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Social connection: empathy and mentalization for teachers

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Attending to the academic and social/emotional developmental needs of students has and continues to be a significant challenge for teachers and relatively little research examining the impact of teacher empathy exists. Empathy is an important skill for educators to facilitate the creation of a positive learning environment with students and professional responsibilities of teachers to be empathic are defined in standards frameworks worldwide. Yet, defining empathy remains somewhat contested in the literature among philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists and neuroscientists. Empathy is not unitary, but rather is composed by experience, sharing, mind perception and mentalization. Simulating the mental states of others, or ‘mentalizing’, is a necessary component for empathic responding to others. Drawing on Fonagy’s mentalization model, we examine the conceptual links between: mentalization and empathy in teachers; whether empathy skills can be taught to teachers; and, implications for classroom practice.

Keywords: empathy; mentalization; relationships

Introduction

Human beings are social animals (Dijksterhuis, 2005). We have a powerful ability to forge and maintain networks of social interdependence characterized by shared goals, joint attention and cooperative behaviour (Herrmann, Call, Hernández-Lloreda, Hare, & Tomasello, 2007). Because we spend our lives in the company of others, social cognition is necessary to make sense of others and ourselves in context (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). Understanding the internal states of others and their intentions toward us are therefore critical skills in recognizing and responding to human behaviour (Baron-Cohen, Knickmeyer, & Belmonte, 2005).

The capacity to empathize is ‘… the spark of human concern for others … The glue that makes social life possible’ (Hoffman, 2001, p. 3). Humans empathize with others (Batson, 1998) and sacrifice their immediate self-interests to promote the overarching interests of the group and communities they belong to (Komorita & Parks, 1995). The field of education is ‘an art built upon the social relationship between teacher and student’ where interaction directly shapes a student’s ability to ‘take in new experiences and learn from them’ (Siegel, 2013, pp. 11–12). It would therefore seem essential that teachers understand these relational mechanisms which enable them to create the experiential conditions to inspire student learning. Teachers’ socio-emotional needs, teacher–student relationships and their association with teacher well-being warrant further
attention in the study of interpersonal relationships in education. de Jong et al. (2014) found that while the teacher–student relationship is well-documented, few attempts have been made to identify its role and functioning. The increasing influence of psychological theory in educational practice is essential, yet concepts such as ‘empathy’ remain poorly understood.

A review of the literature reveals three main elements involved in an empathic attempt to enter another’s mind. The first is the ability to understand other people’s intentions and goals. Second is the ability to understand other people’s beliefs and thoughts. This is variously referred to as theory of mind (Premack & Woodruff, 1978), mentalizing (Fonagy, Steele, Moran, & Higgitt, 1991), mind-reading (Baron-Cohen, 1995) or cognitive perspective-taking. Third is the ability to understand other people’s feelings, referred to as empathy or emotional perspective taking (Decety & Lamm, 2006; Keysers & Gazzola, 2007; Preston & de Waal, 2002; Singer, 2006). Here we discuss the mentalization path and its role in expressions of empathy in the context of teaching.

The remainder of this article is divided into four sections. First, we look at the theoretical conceptualizations of empathy before looking at mentalization as a subcomponent of empathy. Second, we consider the literature on social intelligence and the role of mirror neurons. Third, we review evidence for individual differences in empathy. Finally, we look at whether empathy can be taught to teachers and its importance for educators highlighting implications for teacher practice.

Conceptualizations

What is empathy?

What is actually meant by ‘empathy’ is often assumed and regularly not defined. This begs the question: How can we teach a skill, and expect teachers to be familiar with it without clearly defining what it means?

There are almost as many definitions of empathy as there are scientists who study the phenomenon (Wispé, 1986). Empathy has been described as an elusive concept (Basch, 1983), one that is difficult to define and measure (Kestenbaum, Farber, & Sroufe, 1989), and a term with a history marked by ambiguity and discrepancy (Swan & Riley, 2012). Yet, many definitions share important features including the idea that empathy is not unitary (Preston & Hofelich, 2012; Zaki, 2014). Instead empathy is a complex phenomenon composed of a variety of sub-skills and systems. Preston and Hofelich (2012) argue that it is an umbrella term for states of feeling ‘with’ involving ‘processes by which observers come to understand and/or feel the state of another …’ (p. 25).

