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Teacher Empathy: A Model of Empathy for Teaching for Student Success

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ABSTRACT
This paper defines teacher empathy, argues that teacher empathy enhances student learning, and offers suggestions for increasing teacher empathy. Teacher empathy is the degree to which an instructor works to deeply understand students' personal and social situations, to feel care and concern in response to students' positive and negative emotions, and to respond compassionately without losing the focus on student learning. Teacher empathy is communicated to students through course policies as well as the instructor's behavior toward students. To increase teacher empathy, we review non-pejorative explanations for undesirable student behavior (e.g., fear of failure), and we suggest ways in which faculty can learn about their students and can structure course policies to increase teacher empathy. Ultimately, we call for research on teacher empathy and student learning.

KEYWORDS
Empathy; college; teaching; teachers; students; success; metacognitive

Instructors in higher education are often faced with difficult situations. Consider the following two examples:

1. Mariana, a traditional-age Hispanic student, has asked to meet with her instructor. Finals week is rapidly approaching; Mariana is behind and may not be able to complete the final paper on time. She has missed class frequently and submitted several assignments late. Although she attended office hours early in the semester to clarify the course material, she has not come recently.
2. Professor Miller has just wrapped up his first semester as a college instructor, and the experience was not quite what he expected. He noticed many students using cell phones during class. A few students were consistently late to class; others left early. Not a single deadline was met by everyone in the class, and it was rare for everyone to be present for an exam.

Although the first example highlights a challenge posed by an individual student and the other highlights challenges posed by the class as a whole, the instructors' responses are likely to be shaped by their degree of teacher empathy. This paper defines teacher empathy, argues that teacher empathy is important for both high-quality student–teacher relationships and student learning, and suggests ways that instructors can become more empathetic.

What is teacher empathy?

Psychologist Carl Rogers in *Freedom to Learn* (1969, 157–158) was the first to conceptualize teacher empathy, saying that, "a high degree of empathy in a relationship is possibly the most potent factor in bringing about change and learning." He asserts, "When the teacher has the ability to understand the student's reaction from the inside, has the sensitive awareness of the process of how education and learning seems to the student … .the likelihood of learning is significantly increased." Although there is little research on teacher empathy in higher education, multiple definitions of empathy have been generated by researchers from various disciplines, including health care (Hojat et al, 2001), social-neuroscience (Decety and Jackson 2006), philosophy (Stueber 2006), psychology (Batson 2009), and social work (Segal 2011).

To develop our definition of teacher empathy, we focused primarily on the theoretical work of Batson (2009, 3–15) and Segal (2011, 266–77), who discussed interpersonal and social empathy respectively. Interpersonal empathy is "the processes whereby one person can come to know the internal state of another and can be motivated to respond with sensitive care".

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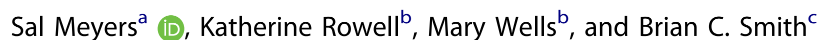

Although interpersonal empathy is an important component of teacher empathy, we argue that focusing solely on individual issues is insufficient. Group members (e.g., socio-economic status, Walpole 2003, 63) are associated with student success. Therefore, instructors also need social empathy, which is "the ability to understand people by perceiving or experiencing their lived situations and as a result gain insight into structural inequalities and disparities" (Segal 2011, 276–77).

So what is teacher empathy? Teacher empathy is not empathy experienced by people who happen to be teachers; it is an integral part of the role of teaching. More specifically, teacher empathy is the degree to which instructors work to deeply understand students' personal and social situations, feel caring and concern in response to students' positive and negative emotions, and communicate their understanding and caring to students through their behavior. Rather than being a characteristic instructors do or do not have, teacher empathy exists along a continuum. Not only do some instructors show more empathy than others, but instructors find it easier to empathize with some students and at some times than others.

