



Teachers' Emotional and Empathetic Abilities in Relation to Adolescents Social and Emotional Characteristics and the Importance of Rapport with Secondary Students in a Multicultural Environment

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Abstract

The study explores the importance of empathy and emotional intelligence in developing rapport with students and managing disruptive behaviors, particularly in multicultural educational settings. The qualitative research adopts the phenomenological approach, using thematic analysis on interviews with teachers. The research investigates how teachers perceive and implement these emotional competencies, the strategies they find effective in building student rapport, and the challenges they encounter in employing empathy. The analysis reveals a profound understanding among teachers of the significance of empathy and emotional intelligence in educational contexts. Teachers view these skills as essential for understanding and connecting with students, especially in classrooms characterized by cultural and emotional diversity. The strategies identified for enhancing rapport, such as individualized attention and building relationships beyond academics, align with the concept of relational pedagogy. These approaches highlight the importance of creating inclusive and empathetic classroom environments where students feel valued and understood. However, teachers also report significant challenges in implementing these strategies, including managing large classes, coping with emotional exhaustion, addressing diverse emotional needs, and balancing the emotional labor inherent in teaching. Overall, the study shows that empathy and emotional intelligence are not merely individual traits but are deeply influenced by the broader educational context.

Subject Areas

Teacher Education

Keywords

Empathy, Emotional Intelligence, Students' Rapport, Multicultural Classrooms, Disruptive Behavior

1. Introduction

In an era characterized by unprecedented cultural diversity within educational environments, the role of empathy and emotional intelligence in fostering effective teacher-student relationships and managing classroom dynamics has never been more critical. This research delves into the nuanced interplay between these emotional competencies and their impact on educational outcomes, particularly focusing on their efficacy in building rapport with students and addressing disruptive behaviors in multicultural settings. By adopting a qualitative, phenomenological approach, this study leverages thematic analysis of interviews with teachers to uncover the depths of their experiences, perceptions, and the strategies they employ to harness the power of empathy and emotional intelligence in their professional practice.

The essence of empathy and emotional intelligence in education transcends the conventional boundaries of pedagogical skills, positioning these competencies as indispensable tools for navigating the complex tapestry of student emotions, backgrounds, and behaviors. Teachers, as the architects of the learning environment, are increasingly recognized for their role not just as conveyors of knowledge, but as pivotal figures in shaping the emotional and psychological well-being of their students. This study illuminates the profound understanding among educators of the significance of empathetic and emotionally intelligent teaching methodologies, which are instrumental in creating inclusive, supportive, and effective learning spaces.

The challenges of implementing these emotional strategies, however, are multifaceted. Teachers report hurdles such as managing large class sizes, coping with emotional exhaustion, and addressing a spectrum of student emotional needs, all of which underscore the demanding nature of teaching with empathy and emotional intelligence. Despite these obstacles, the consensus among educators underscores a critical insight: empathy and emotional intelligence are not merely intrinsic traits but are deeply influenced by, and responsive to, the broader educational ecosystem.

Through the lens of teachers' experiences, the research seeks to offer a richer understanding of these emotional competencies, highlighting their importance, the strategies for their effective application, and the challenges faced in multicultural educational settings.

Having as a group of analysis teachers of students 12 to 15 years old, the scope of the current study is to understand whether emotional intelligence and empathy is an important tool in teaching and learning in secondary education and when

dealing with adolescents' disruptive behavior or not. The opinion of teachers' who are dealing with disruptive behaviors in adolescents, is valuable. The strategies they use, how they respond to disrespectful attitudes or whether they feel they need extra support all these, are a matter of investigation in this study.

2. Literature Review

Disruptive behaviour is this kind of behaviour towards teachers which does not result in a smooth relationship between teachers and students, and they mention the intention of students to harm or revenge them. In addition to this, studies refer to the term disruptive behaviour as the set of inappropriate behaviours that can stop the learning and influence the interpersonal relations (Esturgo-Deu & Sala-Roca, 2010) [1]. In other words, disruptive behaviour refers to any behaviour that disrupt the class, the teacher or the students (Nash *et al.*, 2016) [2], such as being disrespectful towards the teacher or peers, making excessive noise, refusing to follow instructions and/or creating a hostile environment for learning.

