

# Teacher Sympathy: Conceptualization and Cultivation Mechanisms in Educational Practice

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**Abstract:** The cultivation of students' healthy personality needs to be rooted in a humanized ethical field, and teacher empathy is the spiritual background of this field. As an internalized emotional endowment of educators, teacher empathy is not inherently solidified, but can be dynamically generated through conceptual infiltration, environmental influence and practical refinement. Teacher empathy has its own unique structural connotation and important value implication. It is conducive to promoting teacher-student emotional resonance, opening the window of the student's mind; helping to enhance the teacher-student cognitive empathy, construct a good teacher-student relationship; helpful to promote teacher-student behavioral concerns, cultivate students' sympathy. In view of this, this paper proposes the way to cultivate teachers' empathy from the conceptual deepening, environment creation and practice deep cultivation, aiming to cultivate empathetic teachers and students, and build a warmer and more harmonious educational environment.

**Keywords:** Teacher sympathy; Value implications; Emotional resonance

## 1. Introduction

Tao Xingzhi, in his article titled "The Concept of Teacher-Student Relationship," delves into a profound discussion on the compassion that should exist between teachers and students: "What is sympathy? It means taking the happiness of students as one's own happiness, and taking the worries of students as one's own worries<sup>[1]</sup>", teacher sympathy should be a necessary quality of teachers, and is the source of the formation and growth of teachers' professional ethics. UNESCO 2021 in its report "Re-imagining our future together: forging a new social contract for education" clearly states that pedagogy should be organized around the principles of cooperation, collaboration and solidarity, aiming to develop students' intellects, their capacity for social interaction, and their ability to act ethically, so that they can work together to transform the world on the basis of empathy and compassion<sup>[2]</sup>. Nowadays, the weight of instrumental rationality and utilitarianism has led to the gradual indifference of educational emotions. Dramatic changes in material life and the challenges of the spiritual world coexist, and the drawbacks of exam-based education are highlighted, exacerbating the problem of emotional education in schools, especially teacher-student relationships are strained, with indifference, antagonism and even deterioration, and frequent incidents of bullying in schools. At the same time, teachers' sense of professional honor and happiness is reduced, and repetitive labor weakens professional identity and teaching motivation. It can be seen that the cultivation of teachers' empathy is of vital importance. Education should be a process full of emotions, and compassionate teachers should cultivate equally compassionate students. However, the existing research on teacher empathy is obviously insufficient<sup>[3][4]</sup>. On the one hand, the connotation of teacher empathy has not been scientifically defined to clarify the developmental basis, and on the other hand, the structural elements of teacher empathy have not been elaborated in depth to provide references for teachers' high-quality development. Based on this, this study deeply explores the connotation of teacher empathy and its development, which is both a further deepening of educational theory and a positive response of educational practice to meet the needs of the times.

## 2. The Connotation and Structural Elements of Teachers' Sympathy

### 2.1. The Connotation of Teacher Sympathy

Philosophy lays the foundation of human nature, ethics builds the professional norms of teachers, and psychology analyzes its micro-operating mechanism. Therefore, the interpretation of teacher's

sympathy needs to be rooted in the cross-fertilization of multidisciplinary perspectives. Etymologically, "sympathy" is composed of the Greek words "sym" (common) and "pathy" (feeling), which means the intentional connection of "feeling with others", the emotion of emotional empathy for what happens to others and the emotion of concern, support, and assistance in their behavior<sup>[5]</sup>. This concept has been reflected in the philosophical tradition for a long time: Mencius reveals the ethical gene of human nature's inherent goodness with "compassion", while Scheler, through phenomenological analysis, points out that sympathy in the field of education is a "spiritual resonance of intersubjectivity<sup>[6]</sup>", which is not an overlooking of pity, almsgiving, nor empathy (e.g. "empathy"). Neither is it an almsgiving of pity, nor is it a pure cognitive projection of empathy, but it is an ethical practice of the educator to intervene in the life experience of the students with an attitude of equality. The philosophical dimension of teacher empathy is essentially a visualization of the dialogue relationship between "me and you", which transcends the subject-object dichotomy, and realizes the humanistic turn of education in what Jaspers called "flesh and spirit communication". From the perspective of ethics, teachers' compassion presents the dual attributes of professional ethics and moral responsibility. Adam Smith emphasized in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that sympathy is the cornerstone of moral judgment, and that teachers, as "impartial bystanders", need to sublimate emotional empathy into the ethical norms of educational action<sup>[7]</sup>. Tao Xingzhi's aphorism of "taking the students' worries as your worries" is a good example of the transformation from "natural sympathy" to "professional ethics". This transformation requires teachers to break through the limitations of instinctive emotions and incorporate empathy into the framework of professional norms. Psychological research has provided a microscopic mechanism for generating teacher empathy. Hoffman's three-stage theory of "emotional infection-cognitive empathy-behavioral motivation"<sup>[8]</sup> reveals the dynamic process of sympathy from emotion to action; Hu Jingshen further proposes the spiral model of "experience-understanding-behavior"<sup>[9]</sup>, which emphasizes the practical transformation of empathy in educational contexts. Different from ordinary interpersonal sympathy, teacher sympathy is a kind of composite psychological quality in the educational situation, the teacher's deep insight into the emotional world of the students and cognitive structure of the precise grasp, and can give appropriate response.

