This paper is taken from

Creating Communities: Local, National and Global
Selected papers from the fourteenth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Academic Network

London: CiCe 2012

edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,
ISBN 978-1-907675-19-5

If this paper is quoted or referred to it must always be acknowledged as
Pergar Kuščer, M. & Cavaion, I. (2012) 'Empathy as a meaningful dimension for community building', in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) *Creating Communities: Local, National and Global*. London: CiCe, pp. 395 - 404.

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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a selection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Empathy as a meaningful dimension for community building

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Abstract

With increasingly complex societies and troubled economies, issues around European identity are at the forefront of contemporary debate. Educators working with children and young people have to be especially responsive to many complexities within the school environment, such as multicultural and multilingual classrooms, for example. Empathetic understanding can play a strategic role in helping teachers to cope with this complexity. Empathy has been described as cognitive or emotional. It embeds biological predisposition, cognitive understanding and affective response. But what is the belief underpinning the concept of empathy? Are teachers fully aware of the multiple nature of empathic distress? Do they know how to guide themselves through this complex tool we are wired with?

Keywords: *community building, empathy, educators, students*

Empathy for community building: why?

The reason why we chose this title for the paper encompassing both a social concept – community – and a more psychological aspect – empathy – is because we are aware of the interwoven relationship between individuals' capability to understand and feel others and the state of well-being of the communities inhabited by those individuals. We cannot any longer investigate societies as un-emotional bodies, and individuals as independent beings from the societal system.

Keeping in mind the interwoven relation between individuals and community, we need at first to briefly consider some concepts concerning social and political studies –such as community, citizenship and school community – by directly quoting important research carried out in the field of most recent psychological studies of empathy and teacher-child relationships.

Community building and citizenship in the European context

Community, as a sociological concept, has shifted a lot from its original meaning as first defined by Tonnies, referring to *Gemeinschaft* as kinship based on a 'we' identity that families and extended families provide (Tonnies, 1957, cited in Sergiovanni, 1994).

Nowadays we rather encounter a restored concept of community as conceived by Block that defines it as a 'promise of belonging', a 'call for us to acknowledge our interdependence' (Block, 2008, p.3), a sort of open part of society that 'shifts attention

from the problem of community to the possibility of community' (ibid. p1), as a 'human system given form by conversations that build relatedness' (ibid. p.29).

Accordingly to these definitions it is clear that relationships, emotions and the way we express them are defying the classical meaning of community, preventing modern individuals from idealistic conceptualisations linked to restrictive, surpassed meanings of community, that are very much characterised by obliged loyalty to a small, well defined and bounded collectivity.

The social fabric of modern societies itself, thought characterized by higher level of consciousness in its participants (Rifkin, 2009) with its highly complex, dis-homogeneous, unpredictable aspects, referred to us 'unknown society' (van Gunsteren, 1998), does not allow any kind of idealisation.

Looking specifically at our European society and community, a melting pot of clashing diversity is staring us in the face, diversity that calls for urgent and efficacious policies which, according to us should relate more significantly to the development of understanding attitudes, that is, empathic understanding.

On the contrary, the impression is that Europe is not very much oriented toward this well-being concept of community building. It seems instead still struggling with political identity, or with what scholarship of political theories calls 'obsolete theories of citizenship', no longer justifiable in the new, revolutionised social order (van Gunsteren, 1998, p.17). In some cases these scholars accuse European politics - specifically liberal theories - of not being 'very comfortable with the language of "community" or "fraternity" (...) [their] fears are often rephrased in other terms, particularly the language of "citizenship" ' (Kymlicka, 1995, p.172).

We cannot indulge in this discussion, but this paper and the research presented should be seen as a hopeful contribution, or at least, a trial, to contribute to a restorative concept of European citizenship following a more humanistic idea of community building, less political oriented, where emotions do not frighten politicians or theorists. In our case certainly not school practitioners, who should start to 'acknowledge emotions and develop and foster competencies and institutions that allow citizens to deal with them sensibly' (van Gunsteren, 1998, p.44).

We could put this into a framework of actions valuing a third-generation human rights concerning fraternity and solidarity (Ross, 2005), or within the *respectful mind* of Howard Gardner (Gardner, 2008) or Rifkin's *empathic civilization* (Rifkin, 2009). Regardless of the authors that are engaged in this discussion, what is seen as a key element for building a healthy, safe and understanding society is *education*. The school community, that is the main organ of any educational systems, is thus at the core of the next section.

