cultivating a supportive learning environment. Rather than enforcing rigid authority, empathic teachers respond to students' needs through understanding and dialogue, which fosters a culture of mutual respect and accountability (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

In my placement, I observed that students were more receptive to redirection and feedback when approached with empathy, rather than punitive or hierarchical strategies. For instance, when a student expressed resistance to group work due to social anxiety, acknowledging their discomfort and co-creating an alternative solution led to increased participation and trust. This approach not only managed classroom behaviour effectively but also reinforced the student's agency and sense of belonging. As Aldrup et al. (2022) note, empathetic teacher-student relationships significantly enhance classroom cohesion and emotional regulation, particularly among adult learners.

Supporting Diverse Learners

Empathy also serves as a critical tool for inclusion, especially in neurodiverse and culturally diverse classrooms. In post-16 education, students arrive with a broad range of learning needs, cultural backgrounds, and lived experiences. Empathic teachers actively seek to understand these differences, thereby promoting an inclusive ethos that validates diverse identities and reduces the marginalisation often experienced in education (Zembylas, 2012).

In neurodiverse settings, for example, recognising that a student with Autism may require a predictable routine or sensory adaptations allows educators to pre-emptively reduce stress and promote focus. Similarly, cultural empathy understanding students' backgrounds, communication styles, and values; can help dismantle assumptions and support authentic engagement (Wang et al., 2023). The literature and my own practice both highlight that empathetic pedagogy increases participation and motivation among learners who might otherwise disengage due to unacknowledged or unmet needs.

Selective Empathy in the Post-16 Classroom

Empathy is widely recognised as a cornerstone of effective, compassionate teaching, supporting student well-being, classroom engagement, and inclusive learning environments (Butler, 2012; Pianta & Hamre, 2009). However, Paul Bloom's (2017) critique of empathy challenges educators to consider how empathy can be biased,

selective, and even harmful if not applied equitably. In post-16 education, this is especially relevant. Teachers may unconsciously empathise more with students they find relatable those who are likeable, well-spoken, or visibly struggling while overlooking or misjudging those who present differently, such as students perceived as disruptive or disengaged (Syeed & Hadsell, 2020; Wang et al., 2023). This selective empathy risks reinforcing inequality and undermining classroom inclusivity. Bloom's concerns serve as a necessary counterbalance to the prosocial classroom model (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), urging educators to critically reflect on who they empathise with, why, and how to extend empathy consciously and fairly across all learners.

Empathy and Mental Health Support

Empathy plays an indispensable role in supporting student mental health, a growing concern within higher education. Post-16 students often encounter pressures related to identity, workload, relationships, and existential concerns all of which may impact their well-being. Empathic teaching can serve as a protective factor, providing emotional validation and human connection within the educational context (Romero, 2024).

In my own teaching, I encountered students who openly expressed anxiety around assessments or self-doubt about their capacity to complete the course. Empathic listening, flexible deadlines (where possible), and small affirmations created a learning atmosphere where students felt safe to disclose vulnerabilities without fear of judgment. These interactions mirror therapeutic containment, offering emotional holding while maintaining appropriate boundaries. Such relational safety promotes academic persistence and resilience (English, 2016; Meyers et al., 2019), underscoring empathy's role as a buffer against emotional distress in the learning environment.

Moving Forward

Moving forward, this research suggest the value of further exploration into student experiences of teacher empathy through direct, qualitative methods. In future cycles of this action research, I would aim to conduct semi-structured interviews with counselling and psychotherapy students to gather rich, personal insights into how they perceive and experience empathy from their tutors (Appendix 1). These interviews would allow for a deeper understanding of the relational dynamics within the classroom and how empathic teaching influences student engagement, well-being, and professional development. Such data would complement and enhance the current reflective findings, offering a more rounded perspective that could inform both teaching practice and curriculum development within the field of counselling education.