In the field of psychology, empathy is regarded as an important human characteristic to identify another person’s emotions and thoughts, and respond to these with an appropriate emotion: a way to make sense of, and predict another person’s behaviour (Baron-Cohen, 2003). Walter (2012) defines empathy as ‘the ability to share another’s internal world of thoughts and feelings’ (p. 9). Krznaric (2014) defines empathy as ‘the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions’ (p. 10). To most people, empathy therefore consists of feelings or concern for others, a motivational state aimed at improving another’s welfare (Decety & Howard, 2014). In essence, empathy is
generally regarded to be an ability to understand others’ emotions, perspectives or situations and to resonate with or experience the other’s emotional state.

**Cognitive and Affective elements**

So what are the elements involved in an empathic attempt? While there has been debate over the conceptualization and operationalization of empathy, it is generally agreed to consist of interrelated cognitive and affective components (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004; Preston & de Waal, 2002; Walter, 2012).

The cognitive component is an ability to perceive and decode another’s emotional state (Decety & Jackson, 2006) to accurately infer what others are thinking or feeling. It is the mental activities involved in acquiring and processing information for better understanding. ‘Cognitive empathy’ allows us to understand the feelings of others without us being in a similar affective state ourselves (Walter, 2012). For example, one can understand that someone is angry, without experiencing a corresponding personal emotion. Cognitive empathy is an ability to accurately perceive and respond to the thoughts and feelings of another based on accurately imagining another’s experience (Davis, 1980; Hogan, 1969). It involves suppressing one’s own egocentric perspective of events and entertaining someone else’s.

The affective component involves an emotional sharing of another’s emotional state and does not require cognitive understanding of why a person is suffering (Rankin, Kramer, & Miller, 2005). Eisenberg et al. (1994) and Hoffman (1982, 2001) define affective empathy as a response that stems from recognizing another’s emotional state and experienced as similar to what the other person is feeling or would be expected to feel. It is the capacity to perceive, anticipate and respond with care to the unique affective experiences of another (Decety & Batson, 2009).

**Empathy – Innate or contextual?**

Empathy is often seen as an ‘innate ability’ with an assumption that a capacity for empathy is only learnt through experience. What is the impact of the context on levels of displayed empathy?

Displays of empathy can be automatic or context dependent (Zaki, 2014). On the one hand, people often take on other’s internal states reflexively and outside awareness. Here observers’ representations of their own and targets’ actions overlap automatically (Niedenthal, Barsalou, Winkielman, Krauth-Gruber, & Ric, 2005). Forms of mimicry often meet criteria for automatic processing (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). For example, viewing facial expressions may trigger similar expressions on one’s own face, even in the absence of conscious recognition of the stimulus (Preston & de Waal, 2002). Evidence for automaticity can be found in the medical literature relating to clinicians taking on their patients’ moods. After interacting with depressed or anxious patients, observers reported and displayed negative affect (Howes, Hokanson, & Loewenstein, 1985). Organizational psychologists have also found ripple effects where moods spread through groups (Barsade & Gibson, 2012).

Observers do not always empathize automatically. Instead, empathic processes are deeply contextual where features of observers’ situations, experiences and relationships to targets systematically alter the experience of empathy. Expressions of empathy shift with the characteristics of empathizers and the situation and this has profound implications for teachers. Intergroup conflict and the degree of expertise are two contextual
factors in which empathy loses its automaticity (Zaki, 2014). For example, medical practitioners often encounter others in physical and emotional pain. Empathizing with targets at all times could render surgery to be almost impossible. Physicians may respond to this conflict through targeted decreases in empathy by systematically under-estimating the amount of pain patients feel (Sloman, Rosen, Rom, & Shir, 2005).

What is teacher empathy?

In education, empathy can be considered to be ‘an ability to access the life of the mind of others in their bodily and behavioural expressions’ (Zahavi & Overgaard, 2012; p. 10). A behavioural definition is considered appropriate to teaching as demonstrated expressions of empathy are what students see and experience. Empathy is a fundamental component of social cognition – the capacity to think about and understand others (Fonagy, 2012, p. 4). Social cognition allows us to navigate the world of relationships requiring cooperation and reading of the ‘subtle and shifting currents … to make sense of social events’ (Goleman, 2006, p. 90). Empathy occurs when teachers ‘suspend their single-minded focus of attention, and instead adopt a double-minded focus of attention … When empathy is switched off, they think only about their own interests. When empathy is switched on, they focus on other people’s interests too’ (Baron-Cohen, 2011, p. 10).