Teachers' emotional intelligence and empathy are used as "weapons" against students' specific reactions and behaviours. The term "weapons" is used in order to clarify the importance for a teacher to be emotional intelligent and instead of punishing a student, which leads to the repetitive pattern of misbehaving and getting punished again, to use other strategies such as praise or rewards (Allen *et al.*, 2018) [3]. Moreover, disruptive behaviour which leads to frustration from the teachers when it is towards them and to frustration from students when it is towards students, requires teachers to respond immediately to these behaviours following specific strategies based on discipline, which is opposite from the principles of emotional intelligence and empathy (Duesund & Magnar, 2018) [4].

Disruptive behaviour in a class can be influenced from different factors, socio and economic factors, physical abuse or low self-esteem factors and there is a correlation between the relationship of the person who demonstrates aggressive behaviour and the person modelling it. Social learning theory defines disruptive behaviour as a "learned response pattern" under the impact of reinforcement or the demonstration of it and social learning theorists believe that people are more likely to develop behaviours that they watch others doing, while other researchers have found the correlation between teacher and student attachment to be associated with specific behaviours in adolescents (Fauzi *et al.*, 2023) [5].

2.1. The Rapport between Teachers and Students When Disruptive Behaviour Occurs, and the Strategies Teachers Follow

Although immediate actions should be taken when disruptive behaviours occur, a positive classroom environment where the teacher has control and students respect each other, may lead to a classroom with a low degree disruptive behaviour. Duesund & Magnar (2018) [4], found that usually teachers yell, command students to stay quiet, exclude disruptive students from the lesson or give them detention, which leads to students to feel unhappy or that they have been treated

unfairly, thus they lose interest in a task or for a particular lesson and they develop negative feelings towards their teacher. Researchers have identified strategies that seem to be effective in managing disruptive behaviours and these strategies also include exclusion from a game, from the break or punishment (Nash *et al.*, 2016) [2]. However, every disruptive behaviour has a meaning and it is a call for attention from the educators to learn to understand the meaning behind these from a psychological perspective for the purpose of a healthy rapport between the students and their teachers.

Similar reactions from teachers against disruptive behaviour have been identified towards specific students in Europe that include Chinese students. In particular, the behaviours of students in a class, particularly the disruptive, uncivil or non-respectful behaviour, influence teachers' emotions and cause anger and negative feelings towards the students. For international teachers, local students' disruptive behaviours that are unfamiliar to them can be challenging situational experiences and cross-cultural teaching contexts challenge international teachers' dispositional backgrounds since people's inner dispositions are socially constructed and culturally shaped (Xu & Klassen, 2023) [6]. This is very familiar with the topic this research is investigating in a multicultural context and among different communication norms between teachers and students. On the other hand, studies have shown evidence that even a behaviour management approach, for example reinforcement, discipline or punishment is not enough to meet and cover the emotional needs of the students (King *et al.*, 2019) [7]. Literature also is calling for an immediate change in behavioural approaches from teachers with the focus to teach students to speak about their feelings more and also, they highlight the need for a 'therapeutic presence' where staff, as well as students and families, are supported as needed (Solomon & Nashat, 2010) [8].

2.2. Teachers' Empathy and Emotional Intelligence

There is a Chinese proverb, which says, "once a teacher, always a father" and it means that teachers should treat their students with the same care, interaction and support as they would do with their own children and students should demonstrate the same respect towards their teachers as they would do with their father (Wan *et al.*, 2023) [9]. Emotional intelligence and empathy are often connected. Empathy is the ability to view the world from the eyes of another person, while emotional intelligence is based on understanding others' emotions and feelings.

Teachers' emotional intelligence and empathetic abilities in order to understand the feelings of their colleagues and students and particularly their behaviour for the purpose of the proper social-emotional growth, are important. Empathetic teachers can teach empathy to students and a teacher's beliefs influence students to promote capacities for the "outside" world. So, improving emotional intelligence in students can be an operative way to promote the development of empathy (Xiang *et al.*, 2022) [10]. In fact, the higher is a teacher's self-efficacy, the higher their empathy (Goroshit & Hen, 2016) [11].