Challenges and Limitations

Measuring Empathy in Education

One of the principal challenges in embedding empathy within educational settings is the difficulty of measurement. Unlike quantifiable academic outcomes, empathy is inherently qualitative and context-dependent. Particularly in post-16 education, where students' needs and interactions are multifaceted, standardised metrics often fail to capture the depth and variability of empathic practice (Clark et al., 2021).

In this action research, insights were primarily drawn from reflective practice rather than empirical testing. While this aligns with the interpretivist framework, it raises questions about how to demonstrate empathy's impact in a way that satisfies both academic rigour and institutional accountability. However, narrative data and reflective journaling offer rich, authentic insights into teacher-student dynamics that can inform ongoing pedagogical development.

Balancing Empathy with Boundaries

Another significant limitation involves maintaining professional boundaries while practicing empathy. In post-16 education, especially in counselling training, students may view their teacher as a quasi-therapeutic figure, which can blur relational lines. While empathic attunement is vital, there is a risk of over-identification or emotional overextension if boundaries are not clearly defined (Bouton, 2016).

During my placement, I occasionally found myself holding space for emotionally intense disclosures. These moments called for careful management, acknowledging the student's experience without becoming enmeshed or moving beyond the remit of the educational role. Empathy must therefore be balanced with clarity of purpose and safeguarding protocols, ensuring the educator remains a facilitator of learning rather than an informal counsellor (Hackney & Cormier, 2012).

Conclusion and Practical Implications

Actionable Strategies for Post-16 Educators

Empathy, when applied with intention, has the potential to create inclusive, therapeutic learning environments. Within emotionally rich disciplines like counselling and psychotherapy, it becomes a central pedagogical tool. Empathy-based listening such as paraphrasing, validating emotions, and maintaining a non-judgemental presence can encourage student engagement and reflective learning. Fostering open communication helps build trust and creates a safe space for vulnerability, which in turn deepens learning.

Adapting teaching to be inclusive and responsive involves recognising emotional as well as academic needs and maintaining compassionate support alongside high expectations. Reflective practice also plays a key role in sustaining empathy and managing professional boundaries. Educators benefit from regular self-reflection and supervision to navigate emotionally complex situations with care and clarity.

Looking forward, embedding empathy into teacher training programmes is essential. Post-16 educators should be supported in developing emotional literacy, boundary awareness, and relational teaching strategies that support diverse learners in dynamic and often emotionally charged educational settings.

Empathy contributes not only to classroom cohesion but also to student self-awareness, emotional resilience, and inclusive practice. In counselling education, it models the interpersonal skills students are expected to develop. Empathic pedagogy fosters safer, more respectful learning environments and should be recognised as a core element of post-16 teaching practice.

While further research is needed, this action research suggests that empathic teaching enhances student development, classroom dynamics, and educational inclusion. As a pedagogical tool, empathy plays a critical role in supporting learning and well-being in increasingly diverse and complex higher education environments.

(4400 words)

Reference

Bloom, P. (2017) *Against empathy: The case for rational compassion*. London, UK: Penguin, 2016

Aldrup, K., Carstensen, B., & Klusmann, U. (2022). Is empathy the key to effective teaching? A systematic review of its association with teacher-student interactions and student outcomes. *Educational Psychology Review*, 34, 1177–1216.

Andreychik, M. R., & Migliaccio, N. (2015). Empathizing with others' pain versus empathizing with others' joy: Examining the separability of positive and negative empathy and their relation to different types of social behaviors and social emotions. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 37(5), 274–291. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2015.1071256>.

Ashwin, P. (2020) *Reflective teaching in higher education*. 2nd edition. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Batson, C. D., Ahmad, N., Lishner, D. A., & Tsang, J.-A. (2002). Empathy and altruism. In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 485–498). Oxford University Press.

Betzler, R.J. (2023) 'How the case against empathy overreaches', *Philosophical psychology*, pp. 1–21. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2023.2296600>.

