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The Self stepping into the shoes of the Other: Understanding and developing self-perceptions of empathy among prospective physical education teachers through a special school placement

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Abstract

Teachers who demonstrate a high degree of empathy are said to have more positive attitudes towards pupils with disabilities. Therefore, this article sought to explore the influence of a special school placement on prospective teachers' self-perceptions of empathy. Thirty-two final year undergraduate students participated in focus group interviews and were selected because they aspired to be a physical education teacher and had attended a placement in a special school. Interview transcripts were analysed and the following themes constructed: *Stepping into the shoes of the Other*; *Frustrated 'for' not 'with' pupils with disabilities*; *Empathy for planning inclusive lessons and 'reading' pupil body language*, and (4) *Knowing when not to show empathy*. Most prospective teachers felt that: (1) they could empathise with pupils with disabilities; (2) situated learning experiences within the placement enabled them to reflect on the ways in which their empathy influences their teaching now and could continue to do so in the future; and (3) it was important that teachers demonstrated empathy. Thus, it is recommended that all prospective teachers gain some experience teaching in special schools. Our research also warns against teachers claiming the last, conclusive word, about who children with disabilities are, what they think, how they feel and what they want, in myriad contexts and situations.

Key words

Empathy; pupils with disabilities; school-based placements; teacher education

Introduction

The concept of empathy has been explored by philosophers, psychologists, sociologists and neurobiologists (see Coplan and Goldie, 2011). These disciplines have approached the analysis of empathy using different, often conflicting, ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies, resulting in little consensus *vis-à-vis* a working definition of the concept. Often, empathy is reduced to the notion of a person (e.g. a prospective teacher) understanding the world from the perspective of another (e.g. a pupil with disabilities) (Singer, 2006). This viewpoint is closely linked to research in social psychology, developmental psychology and neuro-science, which has attempted to shed light on the human capacity to develop a theory of mind (ToM), which allows us to make attributions about the ideologies and actions of the

Other (Baron-Cohen et al., 2000). While ToM and empathy are undoubtedly bound together, ToM is said to involve ‘understanding’ the mental state of the Other, whereas empathy is a social cognitive skill that entails matching the emotional state of the Other, once it is ‘understood’ (Goldstein and Winner, 2012). However, this only scratches the surface of what is a complex and often elusive concept.

Empathy has both cognitive and affective dimensions. While an investigation of a physical education (PE) teacher’s cognitive empathy would focus on their knowledge and understanding of the beliefs and actions of pupils with disabilities, affective empathy relates to the extent to which the PE teacher can *feel* what the pupil feels; that the teacher experiences the same emotions as the pupil in any given situation (Cooper, 2011). It is this affective component of empathy that is often neglected by researchers, which is problematic because it is said to be crucial for forming social bonds between people (Singer, 2006), such as teachers and pupils. This is especially critical when working with pupils with disabilities because, as Morley et al. (2005) intimated, teachers who are empathetic are more likely to have positive attitudes towards pupils with disabilities in PE. This increases in significance if we accept claims made by Maher et al. (2019) who found that those teachers who spent time developing strong relationships with pupils in a special school were more confident, competent and inclusive practitioners. Here, the importance of exploring ways in which empathy can be developed among pre- and in-service teachers becomes obvious given its potential to improve attitudes towards, and increase competence and confidence when teaching, pupils with disabilities. However, it is important to note, as Coplan (2011: 10) did, that we often assume that there is a ‘greater similarity between Self and Other than typically exists, especially when we attempt to imagine how the other is feeling or what the other is thinking; we are naturally subject to ego-centric bias’.

Much of the research relating to the teaching of pupils with disabilities suggests that many pre- and in-service PE teachers lack the knowledge, skills, experiences and confidence to plan and teach inclusive lessons (e.g. Maher, 2016; Vickerman and Coates, 2009). When attention turns to exploring empathy and its development during teacher education, it is often tied to multi- and cross-culturalism where the focus is on sensitising teachers to issues associated with cultural diversity among pupils (e.g. Cruz and Patterson, 2009). Broomhead (2013) is one of a few researchers who has explored the empathy of aspiring teachers in relation to pupils with disabilities. In her study, data were gathered from the parents of pupils with disabilities. Accordingly, parents suggested that teachers could not empathise with them because they did not have children with disabilities themselves. This assumes that empathy is developed through lived and embodied experiences, something which parents claim teachers had not experienced. In this respect, Thomas (2007) claims that disability is simultaneously biological, material and social in character and, thus, the experiences of children with disabilities are embodied. Employing this perspective, Sparkes et al. (2019) used a variety of strategies and equipment as a way of trying to get prospective PE teachers to simulate this embodiment. This approach achieved some success in increasing student teachers’ awareness of disabilities and developed more positive attitudes to inclusive PE.