On the other hand, the personal characteristics a teacher has, such as modesty, politeness and patience, play an enormous role in students' emotional well-being in young ages in particular and humanistic psychology places the teacher in a mission of creating moral ethos (Arnon & Reitchel, 2007) [12]. The mission of creating moral ethos to students, aligns with the socio-functional theories of emotion that talk about the quality of our relationships and the role of emotions in shaping relationships. For example, not feeling connected to the teacher leads to boredom (Goetz *et al.*, 2021) [13]. It also depends on the teacher's perspectives and whether she /he focuses the teaching with the goal to teach the students or she places herself in the role of a mentor and gives guidance, support, compassion and understanding with emotional intelligence to the students (Mamat *et al.*, 2021) [14].

2.3. Factors that Can Stop Teachers from Employing Their Empathy

The stress in teachers' profession has been linked to behavioural symptoms, attrition, poor relationships inside the school environment and even a reason for leaving the profession. Apart from stress, are the struggles and the workload that lead teachers to act like robots and forget their human characteristics and the fact that they deal with children (Harrison *et al.*, 2023) [15].

Specifically, the job satisfaction has to do with the number of students in a class with behavioural problems and the collaboration with their colleagues (Harrison *et al.*, 2023) [15]. It is worth mentioning, though, that particularly in the field of special education, approximately one-third of the teachers leave the profession before the three years due to students' challenging and behavioural attitudes (Haydon *et al.*, 2019) [16], which leads us to the conclusion that disruptive behaviours from students can have major effects on teachers. This research would like to contribute to a better understanding of the importance of empathy and emotional abilities in teaching practices, recognizing them as valuable tools for educators alongside the essential focus on professional development.

Mostly schools emphasize on the teacher's role to be educated and updated with the curriculum statements and materials more than their emotional intelligence and empathetic abilities. They held programs for professional development and growth and trainings as mentioned earlier above (Orpinas & Horne, 2004) [17], however, there is no focus on training the teachers accordingly when it comes to empathy and teachers are not required to practice or demonstrate empathy. Teachers clearly state their preference to students who demonstrate a better behaviour in the class (de Ruiter *et al.*, 2021) [18] and so in cases where the teacher did not appraise a behaviour, they tend to have an "acting good" attitude towards their students, which leads to unclear instructions, tempers and bad relationships with the students and their parents (de Ruiter *et al.*, 2021) [18]. Teachers though want to support emotionally and psychologically their students, however different issues that are not directly related with the teacher's profession, stop them from willing to interfere emotionally with their students (Fiorilli *et al.*, 2017) [19].

2.4. Do Teachers Feel the Need of Additional Support in Order to Employ Their Empathy?

For students a good teacher is caring, willing to help, listens and has a sense of humour (Turanli, 2009) [20], while for schools a good teacher is someone who considers her students' effective needs and creates good lesson plans! Teachers want to help their students and be there for them and take the extra step to emotionally support their students, but, they don't, because they are not paid enough (Zinsser & Curby, 2014) [21] or they suffer emotional exhaustion (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011) [22]. The role of the school management in their decision to take the extra step is important. If the principals or the directors are able to support emotionally their teachers and create a sense of community, the positive reactions from teachers deploy, because the feeling of belonging is very important for the teachers.

Teachers' emotional exhaustion has been reported in the literature by investigating teachers' views. The stress, the disruptive behaviour, the school climate, the relationship with parents and colleagues, the time pressure, all lead to teachers' emotional burnout and long-term occupational stress, particularly among 'human service workers', such as teachers, can cause chronic fatigue (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011) [22]. A teacher has to be a mentor, a caregiver, a protector, a mentor, a facilitator to academic success and so this multidimensional role of the teacher can lead to feeling emotionally drained (Chang, 2009) [23]. Teachers need a set of psychological resources to be able to function properly under the heavy demands of the profession and their dissatisfaction with the lack of social support towards the profession (Fiorilli *et al.*, 2017) [19]. It will be worth noting that these perceptions come from teachers, and we can conclude that indeed teachers need emotional support.

The psychological functioning of teachers has become particularly important and demands attention. A burnout is characterised by a psychological syndrome which has two main characteristics: depersonalisation/cynicism and reduced personal accomplishments (Klusmann *et al.*, 2008) [24]. The differential demands of the teaching profession, which include emotional students' support and individual approach have been noted to influence teachers' emotional wellbeing, their self-efficacy and their ability to employ empathy. There is a need for social support in teachers with the goal to minimize their anxiety, the stress and the depression (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2021) [25].