Teacher empathy is the ability of the teacher to express concern for, and take the perspective of a student or students, and involves both cognitive and affective elements (Tettegah & Anderson, 2007). As teachers’ empathic abilities increase, so too does their abilities to understand and respond to student needs. How do empathic teachers do this? What are the specific skills that enable the teacher to be ‘in tune’ and hence meet individual student needs? ‘Teacher empathy, in general, is an area that ‘has not been extensively studied’ (Barr, 2010, p. 368).

What is mentalization?

So what is ‘mentalization’ and what is its relationship to empathy? In this section, we consider the mentalizing concept before discussing in the next section how mentalization and empathy are linked.

Mentalization is an ability to understand the intentions, goals and emotional states of ourselves and others (Bateman & Fonagy, 2004). Mentalizing, as pioneered by Fonagy, Steele, Moran, and Higgitt (1991), allows us to differentiate between ourselves and others to regulate affect based on implicit mental models. These models organize and give a pattern to our experiences and allow us to identify and label feelings. Fonagy and colleagues (1991) introduced the concept of an ability to mentalize emotionally to think and feel about feeling at the same time. Thinking about our feelings while we are feeling them is essential to regulate and control our emotional states. Ideally, we learn to identify our emotional states, to control their intensity and duration, and to express our feelings effectively to others and to ourselves. Holmes (2001) states: ‘There is always another to whom the self is telling his or her story, even if in adults this takes the form of an internal dialogue’ (p. 85). Mentalizing (Fonagy et al., 1991) is a form of ‘emotional knowing’ (Nussbaum, 2001) and for teachers, is a tool to make sense of students as well as their own mental states simultaneously.

Teacher mentalization is the process by which teachers know students’ minds and reflect on their own and these processes underpin demonstrated displays of teacher
empathy. Teachers ‘turn up’ or ‘turn down’ mentalizing based on their motives to understand or not understand student internal states (Ickes, 2011; Smith, Ickes, Hall, & Hodges, 2011). Identifying the processes whereby teachers engage in sense-making and come to know the internal states of students and respond with sensitive care, is essential to effective interaction in the classroom.

**Mentalization and empathy combined**

How is the capacity to mentalize and to show empathy linked? Mentalizing and empathy both require an understanding of someone else’s mental or emotional state, but empathy additionally requires sharing the emotional experience of another (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Singer, 2006). Empathy is therefore primarily focused on the other rather than the self and is focused on affect rather than cognition. Mentalizing has been found to positively influence two dimensions of cognitive empathy: perspective taking and levels of personal distress (Hooker, Verosky, Germine, Knight, & D’Esposito, 2008; Krasner et al., 2009).

Mentalization seeks to understand how others think and feel requiring an ability to look inside ourselves to get access to our inner life, whereas another’s behaviour is based on mental states that are always in flux. We mentalize consciously when we are puzzled about another’s actions. ‘Why was she so abrupt with me? Is she upset because I didn’t respond?’ We also mentalize consciously about our own actions – ‘How could I have eaten that chocolate when I am on a diet?’ It is what we do and why, and what they do and why. It requires self-awareness as well as awareness of the mental states of others on a personal and interpersonal level to make the moment-to-moment adjustments to verbal and emotional signals read in others. Mentalizing results in a sense of responsibility for our actions, rather than feeling our behaviour just ‘happens.’ Empathy in a sense is one facet of mentalizing. If the concept of empathy was extended to include empathy for ourselves, mentalization and empathy would be virtually synonymous.

The ability to mentalize and to empathize is mostly used in concert when we try to understand other people’s intentions, beliefs, desires and feelings. Preliminary evidence from studies of populations with marked social deficiencies, such as those with autism or psychopathy, suggest that mentalizing and empathizing are actually distinct abilities, each with dedicated neural circuitry (Singer, 2006). Including mentalizing abilities in definitions of empathy likens the construct to ‘Theory of Mind’ – the metacognitive capacity to explain, predict and interpret behaviour by attributing mental states (desires, beliefs, intentions and emotions) to ourselves and to others (Decety & Howard, 2014). The flexible interplay of circuits within the brain associated with attention, cognitive control and mentalizing allow us to feel and empathize with the inner lives of others (Keysers & Gazzola, 2014).

