Meaning Patterns Project: Interpretive Methods

Project Overview

- Publisher: ERAM 557 SP23
- Start: Mar 29, 2023
- Due: Apr 24, 2023

The Importance of Empathy within the MTSS Framework

Version 3

Introduction

Empathy is not often at the forefront of education discussions in relation to curriculum, data analysis, or instructional practices. Brackett et al (2011) report that higher levels of empathy make people more productive in cooperative learning and work environments. Additionally, empathy education has been proven to enhance academic success.

As a school administrator hired to focus on school improvement, I continue to see the importance of approaching teaching and learning with empathy. Whether our school improvement team is discussing data that is less than stellar or we are meeting about the time-intensive task of adopting a new curriculum, empathy needs to be a valued component within those conversations and be present in the action plan that follows.

It is always a special feeling when former students write a sweet note or visit a teacher to tell them the special role they played in their success. We seldom hear about the student's story who experienced discomfort or even trauma through words, actions, or policies that were part of their learning climate. In reflecting on this topic, my mind automatically goes to situations in which I could have been more patient or nurturing.

It is increasingly common among schools to recognize social emotional learning (SEL) as a critical dimension to support student success.

> "SEL is the process through which students acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018, p. 29).

Students commonly experience a wide range of emotions each day as part of their learning process and progression of building relationships with adults and peers. Empathy is a crucial consideration for teachers as it has been identified as relevant to the quality of teacher/student relationships and interactions (Aldrup et al, 2022). Unlike other social-emotional traits, empathy explicitly involves the ability to "perceive and understand students' emotional needs" (Zins et al., 2004).

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) prioritizes the need for social-emotional learning within multitiered systems of support (MTSS). MTSS is an evidence-based framework for effectively connecting systems and services while simultaneously addressing students' academic, behavioral, and social-emotional well-being within a safe and supportive learning environment National Association of School Psychologists (2021).

The graphic below outlines a framework that connects systems addressing the equitable education of all students. Through the use of data-driven decision making, student strengths and weaknesses can be identified. By utilizing a universal design for learning, the multi-faceted needs of all learners will be acknowledged and unnecessary obstacles in the learning climate can be identified and addressed (Burstahler & Cory, 2008).
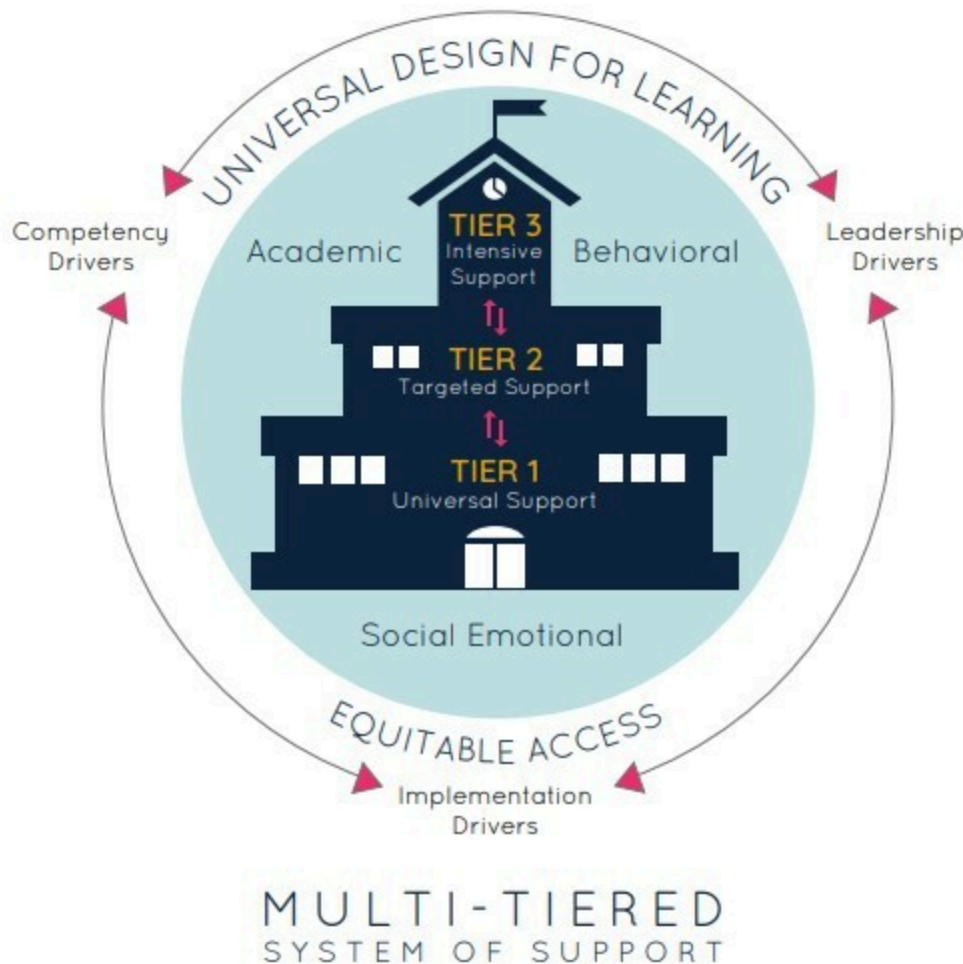
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2018).