This definition of teacher empathy involves cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. Cognitively, teacher empathy involves taking students' perspectives and understanding their personal and social situations. Students' personal situations include their feelings about the course and any learning or emotional disabilities they have. In Mariana's case, the demands of a nearly full-time job contribute to her personal situation. In contrast, social situations refer to the additional pressures students experience due to low socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity. For example, Mariana has to accompany her mother to medical appointments in order to translate for her. And because Mariana is Hispanic, she also regularly experiences racism, both blatant and subtle. The better an instructor understands these varied personal and social situations, the more that instructor cognitively empathizes with Mariana.

Whereas the cognitive component of empathy focuses on thoughts, the affective component focuses on feelings and is typically defined as feeling what another person feels. Although interpersonal empathy involves feeling the exact same emotions as the target, teacher empathy involves feeling similar, but not necessarily identical, emotions. When a student is anxious, an instructor high in teacher empathy does not feel anxious, but does feel a negative emotion that is then translated to concern and compassion. Whereas compassion focuses only on students' suffering, teacher empathy also includes positive feelings in response to students' positive emotions. That is, when a student is pleased, exhilarated, or relieved, the instructor is likely to feel happy or proud.

The more instructors cognitively and affectively empathize with students, the more these responses influence their behavior towards their students. When students are struggling or suffering, instructors high in teacher empathy show compassion. Teacher empathy influences instructors' behavior even when students are not struggling or suffering. Instructors high in teacher empathy take the time to get to know their students and help students reach their true potential. They encourage and support students so that students can reach heights they did not know they could reach.

The behavior of instructors high in teacher empathy is shaped by two additional factors. First, instructors high in teacher empathy set boundaries so they do not become overwhelmed by the intensity of students' negative experiences and experience compassion fatigue. Being accessible to students at all times and trying to act as a therapist are not part of teacher empathy, although instructors high in teacher empathy are likely to refer students to a counseling center, academic support center, or other campus resources. Second, instructors high in teacher empathy prioritize student learning. Mariana may receive an extension, but she is still required to submit the final paper and pass the final exam. Furthermore, if one of the course objectives is professional behavior such as completing work by the deadline, the instructor may not be able to award points for late work and may only be able to actively listen. The goal of this active listening is not to make Mariana feel good, but to make her feel understood. Ensuring a student feels understood is an important way to communicate empathy to an individual student, particularly when prioritizing student learning makes it impossible to make an exception to a course policy.

Envisioning ways of communicating empathy to an individual like Mariana elicits images of one-on-one conversations; however, teacher empathy, unlike other types of empathy, also includes communicating empathy to an entire class. That is why we paired the story of Mariana with the story of Professor Miller's frustrations with the first semester of teaching. Miller does not have a problem with an individual student; Miller has a problem with the class, and class-wide issues can be addressed with course policies.

The nature of the course policies implemented will vary by the degree of teacher empathy. If Miller is low in teacher empathy, students would likely be blamed for submitting work late and using cell phones during class. In response, Miller would develop policies using harsh penalties to reduce that behavior. In contrast, if Miller is high in teacher empathy, Miller would be more likely to either (1) build second-chances into the course and give students the opportunity to submit some assignments late without penalty if the course is an introductory course, or (2) explain the rationale behind a stricter policy if one of the learning objectives is preparing students for the work world. Building flexibility into due dates and explaining the rationale behind policies communicate to students that the instructor is aware of the challenges students face.

How is teacher empathy related to learning?

In the same way physicians provide better health care when they empathize with their patients (e.g., Mercer et al. 2016, 117-24), we argue that instructors provide a better education when they empathize with their students. Nursing students reported that teacher empathy improved their learning (Mikkonen, Kyngäs, and Kääriäinen 2015, 674). In addition, students' perceptions of teacher empathy are related to both students' perceptions of their learning (Bozkurt and Ozden, 2010) and to their performance on objective tests and papers (Chang, Berger, and Chang, 1981). Additional evidence comes from a meta-analysis of teacher-student relationships (including studies of preK-12 and postsecondary students), which noted that teacher empathy was among the strongest predictors of positive student outcomes, a broad category that included academic performance as well as affective and behavioral outcomes (Cornelius-White 2007, 120).