Understanding another’s thinking or feeling allows us to empathically ‘get under other people’s skin’, a skill fundamental to ‘social intelligence’. Social intelligence, popularized by Goleman (2006), may explain the variance in interpersonal functioning not accounted for by intelligence or other constructs. He argued that social awareness, or sensing another’s inner state of feeling and thought, includes empathy, attunement, empathic accuracy and social cognition.
Social intelligence and the role of mirror neurons

Theory of mind research focuses on our ability to understand other people’s goals and intentions by observing their actions. This research originated in Italy with the discovery that neurons in the premotor cortex of the brains of macaque monkeys were firing both when a monkey performed hand movements and when it merely observed another monkey or human performing the same action (Ferrari, Gallese, Rizzolatti, & Fogassi, 2003; Gallese, Fadiga, Fogassi, & Rizzolatti, 1996). These ‘mirror neurons’, as they came to be known, are evidence for a brain mechanism which represents the subject’s own world and that of others. It was suggested by Gallese et al. (1996) that mirror neurons were the basis for imitation. When imitating another’s actions, we first have to transform what we see (action perception) into our own motor programme to allow us to generate an action sequence. Since the discovery of mirror neurons, several studies have demonstrated a similar coding of the perception and generation of motor actions in the human brain (Decety & Grèzes, 2006).

Debate about the exact function of the mirror neuron system and its role in social cognition continues. Fogassi et al. (2005) suggest the mirror neuron system might play a general role in understanding other people’s intentions by providing an automatic simulation of their actions. Simulation extends the role of mirror neurons from an understanding of other’s motor actions and action-related intentions into the domain of feelings. To understand what other people are feeling, we simulate their feelings using our own affective programmes (Keysers & Gazzola, 2007). In turn, Iacoboni and colleagues (Carr, Iacoboni, Dubeau, Mazziotta, & Lenzi, 2003; Iacoboni & Dapretto, 2006) have suggested a motor theory of empathy where mirror neurons have a broader role in social cognition beyond understanding action to understanding others’ emotions and predicting their behaviour. Thus, the ability to empathize may have evolved from a system which represents our own internal feeling states and allows us to predict the affective outcomes of an event for ourselves and for others (Singer et al., 2004). These imitative behaviours start motor programmes that make us feel we are linked to the minds of others (Rizzolatti, Fadiga, Fogassi, & Gallese, 1999). Critics of this broad interpretation of the role of the mirror neuron systems believe it overemphasizes its role in social cognition (Jacob & Jeannerod, 2005). They argue mirror neurons may help us understand other’s simple, observable action goals, but not their abstract beliefs as conceptualized in theory of mind tasks.

While both mentalizing and empathizing represent two different capacities that rely on different circuitries, both result in a better understanding of other’s minds and usually work together.

Individual differences in empathy

Do some people naturally have empathy abilities while others don’t? People are not equally empathic. Scientifically, individual differences in empathic capacity can be assessed using standard empathy questionnaires, such as the Empathy Quotient (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004), and Empathic Concern Scale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980). These scales measure psychological traits which are conceptualized as personality dispositions that are relatively stable over a person’s lifetime. Earlier measures including the Hogan Empathy Scale (Hogan, 1969) measured empathy as a disposition or personality trait that did not change over time. Concerns were raised about its continued use, with the literature now considering empathy as
having state as well as trait elements (Froman & Peloquin, 2001); other researchers challenged the practice of studying empathy as a unidimensional phenomenon (Davis, 1994; Decety & Jackson, 2004). A number of reviews concluded a new approach to the study of empathy is needed (Duan & Hill, 1996; Gladstein & Brennan, 1987; Verducci, 2000).

Individual differences with respect to empathy and the degree to which we have empathic feelings will vary as a function of context and situational factors. In the case of schools, there will be a range of factors that may promote or hinder the conditions necessary for empathy to occur. Further investigation of the factors and pre-conditions that modulate empathic responses are important for a better understanding of the conditions where prosocial behaviour, on the one hand, and egoistic behaviour, on the other, are likely to occur. An interesting question for future research is to determine the relative importance of the ability to empathize and to mentalize for the prediction of others’ motives and actions in different situations, and to determine in which situations one is interfering with or even facilitating the other.