Bouton, B (2016) *Empathy Research and Teacher Preparation: Benefits and Obstacles*: Austin Peay State University

Bozkurt, T., and M. S. Ozden. 2010. "The Relationship between Empathetic Classroom Climate and Students' Success." *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 5:231–4.

Brett, J.D. et al. (2024) 'Empathy and Autism: Establishing the Structure and Different Manifestations of Empathy in Autistic Individuals Using the Perth Empathy Scale', *Journal of autism and developmental disorders* [Preprint]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-024-06491-3>.

Butler, R. (2012). Striving to connect: Extending an achievement goal approach to teacher motivation to include relational goals for teaching. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 104(3), 726–742. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028613>

Cao, H. and Yuan, R. (2020) 'Promoting English as a Medium of Instruction in University Teaching: an action research experience', *Journal of education for teaching : JET*, 46(2), pp. 240–243. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2020.1724657>.

Clark, T., Foster, L., Sloan, L., & Bryman, A. (2021). *Bryman's social research methods* (6th edition). Oxford University Press.

Durán Del Fierro, F. (2022) 'On the possibility of a public regime in higher education: rethinking normative principles and policy frameworks'.

English, A.R. (2016) 'John Dewey and the Role of the Teacher in a Globalized World: Imagination, empathy, and "third voice"', *Educational philosophy and theory*, 48(10), pp. 1046–1064. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2016.1202806>.

Hackney, H., & Cormier, L. S. (2012). *The professional counselor: A process guide to helping*. Pearson.

Jaffe, M. et al. (2024) 'Finding a pedagogy of empathy in a Common Read Project', *Teaching in higher education*, pp. 1–16. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2024.2324727>.

Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. Review of Educational Research, 79(1), 491–525. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308325693>

Klapwijk, E.T. et al. (2016) 'Different brain responses during empathy in autism spectrum disorders versus conduct disorder and callous-unemotional traits', *Journal of child psychology and psychiatry*, 57(6), pp. 737–747. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12498>.

Low, R.Y.S., Egan, S. and Bell, A. (eds) (2024) *Using Social Theory in Higher Education*. 1st ed. 2024. Cham: Springer International Publishing. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-39817-9>.

Lu, Y. E., Dane, B., & Gellman, A. (2005). An experiential model: Teaching empathy and cultural sensitivity. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 25(3/4), 89-103).

Marshall, S. (Ed.). (2020). *A handbook for teaching and learning in higher education ; enhancing academic practice* (Fifth Edition.). Routledge.

Mearns, D., & Thorne, B. (2013). *Person-centred counselling in action*. SAGE.

Meyers, S. et al. (2019) 'Teacher Empathy: A Model of Empathy for Teaching for Student Success', *College teaching*, 67(3), pp. 160–168. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2019.1579699>.

Müller, F. (2021). *Design ethnography : epistemology and methodology* (1st ed. 2021.). Springer Nature. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-60396-0>

O'Connor, K. E. (2008). "You choose to care": Teachers, emotions and professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24(1), 117–126. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2006.11.008>

O'Hara, H. (2005) 'The transcendent teacher-learner relationship: A class investigation', *Journal of early childhood teacher education*, 25(4), pp. 331–337. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1090102050250407>.

Pianta, R. C. (1999). *Enhancing relationships between children and teachers*. American Psychological Association.

Pianta, R. C., & Hamre, B. K. (2009). Conceptualization, measurement, and improvement of classroom processes: Standardized observation can leverage capacity. *Educational Researcher*, 38(2), 109–119. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X09332374>

Rapley, E. (2018). "Seeing the light." Personal epiphanies and moving towards interpretivism; a researcher's tale of exploring teacher pedagogic practice. *Ethnography and Education*, 13(2), 185–203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2017.1315311>

Rogers, C. R. (1957). The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 21(2), 95–103.