Community in our schools

> An effective school has to be a community in which personal relationships based on trust outweigh impersonal rules. A community based on shared vision and close personal interactions is not a frill; it is a necessity.
> (Cobb 1991, p.23, cited in Redding and Thomas, 2001)

> It is the view of the Commission that, while education is an ongoing process of improving knowledge and skills, it is also - perhaps primarily - an exceptional means of bringing about personal development and building relationships among individuals, groups and nations.
> (Delors, 1996, p.12)

These quotes – respectively the one from Sam Redding's publication *The community of the school* and the report to UNESCO, *Learning: The Treasure Within* - both highlight a message which might nowadays sound familiar and is felt very much as a shared value. Nevertheless, after more than 15 years from the launch of UNESCO report, does it also represent the true and main aim followed by each educational system in Europe? We would dare to say, no.

Personal development, personal interactions and building relationships, thought often named in official school curricula, are not yet acknowledged as the first on headteachers' and teachers' agenda. These concepts are related to social competence, social emotional learning (SEL), social intelligence (Goleman, 2006), i.e. issues that do not constitute specific course at university colleges for teachers' training and in-service training.

Schools, says Sergiovanni (Sergiovanni, 1994), become authentic, meaningful communities and not only mean organisations, when they are capable to respond to this new call for socio-emotional competence, when they are constituted by a 'group of individuals who have learned to communicate honestly with one another; who have built relationships that go deeper than their composures; and who have developed some significant commitment to rejoice together, delight in each other, and make others' conditions their own' (Flynn and Innes, 1992, cited in Sergiovanni, 1994, p.32).

These kinds of school communities are not common yet (some experiences from the USA in the 1990s are described in Sergiovanni, 1994). They do not develop naturally, on the contrary, a great effort is needed for realising them and they can not come about without competent, committed educators, who are capable to struggle and to sensitively behave also with regards to the different cultural backgrounds their school communities have developed in.

This element of struggling together is another modern aspect of a renewed concept of community: that of voluntarism, that is, the voluntary committing to institutions or groups with the possibilities not only to take part but also to invent them (Cobb, 1992) in order not to succumb to external annihilating forces of the *unknown society.*

Teachers and emotions in the community of schools

Emotions, for millennia conceived as biasing one's evaluations and cognitions and disrupting rational, moral thought, are now reconsidered and believed to motivate moral development (Eisenberg, 2000). Nevertheless, although emotions have gained a new status in psychological and philosophical studies and although they are at the epicentre of teacher's work (O'Connor, 2006), they hardly become values in school policies where teachers usually - corresponding to the previous mentioned concept of school as organisation instead of community – are merely asked to act as 'service providers' rather than as someone capable to 'take care' of responsibly (O'Connor, 2006), that is, able to empathise with others.

This diffuse aseptic attitude toward emotional and empathic qualities of the teachers reinforces, in our opinion, the alibi which frequently characterises school practitioners and educational policy makers, who consider the development of school standards more important because it is more tangible and objectively attainable. But a growing body of research seems to confirm the idea that success in school as well as in life in general does not depend only on academic ability but also on social and emotional competence (McCombs, 2004 cited in Cain and Carnellor, 2008). This research reveals that:

- emotional development precedes cognitive development and 'emotional intelligence can be strengthened and nurtured by programs that teach emotional literacy' (Cain and Carnellor, 2008, p.55)
- 'social emotional programs can reduce the drop-out and non-attendance rate of students' (Zins et al., 2004, cited in Cain and Carnellor, 2008, p.58).

These insights on emotional development could for example constitute an extraordinary information for *Europe2020,* the EU's growth strategy for the coming decade which includes the ambitious objective of reducing school-drop rates below 10% (http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/reaching-the-goals/targets/index_en.htm)

The social emotional learning program *Roots of Empathy* – developed in Canada as a response to the poor academic results of children living in the inner areas of Toronto, based on the implementation of social emotional learning. (Gordon 2001, 2005a, 2005b) – demonstrates that developing emotional literacy brings positive contribution to the professional learning of the teachers, increases their awareness of the emotional competencies of the children they teach and their own empathy for their children deepens. Impacts on children's behaviour can be discussed as greater understanding of each other and their proper feelings, observable changes in the gentleness, reduced bullying, etc. (Cain and Carnellor, 2008).