## 2.2. *Structural elements of teacher sympathy*

From the perspective of psychology's analysis of the internal mechanism of teacher sympathy, sympathy often arises from the linkage between an individual's perception of another person's emotional state and the internal psychological response mechanism, resulting in empathetic behavior. The structural elements of teacher empathy include emotional resonance, cognitive empathy and behavioral concern. Emotional empathy needs to be supported by educational sensitivity, cognitive empathy needs to be combined with pedagogy, developmental psychology and other subject knowledge, and behavioral concern needs to be transformed into differentiated educational strategies. This three-dimensional interaction of "emotion-cognition-behavior" enables teacher empathy to go beyond the clinical treatment orientation of Rogers' "empathy" and become a professional ability that integrates educational wisdom.

Emotional empathy is the original driver of teacher compassion. Phenomenologist Van Meenen points out that educators need to "capture the unspoken meaning of students in their eyes, intonation and gestures<sup>[10]</sup>". For example, if a student is distracted in class due to a family change, the teacher can sense his or her anxiety through subtle expressions without asking, which is a physical manifestation of "emotional empathy". This empathy not only allows teachers to see into the world of the student's mind, but also paves an effective path for teaching and counseling, so that students can feel the warmth of comfort and strength when they are frustrated. Cognitive empathy is the sublimation of emotional empathy. Teachers need to go beyond the limitations of emotional empathy and use rational analysis to look at the social, psychological and cultural motivations behind students' behavior. For instance, a student's academic slacking might stem from the pressure of familial expectations or a deficiency in self-efficacy. This process not only reflects the teacher's respect for students' individual differences, but also exemplifies the integration of the art of education and the science of teaching, which promotes harmonious teacher-student relationships and the effectiveness of teaching, while planting the seeds of empathy and understanding in students' hearts. Behavioral concern, as a practical dimension of empathy, translates teachers' care into concrete actions, such as adjusting teaching strategies, providing individualized instruction and additional support, which not only demonstrate teachers' responsibility and professionalism, but also create a supportive learning environment for students, stimulate their motivation to learn, and promote academic achievement and personal growth. More importantly, such behavioral concerns become a powerful force for students' healthy character building, empathy and

moral development. These three elements complement each other and together constitute the core framework of teacher compassion. In the vast arena of educational practice, they are intertwined and mutually reinforcing, not only promoting effective communication and deep emotional connection between teachers and students, but also paving a path full of love and wisdom for teachers' professional growth and students' overall development. Through continuous practical exploration and profound reflection, teachers are able to continuously improve their level of compassion and become indispensable guides and peers in the journey of students' lives.

### **3. The Value Implications of Teacher Sympathy**

#### ***3.1. Promote emotional resonance between teachers and students and open the windows of students' minds***

Sukhomlinsky once profoundly pointed out that in the field of education, the break of the spiritual bond between teachers and students often makes teaching reduced to a "meaningless struggle"<sup>[11]</sup>. Teacher sympathy acts as a key to unlock the heart's door, fostering emotional resonance to dissolve the alienation between teachers and students, thereby elevating education from mere "knowledge transfer" to "life dialogue". This resonance is not a superficial emotional contagion, but rather a teacher's embodiment of "presence" that delves into the emotional universe of students—from interpreting the silent rebellion of teenagers to uncover their unspoken loneliness, and in the avoidance of academic distress, discerning the hidden self-denial. A study shows that teacher empathy significantly enhances students' motivation and classroom participation<sup>[12]</sup>, the mechanism of which lies in the fact that the anxiety of academic exploration is transformed into secure attachment when students perceive the depth of the teacher's understanding of his/her thinking logic and cognitive style. This makes students dare to expose their cognitive vulnerability and hammer resilience through trial and error. As Erikson said, during the period of constructing "self-identity", adolescents urgently need to confirm the value of their existence through external recognition feedback<sup>[13]</sup>. Teachers' sympathetic response provides them with a mirror-like reference, enabling them to transcend their inferiority complex in the process of being "seen". The deeper educational significance lies in the fact that empathy reshapes the ethical ecology of the classroom. When the teacher intervenes in teaching as a "realizer of life" rather than an "authority on knowledge", the classroom is no longer a container for unidirectional discipline, but a symbiotic field of emotional flow. Here, students' joys and sorrows are given pedagogical significance: a failed experiment reflects courage, an off-topic essay conceals a spark of creativity. What the teacher realizes through empathy is not the repair of "problems" but the awakening of "possibilities" - this is the most genuine form of education: melting the ice of cognition with the temperature of the heart! This is what education really looks like: melting the ice of cognition with the warmth of the heart, so that every life can be made whole through understanding.