**Why is empathy important for educators?**

In teaching, a model suggesting that the representation of one’s own feeling states is necessary for empathy to arise leads to two possible predictions. First, that enhancing the capacity to understand one’s own feelings would also enhance the capacity for empathy. Second, deficits in understanding one’s own emotions would be associated with empathy deficits. While evidence for the first hypothesis is still at an early stage, evidence for the second hypothesis is accumulating (Singer, 2009).

To be effective, teachers need to understand how students’ experiences inside classrooms shape the changes that are going on in their minds (Nuthall, 2007). In a synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses addressing student achievement, Hattie (2009) found that cultivating teacher–student relationships is a key factor to improving student learning with an average effect size of .72 across 229 studies. Similarly, Cornelius-White (2007) in a meta-analysis of 119 studies found person-centred teacher variables, such as honouring student voice, and adapting to individual and cultural differences to be positively correlated with improved student outcomes with mean correlations of .31.

Teaching regulatory agencies worldwide routinely list providing empathy or care to students as a professional responsibility. For example, in Ireland and Ontario, Canada teachers are required to show care ‘through empathy in practice’. New Zealand and countries of the South Pacific require ‘responsible care’. In Australia, the National Professional Standards for Principals endorse empathy as a personal quality (AITSL, 2011, p. 7) and state registration boards require empathy (Tasmania, Northern Territory) or care (Queensland). Despite these requirements, ‘cognitive and emotional misunderstandings [are] chronic features of many schools and classrooms’ (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 839).

Teaching is an interpersonal endeavour (Butler, 2012; Riley, 2013). Teacher–student relationships require attention from teachers in the classroom, and are an important source of teacher concern and happiness (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Day, Stobart, Sammons, & Kington, 2006). Positive relationships with students are central to teachers’ self-efficacy and professional identity in all phases of a teaching career (Day et al., 2006). It is common for many beginning and veteran teachers to experience problems in the domain of interpersonal relationships and classroom management (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). Problematic teacher–student relationships seem to be an important reason for teacher attrition early in a career (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).
Teacher interpersonal competence is therefore an important factor in creating and maintaining positive relationships with students and enhancing the quality of a teaching career (Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2006). Teachers with healthy teacher–student relationships are better able to teach effectively and motivate their students (Cornelius-White, 2007).

**Empathy, mentalization built from attachment**

So from where do mentalization abilities originate? Maslow (1967) argued that ‘Beloved people can be incorporated into the self… ’ (p. 103). Most research on attachment has focused on the parent–child bond, a relationship that is particularly relevant to teachers. McCall (1974) defines ‘attachment’ as the ‘incorporation of… [the other’s] actions and reactions… into the content of one’s various conceptions of the self’ (p. 219). Parents shape the attachment schemas, or inner working models of their children, subconsciously guiding feelings, attitudes and behaviours toward adults in authority. Teachers follow parents as authority figures as a central source of nurturance and safety and become the first ‘secure base’ (Bowlby, 1988) outside the family (Riley, 2013). From attachment theory, it follows that the mentalizing capacity of teachers as ‘significant other’ for the students is important for healthy student development (Swan & Riley, 2012). While children project their schema onto teachers, as members of the class, teachers have the power to regulate or modify their projections through empathic understanding of the child’s motives. Even minor changes in teacher mentalization about children might have a significant impact on the child’s emerging mind through interactions with a responsive, mentalizing caregiver such as a teacher (Shai & Fonagy, 2014). Increasing teachers’ awareness of the importance of mentalizing holds great promise.

Teachers and parents play important complementary roles in a child’s development. Ideally, both enhance a child’s emotional regulation by providing a safe haven that supports the learning process, but this is not always the case (Lewis & Riley, 2009; Romi, Lewis, Roache, & Riley, 2011; Riley, 2013). A key component of empathy and mentalization therefore is the teacher’s ability to mirror the mind of the child. Mirroring is ‘the process by which a person attunes to a child’s inner world and provides the child with the words and behaviours for self-expression’ (Cozolino, 2013, p. 52). Teacher–student attunement therefore isn’t a ‘nice addition’ for learning, but a core requirement. Ways to improve the quality of teachers’ mentalizing capacities therefore requires serious investigation.

**Can empathy skills be taught to teachers?**

In medical training, empathy is typically taught as a set of cognitive and behavioural skills (Winefield & Chur-Hansen, 2000). Should empathy skills also be taught to teachers?