It has been claimed that pupils’ perceptions of the empathy displayed by their teachers positively influences academic motivation (Branwhite, 1988) and the development of empathy in the pupils themselves (Hoffman, 2000). This has led Barr (2010) to argue that teacher education programmes need to help aspiring teachers to recognise, develop and exercise their empathetic capacities. Cooper (2011) places so much emphasis on the importance of empathy that she calls for teacher educators to actively seek prospective teachers that have profound empathy and can develop this in their pupils.

91 To our knowledge, none of the research currently available has explored the role of
92 empathy in the school-based placement experiences of prospective teachers despite it being
93 an important disposition for educators to possess in order to facilitate positive relationships
94 among pupils (Tettegah and Anderson, 2007). While Vickerman (2007) shed light on the
95 professional socialisation of PE teachers in relation to disability and inclusion, this research is
96 from the perspective of teacher education providers and, therefore, does not analyse what
97 Lave and Wenger (1991) term the situated learning experiences of prospective teachers.
98 Similarly, Haegele et al. (2018) examined the impact of a two-day professional development
99 workshop on the attitudes of Brazilian PE teachers toward the inclusion of pupils with
100 disabilities. However, the teachers in this study did not get the opportunity to work 'hands-
101 on' with such pupils, something Coates (2012) has said is crucial for ensuring that they enter
102 teaching with the necessary skills to confidently teach inclusive PE lessons. In this respect,
103 Lave and Wenger (1991) remind us that learning is contextual and situational. Therefore, it is
104 important that learning experiences occur within the contexts and situations that prospective
105 teachers will find themselves when teaching pupils with disabilities. A study by Maher et al.
106 (2019), which used part of the same data set as this study, is one of very few to explore a
107 special school-based placement as part of the professional development of prospective PE
108 teachers. Here, the focus was on the experiences within a special school that shaped self-
109 perceptions of confidence and competence.

110 It is because of the significance attributed to the concept of empathy and the potential
111 of situated experiences to contribute to learning about empathy that we explore the influence
112 of a special school-based placement on the empathy of prospective PE teachers. Specifically,
113 we aim to answer the following research questions: (1) how do prospective PE teachers
114 conceptualise empathy? (2) How does the empathy of prospective PE teachers influence what
115 they do on placement? and (3) how important is empathy, according to prospective PE
116 teachers, for teaching children with disabilities? The next section explores, albeit briefly, our
117 conceptualisation of situated learning theory as this was used to help us make sense of the
118 learning and experiences of our students on placement.

119

120 Situated learning theory

121 Situated learning theory was constructed to challenge the hegemony of theoretical paradigms
122 in educational research that placed the mind and mental processes at the centre of our
123 understandings of learning (see Bruner, 2006). We agree with Lave and Wenger (1991) who
124 postulate that learning is a collective social activity, the outcome of which is the construction
125 of knowledge by actors in specific contexts and situations. Indeed, one of Lave and Wenger's
126 (1991) most significant scholarly contributions was to emphasise the 'practice' element of the
127 theory-practice dichotomy by considering thinking and learning as something that is
128 experienced through, for example, becoming a member of a community of practice in
129 schools. For us, it is the social practices and interactions that happen in the special schools
130 during placement that are the subject of our inquiry because it is these that will shape our
131 students' learning about, and displays of, empathy. Here, the significance of our study is
132 further evident given that, according to Korthagen (2010), much of the research that uses
133 situated learning theory to explore teacher education focuses on the development of
134 pedagogical content knowledge and attitudes and beliefs, rather than a social cognitive skill
135 such as empathy.

136

137 Philosophical position

Philosophical alignment was essential for increasing research quality (Tracy, 2010). An interpretivist ontology underpinned the research in that qualitative data were gathered to get a better sense of the socially constructed realities of prospective PE teachers. We embraced the notion that there are multiple realities (Maxwell, 2012) that are dynamic, in flux, and therefore subject to change over time and across space. So, even though the prospective teachers may have attended the same special school on placement, and been placed with the same group of pupils in a PE context, their interpretations of situated learning experiences (Lave and Wenger, 1991) may differ because each individual has their own ideologies, values and lived experiences, all of which can shape experiential interpretation and meaning construction. Similarly, we, as researchers, hold a set of beliefs that will inevitably spill into the research process. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), this is the axiological assumption that characterises qualitative research. This is indicative of the subjective epistemology that we ascribe to, thus making it essential that we explore our positionality.