#### ***3.2. Enhancing cognitive empathy between teachers and students and building good teacher-student relationships***

According to Damasio, emotions are the essence of human relations. Vygotsky's "theory of emotional interaction" reveals that education is not a mechanical process of transferring knowledge, but an inter-subjective dialog with emotion as the bond. Teacher sympathy, as the core of cognitive empathy, involves decoding students' emotional symbols to construct a two-way understanding of the spiritual channel. An empirical study confirms that teacher empathy not only positively predicts the closeness of teacher-student relationships, but also plays a mediating role in the transmission chain of "colleague support-teacher-student trust", which essentially dissolves the gap between institutionalized roles through emotional connections. This empathic practice has a deep ethical dimension. Teachers not only need to follow the explicit statute of professional responsibility, such as differentiated counseling, but also need to practice the implicit commitment of "educator as ethical subject" - when students are alienated due to misunderstanding, teachers replace moral judgment with "embodied empathy", which is an alternative to moral judgment. When students are alienated due to misunderstanding, the teacher replaces moral judgment with "embodied empathy" and transforms the confrontation into an educational opportunity by retracing the psychological logic behind the behavior. This process is a manifestation of what Levinas calls the "ethics of the other"<sup>[14]</sup>: the teacher no longer assumes the role of authority, but rather opens up to the students' life experience as a "listener". This is where the virtuous circle of the teacher-student relationship comes from. When students perceive the sincerity of the teacher, their defense mechanisms are transformed into emotional bets. This

strengthening process of "trust-participation" makes the teacher-student relationship break through the instrumental connection and sublimate into a spiritual symbiosis. On the other hand, when teachers fall into "emotional incapacity", teacher-student interactions will degenerate into institutional performances - students build up a heart wall with silence or perfunctory, and the temperature of education is quietly lost in the programmed process. The ultimate value of cognitive empathy lies in the return of education to the true state of "life meets life".

### ***3.3. Promoting teacher-student behavioral concerns and fostering student sympathy***

Students' empathy does not come naturally, but needs to be actively led and carefully cultivated by teachers. Teachers' empathy is not only a manifestation of their personal qualities, but also the key to cultivating students' empathy. Teachers' compassion is a role model for students to follow. Students are born to learn from their teachers, not only in terms of knowledge, but also in terms of words and deeds. Compassionate teachers, concerned about students' feelings, care and support for students in distress, this behavior is deeply rooted in the hearts of students, and will become their future reference to help others. A study confirms that students who have received empathetic care from their teachers are more likely to sympathize and help others when they grow up<sup>[15]</sup>. In addition, the deeper role of teacher empathy is to restructure the ethical ecology of the classroom. Noddings' Ethics of Caring<sup>[16]</sup> suggests that when teachers replace the role of "knowledge authority" with that of "relational presence," the classroom is transformed into a symbiosis of emotional connection. In this field, students' cognitive development and social growth occur simultaneously: teachers' tolerance for multiple cognitive styles, such as allowing unconventional problem-solving, enables students to learn to respect differences; positive interventions in emotional dilemmas, such as the establishment of a psychological safety valve mechanism, develops their empathetic sensitivity. Ultimately, teacher empathy points to the cultivation of civil society. Dewey believed that empathy is a human nature with social attributes and an important way to promote social solidarity and democracy. In the field of education, teacher empathy can guide students to learn to pay attention to the feelings and needs of others, thus cultivating a sense of social responsibility and citizenship. Dewey also emphasized that empathy needs to be transformed in order to become empathy of a social nature, and teacher guidance is key to this transformation process. A democratic society requires individuals to act with consideration for the actions of others, and empathy is the key to achieving this<sup>[17]</sup>. Therefore, in educational practice, teachers' empathy has an irreplaceable role in developing students' empathy and guiding them to develop democratic values.

