



Cap sur l'école inclusive
en Europe



Resource Sheet

Empathy: Elements for a General Definition

Section of the module /D



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1 - Thematic

The theme discussed here is "**Empathy: Elements for a General Definition**".

The purpose of this resource sheet will be to answer the question of the particular place that the elements of definition of empathy can take in the educational and pedagogical accompaniment work of learners with Special Educational Needs. **Especially concerning the personal skills to mobilize and the relational positions to adopt with these children.**

General definition

The term empathy refers etymologically to the Greek word "*empathéia*" which means "affected", "passionate".

Its introduction into the English language goes back to 1909, when psychologist Edward Titchener (pupil of the German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt) took the German word "*Einfühlung*" (a word close to "sympathy" - "Mitgefühl" - but differing from it) and formed a neologism: "empathy". Titchener's objective here was to offer the psychologist the **means to think of a mode of relationship that is not based on sympathy, impelling a shift and a gap from the other in the accompanying relationship.**

Carl Rogers, a famous American psychologist, will later highlight the determinative nature of the relationship in the therapeutic process and thus define empathy as a central relational modality in patient support.

Thus, empathy is not to be considered only as a "sensitivity", a state of openness to others and an affective, emotional and cognitive availability. **Empathy is also a method, a "tool" and a medium used by the professional to better support the other.** A medium that goes through the bodily and the psychic of one, to connect with the bodily and the psychic of the Other.

As Carl Rogers emphasizes, **empathy is thus to be conceived as relying on interpersonal relationship skills based on intrapersonal skills** (Rogers, 1968).

Carl Rogers defines that "*being empathetic means to accurately perceive the internal frame of reference of one's interlocutor and the reasoning and emotions that result from it. That is to say,*

capturing the suffering or the pleasure as they are experienced by the interlocutor, to perceive the causes in the same way as him / her"(Rogers, 1968).

According to Rogers, there are three principles that allow the therapist to stand in the "right place" to enable the other to move forward in his / her therapeutic journey:

- The empathic attitude;
- The unconditional acceptance of the other (or non-judgment);
- And authenticity (also called congruence – the ability to feel and express authentically to others what one feels). According to Rogers, congruence is the relational condition for the other to express authentically what he / she feels.

Note here that empathy is to be differentiated on several levels. First, we need to differentiate **between cognitive empathy and affective and emotional empathy**. Cognitive empathy refers to the ability to represent the mental state of others (theory of the mind) whereas affective and emotional empathy is about the ability to feel what the other feels.

On the other hand, empathy can be divided into two distinct abilities: in terms of **experiencing** on the one hand (this is what we are talking about when we talk about cognitive, emotional empathy, etc.), and on the other hand in terms of **communicative skill** (this will be the subject of the resource sheet "*Empathy and benevolent communication*").

Empathic ability

According to Theresa Wiseman, a nurse and care relationship specialist, empathy is an ability that is anchored at different skill levels. It is necessary to be able to adopt the other's point of view, to recognize his / her emotions and his / her thoughts, but it is also necessary to possess the ability to **communicate to the other the fact that one is able to recognize and to take into account his / her emotions and thoughts**. Here we come to the notion of congruence proposed by Carl Rogers.

It is this aspect of things that is highlighted by the work of psychologist Marshall Rosenberg (a pupil of Carl Rogers). Rosenberg, founder of the communication model called "nonviolent communication" (NVC), for whom **empathy can express itself authentically and nurture human relations only if it is communicated to the other in a benevolent way** (see on this point the resource sheet: "*Empathy and benevolent communication*"). Rosenberg adds that in order to be empathic, everyone must first be able to situate oneself in what he calls "**self-empathy**". Coming closer to Carl Rogers' concept of congruence, Rosenberg will propose this notion of self-empathy to recall that if empathy is indeed an **interpersonal relationship skill, it could not exist without the existence of such intrapersonal skills as the ability to listen to oneself ("self-empathy") or else benevolence**.

As he points out: "*When we practice interior violence against ourselves, it is difficult to feel genuine benevolence towards others*" (Rosenberg, 1999).

2/ Context

We are in a class (primary or secondary school) where a pupil is psychologically disabled. Difficulties are observed in the dynamics of the class group where differences divide and create misunderstandings. This can create inclusion difficulties for children with SEN.

Here, building on the work on empathy and on **the idea that the capacity for self-empathy is the condition for empathy to exist and express itself**, the teacher can make the pedagogical choice of establishing an educational tool aiming at developing the self-empathic abilities of pupils.

For example: learners are grouped together and watch small video scenes from documentaries. The instruction is that, in turn, everyone expresses what he /she felt or what he / she thought during this scene. The teacher allows the pupil through his / her questioning: on the one hand to question or put things in words, and **to develop one's ability to listen to oneself (intrapersonal capacity: self-empathy) and to the other (interpersonal ability: empathy).**

3/ Goal

This sheet is to be attached to the module trunk D as Define. This is to define here what we are talking about when we talk about empathy as a relational skill. This definition makes it possible to mobilize resources to enrich **the intrapersonal and interpersonal skills to mobilize and the relational positions to adopt with these children.**

4/ Limits

The limit to be considered here is that, as we have seen, these relational skills related to self-empathy and empathy **can be the base of a relationship only if they are part of enabling communication schemes.**

5/ Prospects

To overcome this limit, the teacher (or the accompanying person) will be able to rely on the so-called "non-violent communication" approach (see on this point the resource sheet: ***"empathy and benevolent communication"***).