Positionality

We are both white men who, because of previous lived and embodied experiences, would claim to be working-class even though our current economic, cultural and social capital may suggest otherwise. More crucially given the focus of our research, we do not have disabilities. Our interests here related to our personal and professional commitments, which are enviably political and value-laden, to ensuring that prospective PE teachers (1) are fully exposed to the 'realities' of working with children with disabilities, and (2) have the commensurate skills, knowledge and experiences to allow them to support the learning of those children. Thus, our positionality must be understood in relation to belonging to multiple social groupings that intersect and enable and constrain our ability to develop relationships with, and gain insights about, participants (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Grimaldi et al. (2015) encourage researchers to move beyond such fixed, categorical understandings of positionality by reflexively considering the contextually situated relationships and interactions between researchers and participants. This acknowledgement is crucial given the inherent power (in)balance between us, our students, and the children taught and supported by our students during placement. Indeed, the reflexive consideration of the connections between the research, symbolic violence and wider relations of exploitation and domination (Apple et al., 2010) was key for ensuring that our methodological decisions and procedures were ethical and appropriate. Moreover, by exploring our positionality and engaging in reflexivity, we ensured transparency, honesty and criticality, which are hallmarks of quality in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010).

Method

Given that we were interested in moving beyond mere descriptions by exploring what hermeneutic inquiry refers to as the 'essence of meaning' (Lopez and Willis, 2004: 728) embedded in the situated learning experiences of our students, focus groups were used. Focus groups enabled us to capture meanings of prospective teachers, some of which they may be unaware of (Solomon, 1987), that were generated, maintained, challenged and changed (or not) through social participation (Silverman, 2018) in situated learning experiences in special schools. Therefore, recreating this social environment allowed the initial interactions to permeate the more formally constructed interview setting. Moreover, the focus groups provided a space for participants to reflect on the cognitive and emotional elements of their empathic imaginings while locating themselves and each other in teacher education and special school landscapes. It is through the stories that prospective teachers told and

discussed that multiple meanings and the richness of social worlds were constructed (Silverman, 2018). Here, the collective voice was just as important as the individual one (Gibbs, 2012). Hence, the role of the facilitator was crucial because individual voices can be supressed by group dynamics if conformity and/or silencing pervades. The facilitator endeavoured to nurture conversation, creating a culture of respect for individual views, and encouraged involvement of all participants through, when necessary, direct questioning (Silverman, 2018). Nonetheless, it was important for the prospective teachers to lead the discussion and explore issues relevant to their experiences of placement. However, an interview guide was developed to ensure that the data generated were in keeping with the aim and purpose of the research (Marshall and Rossman, 2016), particularly in relation to the identification and exploration of the situated learning experiences relating to empathy. Questions were open, and probe, clarifying and expansion questions were added by the facilitator in order to generate, what Sparkes and Smith (2014) describe as, thick descriptions of experiences. This approach is in keeping with Tracy's (2010) ideas about increasing the rigour of qualitative research. Below is a sample of guide questions:

- What is your understanding of the term 'empathy'?
- Tell me about situations/incidents/experiences when you demonstrated empathy.
- How, if at all, did the special school placement influence your empathy? (Probe: specific situations/incidents/experiences)
- How important is it that teachers of pupils with disabilities are empathetic?

Participants and recruitment

The prospective teachers identified for recruitment were those studying a final year module, entitled *special educational needs and disability (SEND) in physical education,* as part of a three-year BA (Hons) Physical Education course. Lectures, seminars and practical activities were used to prepare the students for six half-day placement opportunities over a consecutive six-week period at a special school in Yorkshire. Special schools varied *vis-a-vis* their organisational structure and operational mechanisms. Moreover, the specific needs and capabilities of the pupils who attended the special schools were diverse but generally included pupils who had learning needs stemming from physical, cognitive, communicative and/or behavioural difficulties (DfE/DoH, 2015). Some of the schools had many pupils with Profound Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD), whilst others had specialist support for children with visual and hearing impairments. Typically, classes included between six and 12 children and were supported by one teacher and up to four teaching assistants. Prospective teachers observed, planned, supported delivery and then taught PE lessons to individuals and/or small groups. Here, transition between the varying roles, such as from supporting to leading PE lessons, was negotiated with the class teacher.

Thirty-two prospective teachers participated in eight focus groups, each of which had 3-5 participants. Participants were selected on the basis that they: (1) were studying the SEND in PE module; (2) were predominantly prospective PE teachers (i.e. intended to apply to train to become a teacher once their undergraduate studies were complete); and (3) had attended a special school for six half days over a six-week placement. A lecture was used to distribute an information letter, explain the aim and purpose of the research to all students studying the SEND in PE module (n=78), and to ask for their involvement. While no attempt was made to gain an even gender split because of disagreement about whether there is a gendered dimension to empathy (Klein and Hodges, 2001; Morley et al., 2005), 17 females and 15 males participated in focus groups.

232 Focus groups lasted between 50 and 60 minutes and took place in classrooms at the
233 university to recreate the typical learning environment that the students had experienced
234 throughout the module. All members of each separate focus group had attended the same
235 school during placement, which meant they could attempt to make sense of shared situated
236 learning experiences through negotiating meaning (Silverman, 2018). The other option would
237 have been to mix students from across the placements and, in doing so, seek to stimulate
238 discussion based on perhaps more varied situated learning experiences. However, given the
239 broad spectrum of experiences gained because of the wide-ranging needs of pupils at
240 different schools, the prospective teachers may have struggled to come to terms with the
241 nuances of different placements and may therefore have spent a great deal of time trying to
242 understand the contextual diversity rather than exploring their empathy.

