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An Exploration of Early Years Education Teachers' Perceptions of the Development of Empathy in Early Childhood

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Abstract. This study explored the perspectives and experiences of nine early education practitioners in Wuhan, China, regarding the development of empathy in early childhood. This study aims to understand early childhood teachers' perceptions of empathy, including what empathy is, children's expression of empathy, their current strategies to enhance children's empathy, and what they believe should be done to develop children's empathy. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to gain comprehensive insights into the instructive perspectives and practical experiences of the participants. The findings of the study indicated that although most of the participants have basic knowledge of empathy, their understanding of empathy was largely oriented towards cognitive empathy; while instructional time was often fragmented in practice. This was primarily due to three major practical obstacles: a rigid assessment system, limited curriculum autonomy, and insufficient collaboration between home and school.This study supplements domestic research gaps on preschool teachers' perceptions of child empathy and provides empirical evidence for preschool social-emotional curriculum optimization.

Keywords: Empathy, Early years education, Educational practice, Pedagogy

1. Introduction

According to Denston et al., it is now recognised within the field of education that social-emotional competence and academic achievement are equally important to student success and that they are closely linked [1]. As a significant component of children's emotional development, empathy not only is closely associated with prosocial behaviour but also indirectly contributes to children's early academic performance indirectly. Meanwhile, empathy can somewhat inhibit or prevent aggressive behaviour and delinquent tendencies [2]. However, a study from Soliman implies that even though kindergartens value children's social-emotional development in their educational practices, empathy is still not prioritized [3].

According to some research conducted to explore children's empathy, many aspects have been linked to the development of empathy in childhood [4-6]. Whilst there has been research on how teacher-children interactions and different teaching styles impact young children's empathy

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development, there has been less research on how teachers understand children's empathy [7]. In order to develop children's empathy more effectively, a higher level of awareness and understanding is required from teachers. Therefore, there is a need to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' understanding of empathy at the early years level. The following two research questions are posed:

(1) What are Early Years Education practitioners' views of the development of empathy in early childhood?

(2) What practices do teachers currently engage in to enhance children's empathy?

In this context, this study was conducted in Wuhan, the city of the initial outbreak of COVID-19, adopting semi-structured interview, involving 10 in-service teachers working in kindergartens. Considering that the entry age for Chinese kindergartens is three years old, it is pertinent to note that the present children in the kindergartens during the research period comprise individuals who were born in close proximity to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Situated within this distinctive social and educational context, the study offers insights into how early years teachers understand empathy and approach its development in everyday practice.

Theoretically, this study enriched the qualitative research database on local EYE teachers' understanding of empathy, and practically, it provided empirical evidence for educational authorities to conduct specialised training on empathy for them and for kindergartens to optimise their social and emotional learning programmes.

2. Literature review

2.1. The definition of empathy

The nature of empathy as either an affective or cognitive concept has been a focal point of debate among many theorists [8]. Thus, Irarrázaval asserted that if we narrowly define empathy by focusing solely on its affective components, it can lead to confusion between the concepts of empathy and sympathy [9].

Empathy in this study will take the definition outlined in Cuff et al.'s summary of past definitions: "Empathy is an emotional response (affective), dependent upon the interaction between trait capacities and state influences [8]. Empathic processes are automatically elicited but are also shaped by top-down control processes. The resulting emotion is similar to one's perception (directly experienced or imagined) and understanding (cognitive empathy) of the stimulus emotion, with recognition that the source of the emotion is not one's own."

2.2. Current studies

Although there are numerous studies on the development of children's empathy, the majority of them focus on familial factors or the courses or programmes that foster empathy development [10]. Other research on empathy in early childhood largely focused on quantitative analyses of children's empathy development such as the design of scales to assess children's empathic abilities [11, 12] and on identifying factors that influence this development, such as children's family background [10], parent-child interactions [13] or gender [14]. Although Denston et al.and Griffith et al. both examined teachers' perceptions and identification of children's social-emotional development, existing research still paid relatively limited attention to the perspectives of frontline teachers in real teaching settings [1, 15].

Furthermore, research on empathy within the field of EYE in China is even scarcer [16], with most studies focusing on the empathy levels of EYE teachers [17]. Existing research on empathy

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interventions has also tended to directly adopt existing scales, paying little attention to teachers' understanding of empathy, whilst lacking studies on the specific groups affected by the COVID-19.

In general, the majority of current research on empathy in EYE focused on quantitative research into the development of children's empathy and identifies factors that influence this development. Therefore, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 in Wuhan, this study focused on EYE teachers and employed semi-structured interviews to specifically explore frontline teachers' authentic perceptions of the nature of empathy, its manifestations in young children, strategies for fostering it, and the practical challenges they face, thereby addressing the limitations of existing research, which tended to adopt a single perspective.