Although many people suspect that empathy is associated with lowering academic standards, we argue that sympathy, not empathy, is associated with lowering standards. Sympathy is "a pity-based response to a distressing situation that is characterized by a lack of relational understanding and the self-preservation of the observer" (Sinclair et al. 2017, 440). If instructors sympathize with students, they might lower standards and make the course easier as a way to quickly reduce the student's distress. But if teachers empathize and sincerely try to walk that mile in students' shoes, they conclude that lowering standards is absolutely the last thing that they should do. An empathetic response considers what students need to be successful after they graduate. This means students need to be well-prepared and held to high standards of academic performance. Instructors high in teacher empathy do not lower standards; they identify and remove obstacles to learning.

Advice for removing obstacles to learning is offered by Verschelden (2017) in her book *Bandwidth Recovery*. Verschelden argues that poverty, racism, and social marginalization reduce students' mental bandwidth and interfere with students' learning as well as their likelihood of graduating. One example of this reduction of bandwidth from poverty comes from research by Mani, Mullainathan, Shafir, and Zhao (2013): When faced with an unexpected hypothetical expense, poor people show a drop in intelligence that wealthier people do not experience. Verschelden offers a wide variety of examples of interventions likely to increase students' mental bandwidth, including persuading students that intelligence is changeable, dividing large projects into smaller pieces and providing feedback on each step, and prompting students to identify multiple pathways for meeting their goals. Removing obstacles in these ways does not involve lowering standards, but it does increase the chances students' will successfully complete their courses.

Becoming a more empathetic teacher

Instructors cannot simply identify a few quick techniques to increase empathy and then stop thinking about it. Empathy requires effort (Inzlicht, Cameron, Hutcherson, and Ferguson 2017), and that effort needs to be ongoing throughout the term. Recognizing that increasing teacher empathy is neither simple nor easy, we offer three broad recommendations to help instructors increase their teacher empathy. First, we recommend that instructors develop a deep understanding of students' social contexts so they can generate non-pejorative explanations for undesirable student behaviors. Second, we recommend instructors make time to learn more about their own students' personal contexts. And finally, we recommend instructors design course policies that reflect a deep understanding of students' personal and social situations.

The first two recommendations are based on research with middle-school math teachers involving the creation of an empathy mindset (Okonofua, Paunesku, and Walton 2016, 5221-6). The empathy mindset was created by (1) providing non-pejorative reasons for student misbehavior, (2) sharing students'

stories of teachers who made them feel respected when they misbehaved, and (3) asking teachers to write about how they could incorporate these ideas in their own practice. The teachers' empathy mindsets led to students perceiving more respect from their teachers and a reduction in suspensions for misbehavior. In higher education, instructors rarely use the term misbehavior; instead, they discuss poor performance and student incivility (e.g., sleeping in class, acting bored or disinterested, not attending class, disrupting class by arriving late or leaving early; Knepp 2012, 34).

Whether examining incivility or poor performance, the literature largely focuses on negative student characteristics such as students' academic entitlement (Jiang, Tripp, and Hong 2017, 8; Kopp and Finney 2013, 332), consumerism orientation (Nordstrom, Bartels, and Bucy 2009, 74-85), and narcissism (Nordstrom et al. 2009, 74-85). Given that researchers have focused on negative student characteristics, we suspect that many instructors may explain undesirable student behavior with similar non-empathetic reasons for the behavior. Shifting instructors' attributions away from characteristics of students to non-pejorative explanations that focus on students' social situations, as was done with the empathy mindset manipulation, could help reduce undesirable behavior and increase student success.