This work will explore the meaning of empathy as it relates to curriculum, learning climate, grading, and behavior. Empathy within an educational context can be easily misunderstood. In this realm, it is more than a feeling, but rather a skill that can be infused into our systems, relationships, and daily interactions (Westman, 2022).

> "When we feel genuine empathy for a person, that affects our sense of responsibility for the person's welfare, how we think of them, how we listen to them, how we speak to them, and how we interact with them. It also influences our willingness to learn from them and to invest in them. Action informed by the world a child sees and knows can be quite different from action based in our own experiences" (Tomlinson, 2021 p. 47).

Empathy and Curriculum

Westman (2022) posits that teachers do not often proactively teach with empathy in the classroom. Empathy tends to be more of a reaction when students present with a learning challenge or personal struggle. Westman (2022) goes on to say that teacher clarity can assist with showing students empathy as learning intentions and success criteria need to be clearly communicated. This process starts in the planning stages with colleagues in a grade level band. Hattie (2012) stresses that teachers and students must have a clear understanding of learning intentions (what students are expected to learn) and success criteria (what success looks like with any given assignment or project). Hattie goes on to explain that for some students, learning feels like a path through the unknown with no clearly defined destination in sight. Approaching curriculum with empathy involves giving students a map to their destination as well as frequent updates along the way about where they have successfully been, how much of their journey is left, and re-iterating instructions and tips along the way.

Hoerr (2016) states that it is crucial to start the instructional process with empathy. Learning intentions should have a clear focus on standards that are being assessed rather than the product that is to be turned in. Creating lessons or projects with attention to learning provides students with the autonomy to focus on skills that assists them with the task of making connections to the curriculum and making sense of their world (Westman, 2021).

"When we feel genuine empathy for a person, it affects our sense of responsibility for the person's welfare, how we think of them, how we listen to them, how we speak to them, and how we interact with them. It also influences our willingness to learn from them and to invest in them" (Tomlinson, 2021, p.47).

Empathy in the Learning Climate

Bozkurt and Ozden (2010) conducted a study with 6th-11th grade students as well as university students. An empathy scale was developed based on a qualitative pilot study. The study was designed to measure the impact of teacher empathy levels as they were displayed in attitudes and behaviors based on student perception. The study found that empathetic behaviors rather than the academic competency of teachers boosted student success as reported by students. The study underscored the importance of empathy as a pivotal motivational concept that should be integrated into student-centered educational systems.

Despite ambiguity regarding the definition and nature of empathy, there is agreement in the literature that an empathetic teacher response contains both cognitive and emotional elements.

"Cognitive empathy involves knowing how other people think and feel,

while emotional empathy involves feeling another person's emotions." (Clarke, 2023)

In the following video, Dr. Aileen Fullchange provides a one-minute explanation of what cognitive empathy is and how we might incorporate it into our educational practices.

Media embedded April 29, 2023
[Permalink]

1-Minute Breakdown | Building Cognitive Empathy, Momentous Institute (2020)

Emotional empathy can be described as feeling another person's emotions.

> When we experience emotional empathy, we are moving from the cognitive perespective into a shared emotional experience" (Clarke, 2023).

The following definition explains the nuances of cognitive vs. emotional empathy.

Cognitive Empathy

- Taking another person's perspective
- Imagining what it's like in another person's shoes
- Understanding someone's feelings

Emotional Empathy

- Sharing an emotional experience
- Feeling distress in response to someone's pain
- Experiencing a willingness to help someone

Clarke (2023)

Bozkurt & Ozden (2010) report key student comments regarding how effective

teachers approached problem solving within both a cognitive and empathetic climate:

Cognitive Climate

- Pays attention to our opinions
- Values what we say
- Understands our frame of reference

Empathetic Climate

- Listens to us
- Pays attention to our feelings
- Suggests and initiates solutions to our problems

"An 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, p. 210).