243 Following guidance offered by Creswell and Poth (2018), ethical approval was gained
244 through a university's Research Ethics Committee, and The British Educational Research
245 Association's (2018) ethical guidelines were followed. Before the start of each focus group,
246 participants were given a consent form. They were reminded that participation was voluntary,
247 confidential, that they could withdraw from the interview for any or no reason with all data
248 generated from them being destroyed, and that withdrawal would have no adverse impact on
249 their subsequent studies (BERA, 2018). This was crucial given the obvious power
250 relationship between the prospective teachers and the facilitator of the focus group in that the
251 latter were taught by the former. To address this issue, all participants were clearly informed
252 that anything they did or said during the focus group interview would have no adverse effect
253 on their future studies or grading of work. Here, we drew on the work of Tracy (2010) by
254 engaging in dynamic and relational ethics, which is a hallmark of rigour in qualitative
255 research. It is noteworthy that focus groups posed additional ethical challenges in that other
256 members were privy to what had been said. Therefore, participants were encouraged not to
257 share what had been said beyond the focus group, and that this nuanced point was clearly
258 explained in the information letter and consent form (Gibbs, 2012).

259 The access to, and sharing of, data was confined to the research team and managed in
260 accordance with the Data Protection Act (Stationary Office, 2018). All focus group
261 interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a third party. Transcripts were
262 anonymised using pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

263

264 **Data analysis**

265 Qualitative coding was used to help us to make sense, through interpretation, of the essence
266 of meanings constructed by, and situated learning of, prospective teachers during special
267 school placements. Both researchers coded all the transcripts independently. Before doing so,
268 we met to discuss and agree on a strategy to ensure a degree of consistency across the
269 analysis. Coding involved giving labels to aspects of data to distil it and to give us a handle
270 for comparison purposes (Charmaz, 2014). The first step involved us manually giving labels
271 to sections of the text identified as being significant to the social realities of prospective
272 teachers (Saldana, 2015). These were the participant narratives that would be used to explore
273 the essence of meaning (Lopez and Willis, 2004) based on situated experiences in special
274 schools. Next, axial coding was undertaken by both researchers to identify relationships
275 between open codes. All axial codes were then sent to the lead researcher, who selectively
276 removed duplicates before collating the remaining codes. Consideration was then given to
277 similarities, differences, connections and patterns within and between the codes offered by
278 each researcher. This was akin to a process of constant comparison (Bryman, 2015). Given

that we, the researchers, have differing lived experiences, academic knowledge and observe the social world through different theoretical lenses, this was done to gain multiple and alternative explanations and interpretations of the data so that the analysis was not based entirely on the ideologies and assumptions of any one researcher. However, it should be noted that there was a clear power dimension here in that it was the lead researcher who had final say over the codes that were grouped together to form themes (Campbell et al., 2013).

Findings and discussion

The themes constructed during data analysis were entitled: (1) *Stepping into the shoes of the Other*, (2) *Frustrated 'for' not 'with' pupils with disabilities*, (3) *Empathy for planning inclusive lessons and 'reading' pupil body language*, and (4) *Knowing when not to show empathy*. These have been used to structure the findings and discussion provided below.

Stepping into the shoes of the Other

We aimed to explore how prospective PE teachers conceptualise empathy and how a special school-based placement, as a situated learning experience, influenced self-perceptions of empathy. Despite Goldman's (2011:31) assertion that 'the term empathy does not mean the same thing in every mouth. Nor does there seem to be a single, unified phenomenon that uniquely deserves the label', it was interesting that prospective teachers expressed similar sentiments, time and again, when endeavouring to conceptualise empathy. Notwithstanding Goldman's (2011) claim, this was surprising to us given that no definition(s) of empathy had been given throughout the module, or any prior attempt made to discuss its conceptualisation. Cameron (FG2), for example, described empathy as 'being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes. You know, walking in someone else's shoes. Just trying to imagine what it is like to be them'. Likewise, Dianne (FG4) claimed that an empathetic teacher is 'someone who is able to put themselves in the shoes of others. All teachers were children once. They all went to school. They should be able to remember what it was like in school'. Rhona and Alex (FG3), Karen (FG5), Sarah (FG7), and Isla and James (FG8), also uttered words to that affect. Whilst these explanations are perhaps somewhat vague and superficial when compared to academic constructs of empathy, the ability of participants to see life from the perspective of 'others' is a consistent feature of participants' views.