Understanding students' social context

What are possible non-pejorative reasons for college students' undesirable behaviors? Many behaviors that have been labeled as incivility may not be a result of student rudeness. Students who miss class or fall asleep during class might be doing so because those students have numerous other responsibilities. Most students (70-80% of undergraduates) are employed (Carnevale, Smith, Melton, and Price 2015, 11); many of them (40%) work at least 30 hours per week. And a quarter of undergraduates have dependent children (Gault, Reichlin, and Román 2014, 4). In addition to these off-campus responsibilities, many students participate in co-curricular activities on campus such as athletics, Greek letter organizations, religious organizations, student government, academic and professional organizations, and the arts. Because employment, parenting, and co-curricular activities all compete for students' time, one empathetic response, particularly for instructors teaching first-year students, is to teach the class how to manage their time.

Another non-pejorative reason for undesirable behaviors is fear of failure. Cox's (2009) qualitative research found that community college students reported academic anxiety. Students handled their fears in various ways; one strategy was to avoid assessment (e.g., refrain from class discussion; avoid talking with the instructor; fail to submit work to be graded). "In the absence of evidence from assessments, students can still cling—however tenuously—to their identity as college students" (Cox, 2009, 66). Instructors high in teacher empathy recognize that not submitting assignments may be a function of fear of failure rather than laziness or lack of motivation. These instructors put forth intentional effort to make students feel safe in class, to value students' contributions, and to encourage and motivate students.

The anxiety Cox (2009) described is not limited to community college students. Students of color, even those at highly selective institutions such as Stanford, can experience stereotype threat (Steele and Aronson 1995, 799). Stereotype threat is the fear of confirming a negative stereotype about one's group; this anxiety interferes with performance in evaluation contexts (Steele 2010, 5). Similarly, stereotype threat can lead women in STEM fields to disengage because they fear confirming the negative stereotype that women do poorly in math and science.

Understanding students' experiences of stereotype threat motivates instructors high in empathy to find ways to reduce stereotype threat in their classes. One evidence-based approach is to ask students to identify the values important to them and explain why those values are important. This value affirmation exercise increases students' GPAs even several years after the exercise, especially for students with social identity threats (Cohen and Sherman 2014). Another evidence-based approach to reducing stereotype threat effects can be utilized when giving students feedback. To discourage students from interpreting criticism as resulting from the instructor's prejudice, instructors tell students that they are being held to a high standard and that the instructor believes students can meet that standard (Cohen, Steele, and Ross 1999, 1313).

Another source of anxiety for ethnic minority students that can lead to behavior misperceived as laziness or incivility is belonging uncertainty (e.g., Strayhorn 2012, 18-23). Belonging uncertainty occurs when people are not sure they are fully included, valued, and respected, and it is more likely to be experienced by socially stigmatized groups (Walton and Cohen, 2007). For example, when led to believe they had few friends in a particular intellectual domain,

African American students reported they did not belong and perceived themselves as having less potential than students in a control condition; in contrast, white students did not show these decreases (Walton and Cohen 2007, 93). Belonging uncertainty also has been shown in first-generation students (Stebleton, Soria, and Huesman 2014, 14) and women in STEM fields (Wilson et al. 2015, 765). Students who felt a weaker sense of belonging put forth less effort in their classes and participated less in class (Wilson et al. 2015, 761). Furthermore, at least one research-intensive university found that social belonging was a better predictor of continuing to the sophomore year than cumulative GPA (Keating, Van Boven, and Ito, 2016). Even in a sample of predominantly White college students, those low in belonging showed declines in their GPAs over time; an intervention designed to protect them from threats to belonging led to increases in their GPAs (Layous et al. 2017, 4).

How can instructors high in teacher empathy help reduce belonging uncertainty? One option is to encourage first-year students to see social adversity as a common problem that all college students encounter and one that improves with time; this social-belonging intervention led African American students, but not European American students, to have a higher GPA, better physical health, and a greater sense of well-being at the end of their senior year (Walton and Cohen 2011, 1447-51). Another option is to have students do a 10-minute writing task in which they identify the values most important to them and explain why; this values affirmation activity has been shown to increase students' GPA over the following two years (Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, and Brzustoski, 2009).