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study adopts the phenomenological approach, in which a small number of participants have been interviewed and discuss their experiences about a specific phenomenon that they have been dealing with as educators in secondary education. Phenomenology looks at people' personal experiences towards an issue, focusing on persons' emotions, feelings, judgments and perceptions and the researcher

is interested to know how the experience was like and not only the person's reactions towards it (Conelly & Lynne, 2010) [26]. The researcher considers herself an interpretive phenomenologist, *i.e.*, a researcher examining how the subjects make sense of their experiences (Frechette *et al.*, 2020) [27], following the hermeneutic phenomenology, which, as Wojnar *et al.* (2017) [28] stated, is concerned with the understanding of the experience and with how things are understood by those who have these experiences and by those who study them.

This study is situated within a social constructivist ontological framework. Social constructivism posits those realities are constructed through human activities and interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) [29]. This perspective is particularly pertinent in multicultural educational environments, where diverse cultural narratives and interactions shape the realities of teaching and learning, while exploring teachers' emotional intelligence and empathetic abilities in a multicultural context (Rohleder & Lyons, 2015) [30]. The study's epistemological stance aligns with constructivist theories, which emphasize that knowledge is co-constructed by the researcher and participants and is inherently subjective (Crotty, 1998) [31]. This approach supports the study's qualitative methodology, aiming to understand the complex, context-dependent phenomena of emotional intelligence and empathy in education.

The social constructionist stance asserts that meanings are developed through social processes and interactions (Burr, 2003). In the context of this study, it helps to explore how cultural and social contexts influence teachers' and students' perceptions and behaviors related to emotional intelligence and empathy. This stance recognizes that these perceptions are not merely individualistic but are shaped by broader cultural narratives and societal norms (Gergen, 1985) [32]. The classroom, therefore, becomes a microcosm of these broader societal interactions, making it an ideal setting for examining these constructs.

Reflexivity in this research involves a continuous process of reflection by the researcher on their background, experiences, and biases and how these might influence the research process and outcomes (Finlay, 2002 [33]). As an educator and researcher, my experiences and perspectives inherently shape my approach to and interpretation of data. This reflexivity is vital in qualitative research, particularly in studies dealing with subjective experiences and culturally sensitive topics (Malterud, 2001) [34].

Regarding the methodological approach, the qualitative approach of this study is specifically chosen for its strength in exploring complex social phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). It allows for an in-depth exploration of individual experiences and perceptions, particularly in understanding how emotional intelligence and empathy manifest in diverse educational settings (Creswell, 2007) [35].

Finally, on the crucial issue of ethics, ethical considerations in this research are guided by the principles of respect, confidentiality, and informed consent (American Psychological Association, 2020). Special attention is given to cultural sensitivities and the emotional well-being of participants, particularly when discussing

topics related to personal and cultural experiences (Sieber & Tolich, 2013) [36].

3.2. Sampling Strategy

In order to get a sufficient amount of data and according to literature, the interviews are five among teachers who teach secondary students aged twelve to fifteen (Opie & Brown, 2019) [37].

The elements are the teachers in secondary education, while the school and the classes are the primary sampling units with the teachers demonstrating the secondary sampling units. By selecting teachers who have established social and professional relationships within multicultural classrooms, the study taps into a source of experiential knowledge that is central to its research aims (Etikan *et al.*, 2016) [38]. The selection of participants based on existing relationships also addresses ethical and practical aspects of research. It ensures a level of trust and rapport between the researcher and participants, which is crucial for the authenticity and depth of the qualitative data (Kaiser, 2009) [39].

3.3. Data Collection Strategies

The duration of the interviews was between twenty-three to thirty minutes. In addition to this, saturation and completeness were elements that were taken into consideration while interviewing for the benefit of the results coming from the sample (Check & Scutt, 2012) [40].

The participants were teachers who teach students between the age of 12 to 15 years old and the reason for that particular choice was based on previous studies which have been conducted in order to identify students' emotional intelligence at the age of the age between fourteen and sixteen years old. Trigueros (2020), quantitative study includes adolescents, and the results found a significant correlation between the socio-emotional growth of the students, their emotional intelligence and bullying. The lower the emotional intelligence, the higher the predictor of bullying among adolescents of that age (Trigueros *et al.*, 2020) [41]. Similar studies have used the specific age group to identify the process of decision making in adolescents, which have been found to be more increased in ages between fourteen to sixteen years old, compared with the preadolescence age.