Within classrooms, one sees a range of empathy practices depending on the importance placed on empathy by the teacher involved and empathic teachers regulate their teaching to meet student needs (Siegel, 2012). The process of assessing teacher-embodied mentalization involves focusing on moments of empathy in the classroom and examining the degree to which a teacher’s ability to appreciate his/her student’s mental states translates into regulating behaviour. Without empathy, teachers are teaching content instead of teaching students.

Rogers (1951) initially described empathy as a skill that can be taught. In his later work (1975), he conceded that empathy was not so much a skill, as a way of being. Is empathy a skill that can be taught as a ‘competency’ or is it something fuller, something
more persistent? While the process of empathy can be facilitated to occur, affective elements – teaching teachers how to feel if you like – cannot be directly taught as this element is considered to be somewhat autonomic (van Berkhout & Maloof, 2015). The authors however do believe that behavioural empathy elements (occurring in response to affective or cognitive empathy processes) can and should be taught to teachers.

Empathy training has been shown to be successful in improving empathic potential in other fields. For example, for health professionals, a 2015 meta-analysis of 18 randomized controlled trials evaluating empathy training found training programmes are efficacious with a moderate effect size of .63 (van Berkhout & Maloof, 2015). Further, this meta-analysis found that studies that targeted cognitive and behavioural, or cognitive, affective and behavioural empathy together, had higher effect sizes than studies that targeted cognitive or affective empathy elements only. Interestingly, all studies targeted at least cognitive empathy based on a view that cognitive empathy involves processes that can be consciously acquired. The study concluded that further research is needed on types of assessment which is often hampered by the lack of an agreed-upon method of measuring empathy. Difficulties in measurement may lead to devaluation and neglect of important aspects of training.

We hypothesize that, just as with the medical practitioners, cognitive and behavioural empathy elements can be taught to teachers to improve their relational practices. While there is no one process for empathy to be taught, there are a range of strategies that seem to work and teachers can improve their skills in this area. Empathy skills can be learned by teachers if they have access to the right strategies. Teachers can enhance or strengthen their empathy skills through experiences that increase self-awareness, listening, awareness of commonalities, and respect and tolerance for others. Promoting attitudes and behaviours such as self-awareness, positive regard for others, good listening skills, and respect are important in developing teachers who are motivated to demonstrate empathic capacity.

Conclusion – towards an operational measure of empathy for educators

Empathy is an important skill as it represents the very foundations for student care. As in medicine, it has always been and always will be among a teacher’s most essential tools of practice. Simulating the mental states of others, or ‘mentalizing’, is a necessary precondition for empathic responding to others (Frith & Frith, 2003; Preston & de Waal, 2002). Examining the process of teacher mentalization is an important component of the teacher empathy process (Fonagy, Steele, Moran, & Higgitt, 1991; Hogan, 1969) and there is a need for robust, workable taxonomies for this domain of professional competence mandated in standards frameworks.

Human beings take into account both what we learn and from whom we are learning it. Mentalizing for teachers involves the capacity to consider and treat a child as a psychological agent motivated by mental states (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002).

A teacher can see a child’s history reflected in his or her postures, attitudes, words and spirit, and by the end of the first day of the new school year, has a pretty good idea of the challenges that lie ahead. (Cozolino, 2013, p. 23)

Within a class, the teacher actively seeks to ‘interactively regulate each other’s internal states’ (Siegel, 2012).
Classrooms are complex social settings characterized by social interactions between teachers and students, and among students. Empirical work over the past decade supports the view that the form interactions take between teachers and students are important in student learning (Lewis & Riley, 2009; Pianta, Belsky, Vandergrift, Houts, & Morrison, 2008). Successful teachers establish, enhance and maintain healthy relationships with students, and stimulate students’ motivation for learning and this is in part achieved through mentalization. The question is to what extent? This requires us to pay attention to the nuances of teachers’ work, to understand and explore what their success tells us about how children learn. If the quality of teacher–student relationships underpins educational experiences for children, then we need to investigate this area more rigorously.

The process of assessing teacher-embodied mentalization involves focusing precisely on moments of empathy in the classroom and examining the degree to which a teacher’s ability to appreciate his/her student’s mental states is translated into modifying behaviour to meet student needs. Fonagy’s concept of mentalization involves interpersonally complex understandings of ourselves and others, reflecting abilities that enable us to navigate the social world and develop an enriched, stable sense of self. Considering the affective, cognitive and behavioural effects of teacher–student interactions to enhance teacher empathy skills is therefore an area ripe for future research.

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