The focus group extracts noted above are also significant in that they hint at the 'Othering' and imaginative dimension of empathy. That is, according to Coplan (2011:6), 'to say that empathy is 'imaginative' is to say that it involves the representation of a person's states that are activated by, but not directly accessible through, the observer's perception'. In other words, empathy was found to involve the prospective teachers endeavouring to understand the world from the perspective of pupils with disabilities. This purview aligns with ToM (Baron-Cohen et al., 2000) and can be achieved, according to Coplan (2011), through simulation whereby the prospective teachers attempt to mentally reconstruct the pupils' ideologies and experiences, while maintaining a clear sense of differentiation between the Self and the Other. The teacher imagines they are the pupil, in the situation of the pupil, but acknowledges that they are not the pupil in that situation. This process is akin to what psychologists refer to as cognitive empathy (Singer, 2006) where the focus is understanding the beliefs, values, attitudes and actions of pupils with disabilities.

323 Prospective teachers made attempts to extend conceptualisations of empathy by
324 exploring what Cooper (2011) calls its affective dimension. Adele (FG1), for instance,
325 suggested that it was:

326 …important to understand what the pupils were feeling. It is about the emotions.
327 Sometimes children feel scared. Sometimes they are shy. Others seem really
328 confident, and teachers need to be able to know how the kids are feeling.

329 In the same vein, Katherine (FG6) argued that empathy related to:

330 … how teachers understand and act on somebody else's feelings. That is really
331 important for me. Teachers need to be able to understand how the kids feel and do
332 something about it. That is good teaching for me, changing the lesson based on
333 feelings.

334 In this instance, the 'act on' perspective Katherine (FG6) alluded to related to teachers
335 empathising with pupils in order to more appropriately support and teach them. For Katherine
336 (FG6), therefore, her self-perception of empathy had the potential to have a positive effect in
337 the way that it could directly impact on how she supported and taught each child in the
338 special school. Here, it is noteworthy that the prospective teachers identify a cognitive
339 process (understanding) when discussing an affective process (emotions). It is, unfortunately,
340 beyond the scope of this article to explore whether cognitive empathy can be used to
341 appreciate emotions. What we can say is that cognitive and affective empathy are tightly
342 bound and not easy to separate (Coplan, 2011). Therefore, following Coplan's (2011) line of
343 thought, prospective teachers in our study suggested that in order to make sense of how a
344 pupil feels in a given situation they will cognitively simulate an experience, which could, in
345 theory, result in either reactive emotions or affective matching. Feeling sympathy for the
346 pupils is a reactive emotion rather than an example of teachers being empathetic because,
347 again, reactive emotions 'are not sufficiently accurate representations of a target's situated
348 psychological states. They misrepresent the type of emotion experienced by the target'
349 (Coplan, 2011:7). Affective matching, on the other hand, is said to occur only when the
350 prospective teacher's affective states are the same as, if not identical to, the pupil's.

351 Hugh (FG7), perhaps unknowingly, was the only person who acknowledged affective
352 matching when he said:

353 Empathy is me feeling the same emotions as the pupils. Some children feel isolated in
354 PE. Some may feel lonely. I was really good at PE because I was really involved, but
355 I can imagine what it is like not to be. There were kids like that in my class at school'.

356 Whether one person can ever experience the same emotions, to the same degree, for the same
357 duration, and for the same reasons is open to debate. This becomes even more complex and
358 perhaps contentious when comparing an adult teacher without disabilities to a child with
359 disabilities. Nonetheless, PE teachers often feel unable to adequately respond to the needs of
360 children with disabilities (see Morley et al., 2005). Thus, it seems appropriate to accentuate
361 the usefulness of empathy for prospective teachers to effectively support children with
362 disabilities.

363

364 *Frustrated 'for' not 'with' pupils with disabilities*

365 We commence this theme with the words of Adele (FG1):

> When it was Leo's turn, I thought, oh, he must be getting really frustrated if he sees that I'm constantly not catching the ball he is trying to throw. It's always going on the floor. So I bent down and he rolled the ball into my hand instead, so he was successful in that, and straight away, he was like, "yes!", when he did it. Just watching his expressions, I could sort of see where he was coming from and then change the way I acted to make sure he was getting successful.

The example provided by Adele (FG1) hints at the symbiotic relationship between cognitive and affective empathy. Here, Adele uses a cognitive process 'I thought' to make a judgement about the emotional state 'frustration' of Leo, the Other. Many of the prospective teachers (e.g. Georgia FG1, Rhona FG3, Jason FG4, Andy FG6, James FG8), like Adele (FG1), mentioned that they thought the pupils were experiencing frustration when they found it difficult to perform a task in PE. Erin (FG8) said:

> Loads of the kids in the class looked really frustrated when we were doing rounders. They just could not hit the ball. We tried to change it but they really struggled. The teacher even found it hard to get them to hit the ball. Even when we used a big, bright ball. It was so frustrating for me, too. I really wanted them to hit the ball.