The interviews were conducted in Abu Dhabi and outside of the school environment. Initial rapport-building with participants is crucial for creating a comfortable environment where teachers feel open to sharing their experiences honestly and in detail (Kvale, 1996) [42]. The questions were Probing and Follow-up Questions. Using probing questions and follow-ups based on participants' responses allows for deeper exploration of topics and clarification of any ambiguous points (Wellington, 2015) [43]. In addition to that, reflective listening and validating the participants' experiences during the interview encourages more in-depth sharing and ensures that their perspectives are accurately understood (Rogers, 1951) [44].

Confidentiality and Ethical Considerations were considered. The ethical

consent form was sent to the participants via email a day before and was signed on the date of the interview. Assuring confidentiality and adhering to ethical guidelines helps participants feel safe to share sensitive information, which can lead to richer data. The interviews were chosen because they can provide a more comprehensive view of the phenomena under study (Denzin, 1978) [45] and can provide data about emotions and beliefs that can be used to identify how people define constructs.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis in this research employs an in-depth thematic analysis, a method widely recognized for its effectiveness in identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. This analysis will be conducted manually, without the aid of software, to foster a deeper engagement with the data. In this process, significant emphasis will be placed on articulating participants' words, facilitating a dialogue between their viewpoints, and justifying the choice of thematic analysis and manual data processing.

In qualitative research, the participants' words are not merely responses; they are the essence of their lived experiences and perceptions. The thematic analysis will heavily rely on extensive quotes from participants to maintain the integrity of their experiences and narratives (Riessman, 2008) [46]. By presenting these quotes, the study creates a 'dialogue' among the participants' views on each question, allowing for a multi-faceted understanding of the themes. This approach aligns with the phenomenological underpinnings of the study, which prioritizes the authenticity of individual experiences.

Thematic analysis is selected as the data analysis strategy due to its versatility and ability to provide a rich, detailed, yet complex account of data. It is particularly effective in exploring the nuances and diversity of participants' experiences in depth (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [47]. Thematic analysis is also commended for its theoretical freedom, meaning it does not subscribe to a pre-existing theoretical framework, making it suitable for studies that aim to explore the lived experiences of participants without imposing preconceived notions (Patton, 2014) [48].

Initially, each interview transcript was read and re-read thoroughly to ensure familiarity with the content, during which preliminary notes and observations were made. This immersive engagement with the data allowed for the emergence of initial insights and areas of interest. Subsequently, initial codes were generated by meticulously going through the data line-by-line. Meaningful features of the data were identified and systematically coded, allowing for a nuanced categorization of the data based on recurring patterns, ideas, or concepts observed. The coding process was carried out manually, with codes being written in the margins of the transcripts or noted on separate sheets of paper, depending on the context and content of the data.

Following the initial coding phase, potential themes were searched for by sorting the various codes into categories that represented broader patterns in the data.

These potential themes were then reviewed against the dataset to ensure they accurately captured the essence of the data. This review process involved refining, merging, or splitting themes as necessary to better reflect the data's complexity and depth. The themes were constantly compared against the coded data extracts and the entire dataset to assess their validity and coherence. Once the themes were satisfactorily refined, they were defined and named to accurately reflect the essence and narrative of the data they represented. Detailed analysis was conducted for each theme, articulating the nuances and significance of the patterns identified. This involved a careful consideration of how each theme contributed to understanding the research question, supported by relevant data extracts to illustrate the themes.

Finally, the analysis was compiled into a coherent narrative that integrated the thematic findings with the broader research context. The relationship between themes was explored, and their relevance to the research questions and existing literature was discussed. Throughout the process, careful attention was given to ensuring the analysis remained grounded in the data.

4. Findings

4.1. Influence of Empathy and Emotional Intelligence in Rapport

In exploring the theme of empathy and emotional intelligence's influence on rapport, the interviews with the teachers create a rich, interwoven dialogue that highlights their collective and individual understandings. Empathy and emotional intelligence are recognized as the main pillars for a person to be a teacher. Teachers emphasize the need to understand the diverse mindsets and cultural backgrounds of students and the importance of the role of the personal connection to the students. This perspective underscores the complexity of empathizing with students in a multicultural setting, where teachers must navigate a myriad of cultural nuances. They also reflect on the development of these critical skills over time and this insight points to the evolving nature of emotional intelligence and empathy, suggesting that these are dynamic skills honed through continuous professional and personal growth, discussing the importance of personal connections. This remark highlights the human aspect of teaching, where understanding and connecting with students on a personal level is just as crucial as academic instruction.