Grading with Empathy

Infusing empathy into grading practices involves separating academic progress and student "soft skills". Westman (2022) posits that there is no need to choose between these two entities. One should be able to set clear learning intentions and success criteria that involves clarity and represents empathy as the goal of learning and growing should be evident.

The grading infrastructure established by Honowai Elementary School and outlined in Westman (2022) is an example of a grading rubric with clear guidelines about student assessment. The clarity that this document communicates represents an equitable and empathetic approach to student assessment.

At Honowai Elementary School we believ

Student behaviors should not be factored into academic grades

Late assignments should not be penalized academically.

Extra credit or bonus points should not be offered to increase a student's grade

When working in groups, a student should be graded on his or her performance, not as a grou

Evidence from formative assessments should inform instruction and not be averaged into a gr

The grade book should be organized by standards and learning goals, rather than by assignme

Clear descriptions of achievement expectations should be given to students.

Grades are based on performance aligned to standards and learning goals rather than assignm

Zeros aren't used for missing evidence. Alternatives (ex: "insufficient evidence") are used inst

Habits of scholarship (student skills) should be assessed and reported separately.

Grades should be for communication, not motivation or punishment.

Students are part of the grading process via goal-setting, choice, and tracking their progress to mastery.

Teachers ensure that students are encouraged to honestly report their progress and advocate themselves by creating conducive learning environments.

O'Connor (2010) Adapted by Lisa Westman for Honowai Elementary School from
A repair kit for grading: 15 fixes for broken grades, (2nd ed),

While the above information focuses on teacher practices, the topic of student motivation is another driving factor in the grading process. Kohn (1999) reports that extrinsic motivation - student desire to get good and/or better grades - is different from intrinsic motivation, which can be described as personal motivation to learn for its own sake. Kohn (1999) goes on to say that not only should we be able to discern the difference, but also be aware that extrinsic motivation for high grades can undermine intrinsic motivation to learn. Assessment discussions often discount the fact that these two types of motivation exist. If nourishing a student's

desire to learn is a primary goal for us, then grading is problematic by its very nature (Kohn, 2011).

The video below is an example of how teachers are interpreting equitable and empathetic grading practices.

Media embedded April 9, 2023
[Permalink]

WPTV News (2019)

> Compassionate grading isn't just about rewriting policies. It has to be about engaging students more fully and critically in conversations about their own education. We need new (more direct, more honest) ways to draw students into conversation about our pedagogies, not just the *what* of teaching, but the *how* and *why*. Ultimately, grading and assessment can't be "compassionate," unless it's work we do with students rather than something that happens to them" (Stommel, 2022).

Empathy in Behavior Management

Westman (2022) posits that a teacher's goal is to "consistently and intentionally exhibit empathy that falls somewhere in between cognitive and behavioral" (p. 5). Reacting to a student's outward behavior is a natural reaction in a roomfull of students. Empathy invites us to look below the surface.

> When you are charged with managing behavior in addition to teaching content, it's easy to overlook what's happening with the student and focus on what's happening to you as the teacher (Morin, 2023).

Marzano and Marzano (2003) maintain that a teacher/student relationship is the most essential component for effective classroom management. They go on to state that a teacher actions are considerably more influential than policy or procedure.

> Teacher empathy is the degree to which instructors work to deeply understand students' personal and social situations, feel caring and concern in response to students' positive and negative emotions, and communicate their understanding and caring to students through their

behavior" (Meyers et al., 2019, p. 161).

Empathetic teaching draws on three components:[6]		Positive behavior management enables teachers to:[7]
Cognitive	One's ability to understand another's perspective and why they have certain feelings in personal and social circumstances	❖ Understand behavior as a way to determine studen needs
Affective	One's ability to feel what another is feeling, whether that be mirroring or uniquely reacting to another's situation	❖ Build trust and relationships with students ❖ Learn to proactively address behavioral challenge rather than react to them ❖ Consider why students may behave a certain way (e.g lack of communication skills, attention seekin avoidance tactic)
Behavioral	One's ability to set boundaries when empathizing with students and maintain a focus on student learning	❖ Build a safe and supportive classroom environment ❖ Engage students, including those with learning an attention issues

Meyers et al., (2019)

Strong teacher/student relationships are foundational to a productive learning climate. Embedding empathy into effective classroom management requires the acknowledgement that all behaviors are a form of communication. Revising our reaction to include empathy means that we should not make assumptions about how a student is feeling, but rather forge a relationship that involves communication and trust (Goldberg-McKeown, 2021).