It is important to note that prospective teachers were often at pains to explain that they were frustrated *for* not *with* the pupils. For most prospective teachers, though, this form of affective empathy assumes that the pupil is feeling frustration in that situation, while performing that activity, at that specific time. In other words, prospective teachers self-referenced how they would feel in that situation in order to empathetically imagine what the children must be feeling, the outcome of which was a change to the learning activity. Adele (FG1) does, however, hint at the visual cues she used to gauge the emotions experienced by the pupil in that she mentioned how she observed the pupil's expressions during her unsuccessful attempts to catch the ball, and then the successful attempt once she differentiated the activity. This is perhaps expected given that symbolic exchange, both verbal and non-verbal, is core to human interaction and, thus, the development of social relationships (Blumer, 1992). Of perhaps greater interest is that Adele (FG1) claimed to have used her empathy to differentiate a learning activity so that it was more tailored to the needs and capabilities of the learner, something that should form an integral part of a teacher's inclusive pedagogies (Maher and Vickerman, 2018).

Many of the prospective teachers suggested that they experienced a variety of emotions throughout the special school placements. While the focus was very much cast towards self-perceptions of empathy, sympathy also came through strongly during focus group discussions (e.g. Tony FG1, Phil FG1, Jason FG4, Andy FG6, Deborah, FG7, James FG8). Andy (FG6), for instance, said:

> I think you feel a bit for the kids sometimes. At times, I felt really sorry for them. There was an incident where a child with ESBD [emotional, social and behavioural difficulties] got told off for just going underneath the parachute [during a PE activity] and he wasn't causing a problem to anyone.

Similarly, Deborah (FG7) explained:

> I felt really sorry for the kids. They were trying so hard. They were working really hard, and did look like they were having fun, but they struggled to do what other kids

> their age would consider very basic skills. You know, fundamental stuff like hopping, throwing and catching. I know you shouldn't say it but I did feel sorry for them.

It is not uncommon for empathy and sympathy to be considered synonymous and thus be used interchangeably (Singer, 2006). However, as Singer (2006) suggests, it is important to remember that empathy is feeling *with* someone whereas sympathy is feeling *for* someone. It would have been interesting to know if Andy (FG6) would have sympathy for a pupil with disabilities if they exhibited the same behaviour in a mainstream school PE lesson given that school staff in that setting have expressed concern that pupils with behavioural difficulties had a negative impact on the learning of other pupils (see Morley et al., 2005; Maher 2018). Nonetheless, whilst some of the participants' self-perceptions in this study seem to fall short of reaching Coplan's (2011) construct of empathy in that they do not feel the same emotions as the pupils (affective matching), it remains that their self-perceptions are akin to cognitive processes relating to empathy in that they try to understand what the children are feeling. So, it could be suggested that a situated learning experience in a special school provides an opportunity to trigger a cognitive process (thought) that leads to an affective process (recognising that a pupil is becoming frustrated), potentially resulting in differentiated practice. The ability of a teacher to use empathy to recognise when to differentiate a learning activity effectively aligns with teaching and curricular notions of inclusive practice, particularly in relation to responding to children's diverse needs and setting suitable learning challenges, both of which are emphasised in the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2013) and National Curriculum Statutory Inclusion Statement (DfE, 2014). In short, empathy among prospective teachers may help them to gain qualified teacher status (QTS) and fulfil their statutory duties once they are teaching in schools.

Empathy for planning inclusive lessons and 'reading' pupil body language

There was a general consensus among the participants that being empathetic was an important part of teaching, particularly when it comes to including pupils with disabilities. Alex encapsulates the views held by many of the prospective teachers:

> Empathy's key for when you're planning and delivering sessions with any form of pupil. You've got to think, if I plan this session and then you get to know your students and you deliver it, the first few minutes and they're all staring at you like, what are you on about, there's not a chance I'm going to be able to do this session. So I think understanding your students' capabilities, understanding from their perspective… to give them time, to be patient with them, to give them simple drills to start with and then, if they're showing signs of improvement, then build it up that way. So I think empathy's really key for planning, for all students (Alex, FG3).

Alex (FG3), as well as others, argued that an empathetic teacher would have a better 'understanding' of the needs and capabilities of the pupils, because they would be able to appreciate some of the challenges associated with trying to perform learning tasks in PE. While we did not probe what Alex (FG3) meant by 'understanding' pupil needs, Vickerman and Maher (2018) discuss the importance of pre- and in-service PE teachers having knowledge of the contextual and situational learning needs and capabilities of their pupils for planning and teaching inclusive, appropriately challenging, and meaningful learning experiences. However, it is important to note that 'knowing' and 'understanding' the needs and capabilities of those with disabilities can be difficult given that disabilities and learning needs can be dynamic, multi-layered, contextual and subject to change over time (Morley et al., 2017). There is a juxtaposition potentially at play here between the knowing of the capabilities of the child and the interface between the changing policy drivers used to dictate

457 the educational context in which children and teachers find themselves. Arguably, the
458 empathetic imaginings of PE teachers would have to keep pace with and reflect not only the
459 shifting and multidimensional nature of pupil needs and capabilities but also the ever-
460 changing ways that SEND is conceptualised, the preferred means and context for educating
461 children with disabilities, as well as the pedagogical skills deemed necessary for teaching
462 those children, if teachers were ever to appropriately 'understand' their learners.