The dialogue among these teachers reveals a shared understanding of the importance of empathy and emotional intelligence in education. Yet, it also uncovers the diversity in their approaches: from cultural sensitivity and understanding to the journey of skill development, the importance of personal connection the adaptability required in teaching and the consistency.

In conclusion, this interplay of perspectives paints a comprehensive picture of how empathy and emotional intelligence are perceived and employed by teachers. It highlights the common belief in their importance, while also showcasing the unique ways in which each teacher integrates these skills into their practice, adapting to the challenges and opportunities of a multicultural classroom environment.

4.2. Strategies for Enhancing Student-Teacher Rapport Sampling Strategy

The theme of strategies for enhancing student-teacher rapport presents a rich tapestry of methods and approaches as described by the interviewees. Their shared experiences and varied perspectives weave a complex picture of the dynamic nature of rapport-building in a multicultural educational context. The significance of handling challenging behavior with sensitivity and care is mentioned and the informal and face-to-face conversations are an efficient strategy to deal with those, but this approach has to be genuine and authentic. This approach highlights the importance of individualized attention, recognizing each student's unique circumstances and responding with empathy.

The role of understanding students beyond academic metrics is also important and it underscores the importance of seeing students as whole individuals, with interests, passions, and challenges that extend beyond the classroom walls. The dialogue between the teachers thus far reveals a shared understanding of the critical role of personalized attention in building rapport. However, there's also a recognition of the diversity of strategies needed to connect with students from various backgrounds effectively. The importance of shared experiences and authenticity in building rapport and this approach signifies the value of engaging with students in contexts outside the traditional classroom setting, thereby strengthening the teacher-student relationship through shared interests.

In conclusion, the interplay of these perspectives paints a comprehensive picture of the diverse strategies employed by teachers to enhance rapport with their students. From addressing individual needs and understanding students beyond academics to engaging in shared activities, the dialogue among the teachers reflects a deep commitment to building meaningful and supportive relationships with students. This multifaceted approach is particularly crucial in a multicultural educational setting, where the diversity of student backgrounds and experiences necessitates a flexible and adaptable approach to rapport-building.

4.3. Challenges in Employing Empathy

The theme of challenges in employing empathy in teaching highlights the complex interplay of personal, professional, and institutional factors that teachers navigate. The dialogue among the interviewees reveals both shared and unique challenges they face in their efforts to empathize with students effectively. Exhaustion is a challenge and an obstacle for all teachers, in almost every and any educational setting (Santoro, 2018) [49]. What is interesting is that not only all of the participants responded positively on whether they have suffered emotional exhaustion but this exhaustion is considered an integral part of doing the teacher's job right. This reflects the often-unseen aspect of teaching, where the emotional and mental demands can be as taxing as the physical ones.

There is also a great challenge, that is the relations with the parents. This suggests that while teachers can strive to be empathetic, the role of the school

environment in facilitating or hindering this effort is significant, highlighting the delicate balance teachers must maintain between being empathetic and maintaining authority in the classroom. Through this integrated dialogue, it becomes apparent that while all teachers value empathy as an essential aspect of their profession, they each face unique challenges in its application. These challenges range from managing diverse and large classrooms to balancing empathy with discipline and navigating the complexities of the educational system. The varying perspectives underscore the need for a nuanced approach to empathetic teaching, one that considers the individual teacher's context, the diverse needs of students, and the support provided by the educational institution.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The thematic analysis provides insightful answers. The interviews paint a picture of teachers who are acutely aware of the role these qualities play in their interactions with students. The analysis reveals that teachers view empathy and emotional intelligence as crucial in understanding and connecting with students. This aligns with Mayer *et al.*'s (2004) [50] conceptualization of emotional intelligence as a set of skills that include the ability to perceive, understand, and manage emotions. Interviewees articulate this by highlighting the need to understand students' diverse mindsets and cultural backgrounds, while highlighting the importance of continuous development of these skills.