When instructors are high in teacher empathy, they can reduce the unnecessary challenges students encounter in college, because those challenges can threaten students' sense of belonging (Reeves, Murphy, D'Mello, and Yeager 2016). Instructors can reduce unnecessary challenges without lowering standards by using what Winkelmes (2013) calls transparent assignments. Transparent assignments typically identify the purpose and learning objectives of the assignment, provide instructions for the steps to take to complete the assignment, and provide clear criteria for success (Winkelmes, 2013). Winkelmes et al (2016, 31-6) found that having instructors convert one or two assignments into more transparent assignments increased first-year students' academic confidence, sense of belonging, and persistence in college. This was particularly true for first generation students, low-income students, and ethnic minority students.

If a student is not paying attention in class, engaging in overt inattentiveness, or not turning in assignments, a pejorative and non-empathetic response is to interpret that behavior as indicative of incivility, lack of motivation, or lack of ability. These interpretations may lead instructors to blame and reprimand the student. In contrast, a more empathetic approach would recognize that the behavior might be a response to having a lot of other responsibilities, fear of failure, stereotype threat, or belonging uncertainty. An instructor high in teacher empathy could respond by working to create a warm classroom climate, asking students to engage in a value affirmation activity, and using transparent assignments.

Fostering empathy for individual students

Our second recommendation for becoming a more empathic teacher is to make time to learn about one's own students. Although familiarity with non-pejorative explanations for students' behavior in general is useful, understanding explanations for one's own students' behavior is also important. Instructors can survey their students about their individual context and relevant academic risk factors. But rather than do so in a way that suggests students are different—and that they therefore do not belong—an anonymous survey might be framed as a request to share one's life. In the authors' experience, even non-anonymous measures elicit some useful information (e.g., "I'm the first in my family to go to college;" "I run track!").

The survey also might ask about times when a teacher made the student "feel heard, valued, and respected" (Okonofua et al. 2016, 5223) particularly in challenging situations such as when students miss a deadline, do poorly on an exam or assignment, or have attendance problems. Students could be surveyed at the beginning of and throughout the semester. Reading student stories and experiences could help instructors not only put themselves in their students' shoes, but also help instructors identify ways of behaving in more empathic ways. If instructors are unsure how to empathically respond to a specific student's needs, they also can consult with other professionals on campus from offices such as student development, counseling services, the tutoring center, and the accessibility office.

Communicating empathy toward the class

Our final recommendation for increasing teacher empathy is to use the syllabus to communicate empathy to the class as a whole. Both the tone of the syllabus and course policies can communicate empathy. Other authors (e.g., Bain 2004, 74-5; Harnish et al. 2011) have offered suggestions for writing a promising or warm syllabus, so we will focus on empathetic course policies including policies for late work, rewriting assignments and retaking exams, and tokens.

When students read a policy that says no late work will be accepted, they might reasonably assume the instructor does not understand the students' personal and social situations. A policy that explicitly allows students to request one 48-hour extension communicates empathy and relieves the instructor from having to evaluate the legitimacy of specific excuses. Rather than make exceptions for the subset of students who disclose their extenuating circumstances, instructors high in teacher empathy implement course policies that help all students. This approach parallels that of universal design which advocates teaching with materials crafted to help all students rather than making accommodations for the subset of students who disclose their disability (Burgstahler 2015).

We are not recommending that instructors never penalize students for late work. We are recommending that instructors use their understanding of their students when formulating late policies. Submitting work on time is an important skill for students to master prior to graduation, but students need help to develop that skill. Instructors higher in teacher empathy would provide greater flexibility to students taking introductory level courses than to students taking upper-level courses. In this way, instructors can scaffold students' learning of the skill.

Another empathetic policy worth considering is a redo and retake policy. These policies build in safety-nets in order to reduce student anxiety and give students a second chance when their lives interfere with their studies. Unfortunately, many teachers believe redoing assignments and retaking tests does not prepare students for the real world. While it is true that mistakes made by medical professionals and airline pilots, for example, can have serious negative consequences, including death, it is also true that nurses, doctors, and airline pilots learn skills through simulation training. Simulations function based on redo and retake to prepare people for the high-stakes situations they will face on the job. Similarly, most professional licensure exams allow retakes; not everyone passes the bar exam or the medical licensure exam on the first attempt. Furthermore, there are various methods of redo and retakes that enable and require students to learn the material (e.g., see Wormeli 2011, 24).