Rogers, C. R. (1959). A theory of therapy, personality, and interpersonal relationships: As developed in the client-centered framework. In S. Koch (Ed.), *Psychology: A study of a science*. Study 1, Volume 3: Formulations of the person and the social context (pp. 184–256). McGraw-Hill.

Rogers, C. R. (1969). *Freedom to Learn*. Columbus, OH: Merrill Publishing Company

Rogers, C. R. (Carl R. (2003). *Client-centered therapy : its current practice, implications and theory*. Constable.

Romero, R. (2024) 'A pathway to self-awareness, empathy and vulnerability: exploring autoethnography as a method for undergraduate teaching', *Teaching in higher education*, pp. 1–15. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2024.2332269>.

Ross, J. et al. (2023) 'Instructor and Student Perceptions of Teacher Empathy in Higher Education', *College teaching*, 71(1), pp. 28–37. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2022.2049673>.

Segal, E. A. 2011. "Social Empathy: A Model Built on Empathy, Contextual Understanding, and Social Responsibility That Promotes Social Justice." *Journal of Social Service Research* 37 (3):266–77. doi:10.1080/ 01488376.2011.564040.

Stebbleton, M. J., K. M. Soria, and R. J. Huesman. 2014. "First-generation Students' Sense of Belonging, Mental Health, and Use of Counseling Services at Public Research Universities." *Journal of College Counseling* 17 (1):6–20. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1882.2014.00044.x.

Stringer, E. T. (2014). *Action research* (Fourth edition.). SAGE.

Syed, N., & Hadsell, H. (2020). *Critical Perspectives on Interreligious Education : Experiments in Empathy* (First edition.). Koninklijke Brill NV.

Wang, Y., Harris, P. L., Pei, M., & Su, Y. (2023). Do Bad People Deserve Empathy? Selective Empathy Based on Targets' Moral Characteristics. *Affective Science*, 4(2), 413–428. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42761-022-00165-y>

Watt, H. M. G., Butler, R., & Richardson, P. W. (2021). Antecedents and consequences of teachers' goal profiles in Australia and Israel. *Learning and Instruction*, 80(5), 101491. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2021.101491>

Weisz, E., Ong, D. C., Carlson, R. W., & Zaki, J. (2020). Building empathy through motivation-based interventions. *Emotion*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000929>

Werry, M., and R. O'Gorman. 2007. Shamefaced: Performing pedagogy, outing affect. *Text and Performance Quarterly* 27, no. 3: 213–30.

Zembylas, M. (2012) 'Pedagogies of strategic empathy: navigating through the emotional complexities of anti-racism in higher education', *Teaching in higher education*, 17(2), pp. 113–125. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2011.611869>.

Appendix 1

Questions for future semi structured interviews, looking at teacher empathy.

General Experience of Empathy

Can you describe a time when you felt your tutor or teacher really understood what you were going through?

What does “empathy” from a teacher or tutor mean to you personally?

Have you ever felt that a tutor lacked empathy when it was most needed? What was that like?

Impact on Learning and Engagement

Have you ever felt more motivated or more confident in your learning because of an empathic response from a teacher?

Do you think empathy from your tutor influences your willingness to take part in group discussions or personal development work?

Support and Wellbeing

Has a tutor ever responded in a way that helped you manage stress, anxiety, or a difficult life situation? What did they do?

How important is it to you that tutors understand the emotional aspects of the work we do as counselling students?

Boundaries and Professionalism

Do you think there’s a healthy balance between empathy and professional boundaries in your learning environment?

Can you think of a time when too much empathy from a tutor felt unhelpful or uncomfortable?

In what circumstances might a less empathic approach from a tutor be more appropriate or effective?

Reflections and Ideal Practice

In an ideal world, how would an empathic tutor respond when a student is struggling, either personally or academically?

What advice would you give to new tutors working with counselling students about how to show empathy effectively?

Has your experience with tutor empathy influenced how you want to work with future clients in your own counselling practice?