It suggests a nuanced understanding among teachers that while empathy is a vital component of their interactions with students, it is the broader framework of emotional intelligence that truly underpins successful rapport. This includes not only the capacity to empathize but also the ability to manage one's own emotions and understand the emotions of others. In fact, while emotional intelligence's pivotal role is widely recognized (Mayer & Salovey, 1997) [51] and empathy is identified as a critical component, reflecting the capacity to perceive and understand the emotions of others (Mayer *et al.*, 2004) [50], the relevance of emotional intelligence in educational settings extends beyond empathy alone. Goleman (1995) [52] expanded on Mayer and Salovey's model by highlighting additional dimensions of EI, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, and social skills, which are integral for effective interpersonal interactions and the creation of a supportive learning environment. These components emphasize the necessity for teachers to manage their own emotions and understand the emotions of others to foster positive relationships and enhance student engagement and learning outcomes (Goleman, 1995; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) [52] [53]. Empirical studies in education further validate the significance of emotional intelligence in teaching. For instance, Brackett *et al.* (2011) [54] demonstrated that teachers with higher levels of emotional intelligence are more adept at creating positive classroom climates, managing stress, and facilitating emotional and social learning among students. This not only improves the teacher-student rapport but also contributes to better academic achievement and social adjustment for students (Brackett, Rivers,

& Salovey, 2011 [54]; Patti *et al.*, 2015 [55]). Therefore, while empathy is a vital component of teacher-student interactions, recognizing its place within the broader construct of emotional intelligence is crucial. This holistic approach enables teachers to effectively navigate the emotional landscapes of their classrooms, employing a range of emotional and social competencies to support and enhance student learning (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) [53].

The approach of handling challenging behaviors through individualized attention, which has been pointed out by the participants, further highlights this perception. It demonstrates an understanding that building rapport isn't just about group management; it's about forging individual connections and creating a classroom environment where students feel seen and understood (Brookfield, 2015) [56]. This is particularly crucial in multicultural settings, where the diversity of student backgrounds requires a more tailored approach (Ambe, 2006) [57].

The teachers' narratives also reflect the ideas proposed by Zeidner *et al.* (2009) [58], who argue that emotional intelligence is critical in educational settings for understanding and responding to the emotional cues of students. This ability to 'read the room' and adapt teaching methods accordingly is not just beneficial but necessary in creating an inclusive and effective learning environment.

Moreover, the strategies identified by teachers align with the concept of relational pedagogy. They underscore the importance of building meaningful relationships with students that go beyond academic instruction. These strategies are crucial in creating an inclusive classroom environment where each student feels valued and understood (Song *et al.*, 2022 [59]; Teven, 2007 [60]; Teven & McCroskey, 1997 [61]; Zhang, 2021 [62]). The integration of teachers' emotional intelligence and empathetic abilities with individualized, culturally sensitive approaches underscores a comprehensive strategy for fostering social-emotional growth among students. Research highlights the importance of teachers understanding their colleagues' and students' feelings and behaviors, suggesting that empathetic teachers are not only able to teach empathy but also influence their students' capacities for navigating the 'outside' world. Xiang *et al.* (2022) [10] support this, noting that improving students' emotional intelligence is an effective method for developing empathy, with a correlation between a teacher's self-efficacy and their level of empathy as outlined by Goroshit & Hen (2016) [11].

The integration of strategies aimed at enhancing the educational environment through individualized attention and cultural sensitivity, as well as the emphasis on building personal relationships beyond academic performance, is crucial for fostering a holistic, student-centered approach (Tomlinson, 2014) [63]. This approach acknowledges students as complex individuals with varied interests and needs, moving beyond a purely academic focus to include informal interactions outside the classroom. These methods not only diminish formal barriers but also foster mutual respect and understanding, enriching the learning experience and promoting personal growth and readiness for the broader world.

Factors such as stress, disruptive behavior, school climate, relationships with

parents and colleagues, and time pressure contribute to emotional burnout. Chronic fatigue, as noted by Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2011) [22], is a concern for ‘human service workers’ like teachers, arising from long-term stress. The multidimensional role of a teacher, encompassing being a mentor, caregiver, protector, and facilitator to academic success, can lead to emotional drainage (Chang, 2009) [23]. Furthermore, the lack of social support and necessary psychological resources has been identified as a key issue, suggesting that teachers require emotional support to function effectively under the demands of their profession (Fiorelli *et al.*, 2017) [19].