Allowing students to resubmit assignments or retake tests does create more work for the instructor. One way of controlling the instructor's workload is to offer students tokens. Tokens are particularly useful in courses requiring many low-stakes assignments such as regular journal entries, frequent problem sets, or regular class attendance. Each student receives a set number of tokens at the beginning of the course, and students can exchange tokens to redo an assignment, submit work a day late, or forgive an absence (e.g., Nilson 2015, 64-5). Exactly what the tokens can be used for is determined by the instructor and clearly stated in the syllabus. In addition, the number of tokens can be adjusted so that fewer tokens are available the higher the course level, consistent with scaffolding students' learning of professional behavior. Instructors high in teacher empathy can use tokens to communicate they understand the lives of college students, but still set limits on how many second chances students can have.

Conclusion

Although we have drawn on a great deal of theory and research in developing our definition of teacher empathy and our recommendations for increasing teacher empathy, many empirical questions remain. In order for researchers to address these questions, both instructor and student measures of teacher empathy are needed. Such measures would allow researchers to determine the extent to which faculty impressions of their own empathy are related to students' perceptions of teacher empathy. The creation of such measures would also allow researchers to answer questions such as what works in communicating teacher empathy, how communicating empathy differs in large versus small classes, and how building specific skills (e.g., listening, validating students' experiences, setting boundaries, referring students to professional services) contributes to teacher empathy and in turn to student learning.

We would like to conclude by returning to the stories of Mariana and Professor Miller. In one-on-one contexts with students such as Mariana, instructors high in teacher empathy seek out information about the student's personal and social situation. Thus, an instructor high in teacher empathy would discover that Mariana is a first-generation college student and

is part of a collectivist culture and as such has family obligations. Mariana might receive a short extension on her final paper, but would only receive a passing grade if the paper truly warrants it.

If Professor Miller is high in teacher empathy, Miller would seek to understand why so many students use their smart phones in class, why students arrive late and leave early, and why students miss major deadlines and exams. To answer these questions, Miller might talk to other faculty on campus and learn that many students at the institution use their smart phones to access the course management system during class; in addition, students face stereotype threat, belonging uncertainty, and are afraid of failing. Instead of blaming students for their undesirable behavior and implementing harsh penalties, Miller might offer explicit instruction to students regarding time management and study skills. In addition, Miller might use tokens to give students second chances and allow them to redo assignments and retake exams; alternatively, Miller might clarify the rationale behind using a stricter late policy.

The various ways in which Miller and other faculty might respond empathetically all take time and effort. Faculty face a dilemma of balancing the time it takes to practice empathy (e.g., extending deadlines, teaching time management) and fulfilling their other obligations (e.g., research, committee work). We have offered a variety of options, not because we think faculty should do all those things, but so that faculty have a range of possibilities from which to choose. Individual faculty should select the options that fit their teaching philosophies and the time they have available.

The recommendations we offer in this paper are consistent with those made in a number of recent publications. We recommend that instructors work to understand students' social context, and books such as *Bandwidth Recovery* (Verschelden, 2017) explain the social contexts associated with poverty, racism, and social marginalization. We recommend that instructors learn about their own students in much the same way Kaufman and Schipper (2018) encourage instructors to "listen with intention" in their book *Teaching with Compassion*. Finally, we recommend that instructors adopt course policies that offer students flexibility and second chances; similar recommendations are made by Verschelden (2017) and by Harrington and Thomas (2018) in *Designing a Motivational Syllabus*. We hope instructors will contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning by reflecting on their own empathy, changing their course policies and their interactions with students, and collecting and publishing data on the outcomes of those changes.

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