463 While the importance of empathy for planning PE lessons was often the focus, some
464 prospective teachers mentioned being able to modify and adapt the lesson while it was being
465 taught. Caleb (FG3), for instance, suggested:

466 I think empathy is key towards the lesson. It is important that you can see from the
467 pupil's perspective how the lesson's panning out. Unless you can see that, what's
468 going wrong, and you can see why it's going wrong, then you cannot change it for the
469 better.

470 Here, Caleb (FG3) claims to use his empathy to cognitively transport himself into the
471 position of a pupil. Once there, Caleb (FG3) suggests that he can make judgements about the
472 PE lesson from the perspective of the pupil. This cognitive process is, according to Caleb
473 (FG3), useful because it allows him to identify aspects of the lesson that may need to be
474 changed. In this instance, it is perhaps encouraging to see Caleb (FG3) place so much
475 emphasis on the pupils' interpretation of, and experiences within, PE lessons. However, this
476 point assumes that there will be alignment between Caleb's (FG3) and the pupils' views
477 about the purpose of the lesson, what is being learnt, the appropriateness of the learning
478 activities, how success in the lesson is conceptualised and measured, and the emotions
479 experienced throughout the lesson. In short, again, Caleb (FG3) assumes he and other
480 teachers can achieve cognitive and affective alignment (Coplan, 2011) when, in fact, he and
481 the pupils may be viewing the same picture through different prisms.

482 Being able to 'read' body language and react to overt displays of emotion was again
483 identified as important, particularly in relation to using them as cues to modify learning
484 activities to make them more appropriate. Karen (FG5) was one prospective teacher who
485 argued that:

486 you need to be able to observe how the pupils react during the lesson. You can see if
487 they are having fun. You can see if they are finding a task too easy or difficult. You
488 can see if they are getting frustrated.

489 While it is indeed crucial for teachers to use their empathetic imaginings to identify when
490 activities are inappropriate and to respond to the individual learning needs of the pupils as
491 purported in the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014) and Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2013),
492 teachers also need to have the pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) required to
493 make appropriate modifications.

494

495 *Knowing when not to show empathy*

496 Whilst all the prospective teachers agreed that being empathetic was an important part of
497 teaching, some had reservations about when and where empathy should be demonstrated.
498 Tony (FG1), for example, articulated a view held by others (Georgia FG1, Rhona FG3,
499 Richard FG4, Isla FG8, Joseph FG8) when he claimed that:

> I think it's important to kind of find a balance with your empathy, as well. So, yes, you've got to be a bit more like lenient as to what sort of things you're doing and your expectations have got to be kind of a little bit lower than mainstream schools, but I think it's also important not to be too empathetic in the fact that you do have to push the children sometimes to actually do the activity because they are capable of doing it, but sometimes they just won't do it. So I think if you're too empathetic, it does hinder the learning, as well.

Interestingly, Tony (FG1) equates empathetic teaching with having low(er) expectations of, and providing less challenging learning experiences for, pupils with disabilities. This way of thinking is, arguably, akin to a deficit model of disability (see Oliver, 2013) in that children with disabilities are seen as the problem, cast as inferior to those without disabilities, and their ability is compared to normative, ableist ideals. However, given that empathy relates to a teacher's ability to understand propositional attitudes and experience the emotions (if that is even possible) of pupils (Baron-Cohen et al., 2000), it is not necessarily the case that an empathetic teacher would need to lower their expectations, nor would they be required to develop or teach learning activities that are less demanding. Instead, an empathetic teacher would be more able to identify when their expectations are *too* low or high and when their lesson is *too* easy or challenging. This is indicative of 'good practice' and should be considered when teaching all pupils in all subject areas.

On a similar note, other prospective teachers seemed to imply that they could only be empathetic, or perhaps only needed to demonstrate empathy, when the pupils were struggling with a learning activity. When the challenge was low *vis-à-vis* the capabilities of the pupils, some prospective teachers said they found it difficult to demonstrate empathy. Joseph (FG8), for instance, explained:

> With the group of pupils playing snooker, they were all quite able to perform the fine motor skills, which, before going in, I didn't think they would be able to and they were all fully engaged. They were all fully able to understand the rules and the scoring systems to different extents, so empathy for me in snooker and pool didn't play a part, at all.