The psychological well-being of teachers, characterized by symptoms of burnout including depersonalization/cynicism and reduced personal accomplishments, demands urgent attention. The dual pressures of providing emotional student support and meeting general demands such as paperwork and lesson planning adversely affect teachers’ emotional well-being (Klusmann *et al.*, 2008) [24]. Additionally, the need for social support to minimize anxiety, stress, and depression among teachers is underscored by recent studies (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2021) [25].

This juxtaposition of the need for a nurturing educational approach for students and the critical requirement for emotional and psychological support for teachers highlights a complex dynamic within the educational system. While efforts to create a supportive learning environment for students are essential, equally important is the acknowledgment and addressing of the pressures and challenges faced by teachers (Wilson, 2004) [64]. The question of what specific support teachers need remains pivotal, suggesting that a great school environment and perfect relationships might not be sufficient alone (Strom & Martin, 2017) [65]. The need for comprehensive strategies that address both the well-being of students and the support system for teachers is evident, underscoring the interconnectedness of student learning experiences and teacher well-being in creating an effective educational framework.

These strategies are consistent with the concept of ‘pedagogical caring’, as discussed by Noddings (2005) [66], which emphasizes the importance of caring in the educational relationship and its impact on student well-being and learning. Engaging with students in activities outside the classroom setting further demonstrates a commitment to building rapport through shared experiences, a strategy supported by research on teacher-student relationships; these genuine interactions and shared interests can significantly impact students’ engagement and academic success (Roorda *et al.*, 2011) [67]. Moreover, this strategy embodies Vygotsky’s (1978) [68] social development theory, which posits that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. By engaging with students in different settings, teachers are not only building rapport but also facilitating cognitive and social development.

The challenges of employing empathy in teaching align with the concept of emotional labor in the teaching profession (Hargreaves, 2000) [69]. Teachers mentioned the emotional complexities and labor involved in teaching. This labor

is not merely about imparting knowledge; it involves navigating the emotional landscapes of a diverse student population, requiring a balance of empathy and practical classroom management. The challenges of managing large classes and providing individualized attention in multicultural environments underscore the complexities of teaching in contemporary classrooms. Teachers must navigate the diverse needs of students, which can be particularly challenging in settings where cultural differences abound. This situation is compounded by the emotional labor involved in teaching, where educators are required to balance their own emotions while empathizing with a diverse student body. Such emotional exertion, as conceptualized by Hochschild (1983) [70] in the theory of 'emotional labor,' highlights the significant effort needed to manage personal emotions alongside responding to students' emotional needs. This emotional labor can lead to exhaustion, impacting a teacher's capacity to consistently demonstrate empathy.

Furthermore, current educational systems often prioritize curriculum knowledge and professional development over emotional intelligence and empathetic skills in teachers. Programs focusing on professional growth seldom address the necessity for empathy training, leaving it to individual teachers to adopt empathetic practices. Research by de Ruiter *et al.* (2021) [18] illustrates that teachers may favor students who exhibit better behavior, potentially leading to biased interactions and the propagation of unclear instructions and strained relationships with students and their parents in the absence of empathetic engagement.

Moreover, cultural differences in emotional expression and the process of emotional acculturation, as discussed by Xu & Klassen (2023) [6], add another layer of complexity. Teachers in multicultural settings might struggle to demonstrate empathy effectively due to varying emotional models across cultures. Such challenges are exacerbated by the emotional and psychological stress of adapting to new cultural environments, which can influence both teachers' and students' emotional well-being.

6. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The research has adopted a qualitative method approach using a small sample and, therefore, the outcome of this research is not representative. Quantitative analysis should follow in a larger group of teachers. Moreover, the research has taken place in a multicultural environment and the diverse environment and peoples' different views have affected the outcome of the research. It would be beneficial to repeat it in different socio and educational contexts. Lastly, the research focuses on specific teachers' views and opinions and based on specific behaviours and attitudes they implement while teaching and therefore potential biases, such as social desirability or selective memory might have influenced the outcomes.

Further research is needed to explore the implementation of empathy and emotional intelligence training in diverse educational settings. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into the long-term impacts of such training on teaching practices and student outcomes. Additionally, comparative studies across different

cultural and socio-economic contexts could shed light on the universality and adaptability of these concepts in various educational environments.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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