Interpretive Methodology

Yanow & Schwartz-Shea (2010) posit that in the realm of interpretive methodology, "there is no direct, unmediated access to reality" (p. 29). The connection between humans and the world relies on historical and cultural contexts.

Bevir & Kedar (2008) add to the description of interpretive methodology by stating that when utilizing interpretive analysis, "observations must be interpreted through the eyes of the participant embedded in the social context" (p.7). One must view, understand, and make meaning of the participants' phenomenon so that they can provide a rich narrative about why the phenomenon occurred. Bevir & Kedar (2008) go on to describe the advantages and disadvantages of interpretive analysis:

Advantages

- Interpretive research is well-suited to analyze complex issues that often have ambiguous or hidden aspects associated with the phenomenon.
- Interpretive research is often a useful tool for uncovering details and questions that lend themselves to further research.

- Interpretive research aligns well with studying unique topics, events, or processes that require an element of theory construction.

Challenges

- Interpretive research often requires a significant amount of time and resources.
- Too little data can lead to inaccurate assumptions and misleading findings.
- It is often difficult for researchers to remain unbiased as they analyze and reconcile diverse perspectives.

Cope and Kalantzis (2020) note that with interpretive research, there is a focus on understanding the ways in which meaning is created in people's lives. How do interactions with others shape our world? The function of agency as it pertains to a teacher's role is to provide a classroom climate in which students can create and engage in the process of meaning making. Even within a world of multi-modality, learning is shaped by human experience. Agency involves student engagement as well as an individual's authority over their own learning. As teachers, our job is not solely defined by the delivery of content. We then have to interpret how it was received so that subsequent content and instructional practices can be relevant and informed. Cope and Kalantzis (2020) summarize this phenomenon as a transposition of self and other. Research challenges us to examine empathetic relationships. It is through this process that teachers and students can create a shared meaning.

Empathy in Education Application

In 2006, Fiona Collins became the principal of Francis Street CBS, an all-boys primary school located in the Liberties in Dublin. As her tenure began, there were teacher, student, and parent complaints about stress, disrespect, and anxiety. Ms. Collins realized that learning could not be maximized without these issues being addressed.

Art therapy, restorative circles, cognitive behavior methods, and yoga are all initiatives that were implemented to move toward a more empathetic atmosphere.

"I believe that empathy-based methodologies create the conditions for engaged self-understanding and learning, and that this approach can build healthy communities" (Collins, 2006).

Francis Street School (image from Twitter)

Students at the Francis Street CBS use the game of chess to improve problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication skills. The art of chess is an excellent tool to teach the concept of making good and responsible choices while stressing responsibility for actions and the need to plan ahead. Collins maintains that all of these values are integral to an empathy-based methodology program that is facilitated by the school's teachers (Collins, 2006).

"Empathy's relevance to the teaching profession has remained central to the human interactions between teachers and students throughout the years …..frameworks of this sort must account for the multiple dimensions of empathy's expression"(Warren, 2013, p. 395).

Warren (2013) goes on to explain that empathy connects the teacher to the

student's experiences both in and outside the classroom. More specifically, the application of empathy helps teachers to engage with and understand a student's social and cultural perspective.

Critique

While few may be critical of incorporating empathy into the learning environment, there are limitations to be aware of. Meyers et al, (2019) note that it is easier at certain times of the school year to exhibit empathy. Teachers are more likely to find enthusiasm for empathy at the beginning of a semester. Empathy is more difficult to sustain over an extended period of time as workloads become more stressful.

Perhaps more alarming is that teachers are not always able to be empathetic toward all students. Cooper (2011) posits that there is a "group think" aspect to empathy in which we relate more closely to individuals with whom we share commonalities. In other words, there is some evidence that we demonstrate bias towards those who are more similar and proximally closer to us (Hoffman, 2000).

It is staggering to think that even a topic such as empathy can have negative connotations. It is imperative to be aware of our own biases and their pedagogical implications.

> We may attend more to the students with whom we identify rather than to the students who need us most" (Prinz, 2011, p. 224).

Discussion

Establishing and maintaining a positive and productive teacher/student relationship is a key component of a teacher's professional role. Providing support by being attentive to academic, emotional, and social needs is an indicator of a successful classroom. From a theoretical perspective, the relationship between a teacher's ability to infuse empathy into the classroom environment has a direct impact on student development (Aldrup et al., 2022)

- Empathy within an instructional environment involves clear instruction that is focused on student engagement, content mastery, and cognitive enrichment. Additionally, teachers provide pertinent and timely feedback and scaffold instruction based on learner needs (Pianta, 1999).
- Empathy within a classroom management model involves being attentive to boredom, noticing the need for student autonomy, productive use of time and setting clear classroom guidelines

Empathy: The Heart of Difficult Conversations | Michelle Stowe | TEDxTallaght (2018)

Conclusion

> "When the teacher has the ability to understand the student's reaction from the inside, has the sensitive awareness of the process of how education and learning seems to the student … .the likelihood of learning is significantly increased" (Rogers 1969, p.157).