Similarly, Isla (FG8) suggested:

> I really would say that I struggled to be empathetic just because of the fact that the lesson was exactly the same every week. And they've been doing this since September; there wasn't anything new. It would take the pupils ages to get the idea, but when they got it nothing changed.

In relation to Isla's (FG8) comments, it is noteworthy that she was supporting pupils with autism spectrum conditions (ASC). Therefore, it is likely that the teacher had endeavoured to provide more structure, rigidity and familiarity to a learning environment, given how dynamic and fluid PE activities and spaces can be (Maher, 2016), because some pupils with ASC prefer structured, repetitive, and patterned activities and environments (Baron-Cohen, 2008). Moreover, it appears that Isla's (FG8) notion of pupil progression is shaped by normative ideals about what should be learned and performed, and how quickly. This is where, perhaps, a higher degree of both cognitive and affective empathy would have enabled Isla (FG8) to appreciate the actions of the teacher and the experiences of the pupils. Nonetheless, it was interesting that both Joseph's (FG8) and Isla's (FG8) perceptions on the utility of empathy were rooted in the notion that it is only required when pupils are

experiencing difficulty, particularly as it relates to learning activities. Again, this is perhaps more akin to sympathy and therefore falls some way short of an empathetic approach that has the potential to trigger actions that will make a considerable difference to the educational experiences of pupils with disabilities through the adoption of more differentiated practice.

Concluding thoughts: Problematizing empathy

We sought to explore the influence of a special school placement on prospective teachers' self-perceptions of empathy. Although participants did not explicitly use the term, the cognitive dimension of empathy was emphasised. Focus was cast on prospective teachers endeavouring to use simulation and imagination to understand PE from the perspective of pupils with disabilities. Attention was also given to the affective dimension of empathy wherein prospective teachers attempted to *feel* what pupils with disabilities felt in order to connect emotionally. Empathy was, overwhelmingly, considered important by the participants for teaching pupils with disabilities, especially when normative standards of attainment were not achieved. An empathetic teacher had, according to participants, a better understanding and knowledge of the needs and capabilities of pupils with disabilities, and would be more able to plan, teach and modify PE lessons to ensure that they were appropriately challenging. To summarise, all prospective teachers were convinced that: (1) they could empathise with pupils with disabilities; (2) that situated learning experiences within the placement enabled them to reflect on the ways in which their empathy influences their teaching now and could continue to do so in the future; and (3) it was important that they, as future PE teachers, demonstrated empathy when teaching. Therefore, it is recommended that all undergraduate PE and teacher education programmes embed SEND, inclusion and a special school placement into their curriculums. Here, there should be a specific focus on how prospective teachers can reflect on the ways that their empathy can make them more inclusive educators.

Self-orientated – as opposed to Other-orientated – perspective-taking, led some of our prospective teachers to claim to 'understand' and 'know' the experiences of pupils with disabilities. In this regard, Smith (2008) draws attention to two notable problems with attempts to locate ourselves in the Other's shoes using empathetic imagination: the body and the concept of otherness. The argument goes that knowledge and experience is embodied; that is, the bodies of pupils with disabilities form the biological and social (Thomas, 2007) basis of their experiences within PE specifically, and the world generally. Therefore, there are limits to the extent to which the prospective teachers in this research could ever empathise with pupils with disabilities, especially at an affective level, because they have never lived in a 'disabled' body. Arguably, from the data provided in this article and elsewhere (e.g. Smith, 2008), it is possible for prospective teachers to become sensitised to some of the challenges experienced by pupils with disabilities (in PE) through a special school placement, but they may never know what it *feels* like to have a disability because it is embodied by the Other.

We are not suggesting that attempting to develop empathy among teachers is a fruitless endeavour. Rather, we are highlighting some of the limitations of teachers claiming to empathise will pupils with disabilities. Here, we want to avoid situations where teachers 'finalise' (Bakhtin, 1984) pupils with disabilities by claiming the last, conclusive word, about who they are, what they think, how they feel and what they want, in myriad contexts and situations. This will go some way to ensuring that those without disabilities avoid perpetuating what may be considered a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991) by legitimising the talking about the Other without the Other. Thus, teacher educators need to allow prospective teachers to engage in critical reflexivity to increase awareness of the potential of such acts of symbolic violence. This should be coupled with the development of a

600 social model world-view among prospective teachers during their teacher education, where
601 the focus is on the environmental, structural and attitudinal factors that 'disable' children
602 (Oliver, 2013). To end, it should be remembered that pre- and in-service teachers are
603 confronted by myriad expectations related to their acquisition of personal and professional
604 attributes to enable them to teach effective lessons and improve the learning of all children.
605 Whilst an understanding of differentiation practices, an improved elicitation of the pupils'
606 voices and a teacher's ability to teach meaningful learning experiences for all children are
607 elements of an effective lesson, our research highlights the crucial role that empathy could
608 play in making a difference to the educational experiences of pupils with disabilities.
609

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