Empathy as a key concept

If we are interested in developing a more community building oriented society, starting from the community school, teachers need to be at the centre of the change with their understanding of empathy phenomena as well as their own emotional growth and capability to empathise with the other components of the community, i.e. children *in primis*.

An important body of research shows in fact how important are the positive teacher-child relationships, relations capable to directly affect children's behaviour (Birch and Ladd, 1998; White and Howe, 1998, cited in Kienbaum, 2001; Gordon, 2005). Cornelius and White (2007, cited in Wallin, 2007) offer a meta-analysis of teacher-student relationships in person-centred environments, showing enhancing students' cognitive, affective and behavioural success. But what exactly is empathy? And, most importantly, what should be the training teachers' understanding and awareness of the role of empathic relationships in their profession?

The last decade research on empathy have deepened the concept so much that we can hardly give an account of all the aspects investigated or still under investigation in this paper. Among the diverse definitions of empathy we choose the one presented by Engelen and Röttger-Rössler (2012) in their article *Current disciplinary and interdisciplinary debates on empathy* which states that empathy is a 'social feeling that consists in feelingly grasping or retracing the present, future, or past emotional state of the other' (*ibid*. p.4). The authors believe that, although there is limit to investigation of the boundary between feeling and cognitive comprehending of others' emotional state, these two aspects cannot always be separated clearly. These authors then shift the discussion to the social nature of empathy, assuming individuals to be at least interested in others' intentions if they are capable of being emotionally involved, and define empathy as the embodied capacity to engage in meaningful social interaction, assuming the role of crucial means of social communication (*ibid*. p.5).

This position - not emphasising the neurobiological aspect of empathy as capability we are wired to from, and even before, birth (Walter, 2012; Preston and Hofelich, 2012; Castiello, Becchio, Zoia, Nelini, Sartori, et al., 2010), nor the anthropological and cultural viewpoints limiting at importance of cultural and personal background of a person in order to understand his/her emotions (Hollan, 2012), deserve greater respect and more investigations as it is not really shared by developmental psychology which sees the capacity to empathise as an effect of maturation rather than socialisation (Bischof-Köhler, 2012).

Hoffman's theory of empathy development is in fact a great resource the way the innate capability to feel empathic distress develops into what he calls 'mature empathy', defined by the author as the 'involvement of psychological processes that make a person have feelings that are more congruent with another's situation that with his own situation' (Hoffman, 2000, p.30). He associates empathy development with children's social-cognitive development. Empathic distress manifests itself as a multi-determined, multimodal and hence a reliable response in the first three preverbal modes (out of the five empathy-arousing modes he describes in his model), especially in face-to-face situations, that provide an important involuntary dimension to empathy throughout life. The mature empathy is then attained only through cognitively advanced modes – verbal mediation and role-taking – occurring when children are about 10-11 years old. Cognitively advanced modes, says Hoffman (2000, p. 61) 'add scope to one's empathic capability and enable one to empathise with others who are not present', giving 'evidence for empathy's effectiveness as prosocial moral motive'. This theory might advise teachers on the appropriateness of their interventions when interest in developing empathic attitudes in their students is at stake. It also directly warns them about seeing

empathy as a simple response, demonstrating that a mature self awareness must be achieved before being able to really empathise with others.

It is actually quite strange that Hoffman classifies his theory under affective empathy studies, in contrast with the concept of empathy as a cognitive awareness. Maybe this is in order to distance himself from theorists linked to TOM (theory of mind). This somehow confirms what we have already mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph about the nature of empathy phenomena: it is a problem that is not solved yet nor can be solved by teachers themselves who are unsure about empathy's nature, but are hopefully thinking about it.

Empathy in our students for teachers

From the study on empathy in teachers and learners we introduce here how we got some insight on subjective meanings of the concept empathy among future teachers students.