Infusing empathy into all aspects of teaching is not an easy task. Our human nature prohibits us from treating all situations with patience, insight, and clarity. Westman (2022) states that it is not a coincidence that mental health and social-emotional learning are at the forefront of many educational conversations. Brackett (2019) reports that over half of 17 year olds report experiencing trauma.

Westman (2022) suggests that rather than try to identify who requires empathy, we should start each day with the premise that all learners deserve empathy in order to learn and grow.

References

*Aldrup, K., Carstensen, B. & Klusmann, U. Is Empathy the Key to Effective Teaching? A Systematic Review of Its Association with Teacher-Student Interactions and Student Outcomes. Educ Psychol Rev 34, 1177–1216 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-021-09649-y

*Bevir, M., & Kedar, A. (2008, August 18). *Concept formation in political science: AN anti-naturalist critique of qualitative methodology:* Perspectives on Politics. Cambridge Core.

*Bozkurt, T., & Ozden, M. (2010, September 21). *The relationship between empathetic classroom climate and students' success.* Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences.

Brackett, M. (2019). *Permission to feel: Unlocking the power of emotions to help*

our kids, ourselves, and our society thrive. New York: Celadon Books.

*Brackett, M. A., Rivers, S. E., & Salovey, P. (2011). Emotional intelligence: Implications for personal, social, academic, and workplace success. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass,* 5(1), 88–103. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2010.00334.x

Burgstahler, S., & Cory, R. (2008). *Universal design in higher education: From principles to practice.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press

*Clarke, J. (2023, March 1). *How empathy can improve your relationships.* Verywell Mind.

*Collins, F. (2015, March 29). Teaching with empathy is a breath of fresh air. *The Sunday Times,* pp. 17–17.

*Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2020). *Making sense: Reference, agency, and structure in a grammar of multimodal meaning.* Cambridge University Press.

Essa and MTSS for decision-makers. National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). (2021).

*Goldberg-McKeown, S. (2021, March 12). The Empathetic Teacher [web log].

*Hoffman, M. (2000). *Empathy and moral development: The implications for caring and justice.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*Kohn, A. (1999). Punished by rewards: *The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes.* Rev. ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

*Kohn, A. (2011). The Case Against Grades. *Educational Leadership.*

*Marzano, Robert J., & Marzano, Jana S. (2003). The key to classroom management. *Educational Leadership,* 61(1), 6.

*Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2018). Resource guides to the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks for students with disabilities.

Meyers, S., Rowell, K., Wells, M., & Smith, B. (2019, April 9). *Teacher empathy: A model of empathy for teaching for student success.* College Teaching.

*Morin, A. (2023, February 8). *Teaching with Empathy: Why it's important.* Understood.

*O'Connor, K. (2010). *A repair kit for grading: 15 fixes for broken grades* (2nd ed.). Boston: Pearson.

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

*Prinz, J. (2011). Against Empathy. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy,* 49, pp.214-233.

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

*Rogers, C. (1983). Freedom to learn for the 80s. Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill Company.

*Stommel, J. (2022, November 1). *Compassionate grading policies.* Jesse Stommel.

*Tomlinson, C.A. (2021). *So each may soar: The principles and practices of learner-centered classrooms.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD

*Warren, C. A. (2013). Towards a pedagogy for the application of empathy in culturally diverse classrooms. *The Urban Review,* 46(3), 395–419. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-013-0262-5

*Westman, L. (2022). *Teaching with empathy: How to transform your practice by understanding your learners.* Brownlow Education.

*Yanow, D., & Schwartz-Shea, P. (2010). Interpretive research: Characteristics and criteria. *Revue Internationale De Psychosociologie*, Vol. XV(35), 29–38. https://doi.org/10.3917/rips.035.0029

*Zins, J. E., Bloodworth, M. R., Weissberg, R. P., & Walberg, H. J. (2004). The scientific base linking social and emotional learning to school success. In J. E. Zins, R. P. Weissberg, M. C. Wang, & H. J. Walberg (Eds.), *Building academic success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say? (*pp. 3–22). Teachers College Press

- Beth Rock