## **4. The formation of teachers' sympathy**

### ***4.1. Reinventing concepts and strengthening sympathy: laying the ideological cornerstone of teachers' sympathy***

From the viewpoint of the connotation and structural elements of teachers' empathy, the cultivation of teachers' empathy needs to start with the reconstruction of concepts. Teachers should deeply recognize the core value of compassion in building harmonious teacher-student relationships and promoting students' mental health through education theory learning and professional training. Dewey's concept of "education as life" reveals that educators need to break through the shackles of the role of knowledge transmitters and become the guides of students' emotional growth and practitioners of life care<sup>[18]</sup>. The awakening of this role consciousness requires teachers to continuously carry out teaching reflection, review the emotional temperature of their own behavior in teacher-student interaction, and internalize empathy as the core dimension of educational philosophy. The key to cognitive restructuring is to realize the sublimation of emotional sympathy to rational care. Teachers need to examine the alienation of teacher-student relationship caused by the lack of empathy and the positive changes brought about by empathy education through case studies and analysis of educational narratives. For example, Prof. Zhu Xiaoman's team confirmed that teachers' emotional literacy has a direct impact on the cultivation of students' moral seeds through the action research of "Emotional Expression"<sup>[19]</sup>. This cognitive shift elevates empathy from a natural emotion to a professional competence, and provides sustained motivation for educational practice.

### ***4.2. Creating an environment to promote sympathy: educating for teachers' sympathy***

The cultivation of teachers' empathy not only requires teachers' personal concepts and awareness, but also the creation of institutional safeguards and cultural ecology is undoubtedly indispensable.

Institutional protection is the foundation of compassion cultivation. The current teacher evaluation system needs to incorporate the emotional dimension, the quality of teacher-student interaction, student emotional feedback into the assessment indicators, such as the addition of emotional communication skills assessment in the teacher qualification certification. Schools should establish "emotional literacy growth files", which can be monitored by observing teachers' behavior in the classroom, their interaction with students, and their response to students' emotional needs. It can also be used as a basis for career development and promotion through student feedback and peer review. In addition, the creation of a cultural ecology is also indispensable. The "social-emotional cultural anchoring framework" can be used as a reference to build a support system that includes emotional workshops, psychological supervision, educational theater and other forms. The practice of "film and television workshop" carried out by Beijing Normal University shows that artistic contextual experience can increase teachers' emotional sensitivity by 28.6%<sup>[20]</sup>. At the same time, it is necessary to strengthen the construction of a social support network, through the media communication, home and school co-education and other ways, to shape the social atmosphere of respect for teachers, to provide value recognition for teachers' emotional labor.

#### 4.3. Deepening practice, practicing care: paving the way for teachers' compassionate development

Compassionate behavior is an outward feature of teacher compassion. The quality of teacher-student interaction determines the effectiveness of empathy in practice. Teachers need to break through the physical contact level and realize the dialogue of the heart with the help of teaching methods such as situational simulation and role reversal. In teacher training, schools should ask some teachers to play a simulated situation in the students' discussion activities, intuitive experience of their own familiar with some of the educational words and actions in the students may produce emotional experience and its impact, so that they gradually learn to look at their own work from the students' point of view, and targeted to reach a sympathetic understanding. At the same time, along with the rapid development of modern information technology, teachers also make full use of emerging tools and channels such as social media and online education platforms to engage in in-depth communication with their students. This innovation in teaching methodology is the key to practice transformation. A "three-dimensional experience model" can be constructed: awakening emotional cognition through educational narratives, creating sympathetic situations using digital twin technology, and deepening emotional practice through project-based learning. For example, the role-playing method in the course of "morality and the rule of law" not only enhances the participation of students, but also increases the incidence of caring behavior of teachers.<sup>[21]</sup> This "learning by doing" model confirms the practical value of Dewey's empirical philosophy, which transforms empathy cultivation into observable educational productivity.

Educators should use compassion as a plowshare to cultivate fertile soil for education. When institutional safeguards, cultural infiltration and practical refinement form a synergy of education, the emotional labor of teachers will be transformed into a catalyst for shaping the "whole person". This kind of warm educational ecology will not only cultivate modern citizens with social sentiments, but also promote the return of the essence of education to life care, and inject lasting spiritual kinetic energy for the progress of human civilization.

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