Participants, materials and procedure

Data were collected from 50 students attending the programme Primary Teacher Education at Faculty of Education. As a tool to detect empirically based information on subjective meanings of the concept empathy we used the *Associative Group Analysis (AGA)* developed by Szalay and Brent (1967). The use of this indirect technique allows researchers to find some meanings of the concept the participants are not necessarily aware of and could therefore not have been discovered by structured questionnaires (Szalay and Lysne, 1970; Szalay, 1972; Szalay and Vilov 1989; Pečjak, 1993, Pergar-Kuščer et. all, 2003; Ross et, all 2005; Pergar-Kuščer, 2006). Each participating further teacher wrote as many associations on the word empathy as he/she could in one minute. In analysis each response was given a score from six to one, indicating the weighted order of its occurrence. It means that the associations were scored on the order in which the response was given: earlier responses are seen as more closely associated with the stimulus word and to carry more meaning, so gets higher scores. Responses were then grouped together into categories and analysed through a process Szalay calls content analysis. Further analysis was made on the basis of weighted frequencies of associations entered for the chosen categories.

What is the concept future teachers have about empathy?

Our understanding of the world grows when we learn from our experiences as well as from the experiences of the others, which are reflected also in the language (Wierzbicka, 1992). Here we present the group's thinking on stimulus word empathy.

Table 1: Semantic categories for the concept of empathy with their most frequent associations and descriptive statistics

Category	Most frequent associations	f	wf	% wf
BEHAVIOURS	*help, listening, conversation, cooperation, attentiveness, adjustment, interrelation*	115	412	30.51
FEELINGS	*sorrow, feelings, compassion, confidence, love, mercy, empathetic experience*	93	387	28.67
PEOPLE	*friend, teacher, doctor, psychologist, family, adults children, human beings, peers*	66	217	16.07
COGNITION	*understand other, comprehension, recognition, knowledge, intelligence, reflection*	56	205	15.19
PERSONAL CHARACTERISTIC	*altruism, kindness, authenticity, positivity*	22	61	4.52
PROCESS	*education, development, trusting*	13	36	2.67
VALUES	*goodness, equality, respect, ethnicity*	11	32	2.37
	Together	376	1350	100

f = frequences of associations produced by the group of students for primary school teachers
wf = weighted frequences

The total sum of associations produced in one minute by 50 participants was nearly 400, but after excluding unstable responses – those free associations made only by one participants of the study, 376 word associations were accepted for the further procedure. Analysis of the associations started with scoring common responses and grouping similar responses. Each response was given a score indicating weighted order of its occurrence. The weights assigning to responses beginning with the first in the sequence are: 6 to first, 5 to second, 4 to third, 3 to forth, fifth, sixths and seventh, 2 to eight and ninth, 1 to tenth and others. The scale of scoring was elaborated on the basis of stability of the rank of responses. Further analysis and comparison were made on the basis of weighted frequencies of associations entered for the chosen categories. Firstly the same words were put together (plural/singular, synonyms and metaphors). After this seven semantic categories were established on the base of the relevant/inclusive semantic meaning of the words included within a particular category.

Following our framework, future teachers should be able to demonstrate empathic understanding as a consequence both of a process of personal, psychological growth and of a clear understanding of the complex nature of the empathy phenomenon implying emotional, cognitive and social aspects. The results of the semantic saturation of the meaning for each category of the group associations on empathy are displayed with the sum of weighted frequencies (and percentages of weighted frequencies). We can see how much clear is group perception of the complexity of empathy, where we identified strong categories conceiving the emotional aspect. Nearly one third of the weighted

frequencies (28,67 %) of associations belongs to category *feelings.* What we find decisive is the huge category of *behaviours* (30,51 % of weighted frequencies) that is positioned at the very first place, as to say that of course empathic understanding is a matter of feelings, sensitiveness, cognition and relationships but then, it must develop into actions, that is, it must generate prosocial behaviour.

Conclusion

Empathic understanding can play a strategic role in helping teachers to cope with complexity and to enable them to create themselves empathic learning environment. The level of awareness that we can notice among the group of students, future teachers, in our study, allow us to think that they could be ready to struggle the complexity of the school communities and maybe to be able themselves to contribute to build strong empathic communities. But as we said in the first part of this paper, a different attention should be paid by educational institutions to teachers capability to empathic understanding, too often overwhelmed by the attention paid to their subject competences.

If we are interested in developing a more community building oriented society, starting from the community school, teachers need to be at the centre of the change with their understanding of empathy phenomena as well as their own emotional growth and capability to empathise with the other components of the community, i. e. children *in primis*. Emotional development precedes cognitive development and 'emotional intelligence can be strengthened and nurtured by programs that teach emotional literacy' (Cain and Carnellor, 2008, p.55). It seems therefore urgent to develop a more effective training in empathy as key strategy for teachers who must be ready for the classroom experience.

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