3. Methodology

The research adopted an interpretivist research framework underpinned by epistemology as the ideology [18], used a case study and collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews to gain perceptions about empathy of a small-scale EYE teachers.

For participant sampling, nine teacher participants were purposively recruited from three public kindergartens, one for-profit EYE institution and one private kindergarten. These kindergartens differ greatly in curriculum autonomy granted by local education authorities and national early childhood curriculum standards. All participants had experience in EYE settings ranging from nearly two years to several decades, with the majority of participants majoring in ECE.

Each participant was interviewed from 30 to 45 minutes and based on these two main research questions, interview questions were designed around five key dimensions: the definition of empathy, age-related manifestations of empathy in young children, empathetic behaviour, strategies for fostering empathy, and barriers to teaching empathy. The audio recordings of these interviews were transcribed into text materials. All participants have signed the formal consent forms. And in order to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity, transcripts were anonymised using letter codes. The consent forms and the interview transcripts were all encrypted and saved on a password-protected laptop. Participants also had access to their transcript for verification to ensure the accuracy and validity and had the right to delete or change the content that they are not willing to share. However, all teachers retained their initial views and opinions.

This study adopted inductive thematic analysis following the six-stage analytical framework proposed by Braun and Clarke [19]. All interview transcripts were coded to generate key codes, after which key themes corresponding to the two main research questions were extracted.

4. Findings

4.1. Research question 1: what are early years education practitioners' views of the development of empathy in early childhood?

Thematic analysis yielded five core themes summarising teachers' perceptions of children's empathy, which are elaborated below.

4.1.1. Theme 1: teachers' conceptions of empathy

When asked about the definition of empathy, 88% of the teachers mentioned the same Chinese idiom, which means the ability to experience the emotions of others or consider the challenges they face from their perspective. Two of them believed that empathy is the embodiment of emotional

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intelligence and social communication ability. Other two of the participants additionally highlighted that expressing or acting out how you feel towards the other individual is also a component of empathy. Furthermore, a teacher asserted that empathy involves comforting others.

4.1.2. Theme 2: whether children can demonstrate their empathy

In the interview, six participants believe that children can demonstrate empathy as early as the age of three, when they just enter the kindergarten. Despite that they might have difficulty in expressing their emotions directly by language, it is evident that they are beginning to understand the sentiments of others. Because children believe that everything has life, so their attitudes towards flowers, plants, and small creatures both reflect children's development of empathy.

However, two teachers stated that children aged 3 to 4 are still primarily self-centered and that it is difficult to see evidence of developing empathy in them; this ability does not emerge until they are 4 or 5 years old. Another teacher expressed her approbation for young children expressing empathy, but did not specify the age at which children can demonstrate empathy.

4.1.3. Theme 3: empathic behaviours

In terms of children's empathy, five teachers indicated that children demonstrate proactive behaviour by offering assistance when they observe their peers or teachers requiring support. Additionally, three teachers posit that children's empathy becomes evident when they exhibit a proclivity to offer support and solace to those in their vicinity who are experiencing feelings of sadness. Other three believed that empathy is also reflected in the ability of children to appreciate the hard work of adults or the efforts of their peers, which is often expressed verbally. Besides, there were four teachers who mentioned that an additional manifestation of empathy in young children is their display of concern towards plants or animals in their surroundings.

4.1.4. Theme 4: importance of empathy

In relation to the importance of fostering children's empathy, six participants have indicated that empathy can significantly benefit children's social emotional activities. Moreover, they believe children with high level empathy tend to exhibit enhanced sociability, resulting in increased friendships. Two of them highlighted the contribution of empathy to a decreased possibility of engaging in aggressive behaviours. Two other participants posited that an increase in empathy levels can be beneficial for the development of rule awareness. They stated that children who possess empathy are more inclined to comply with teacher directions, because they will have some basic understanding of what the teacher behind the instruction wants to convey, and actively engage in learning activities. Besides, two teachers have expressed their belief in the cross-disciplinary development of young children related to empathy development. They emphasised the multidimensional nature of empathy, as it not only implicates the social-emotional development of children but also has active influences on their language, artistic, and scientific development.

4.1.5. Theme 5: factors influencing empathy

All participants hold the belief that the fostering of empathy is intricately linked to nurture and environmental factors. Three teachers noted that the development of empathy in young children is impacted by their inherent nature and age-related factors as well. One of them believed children's empathy can develop with the growth of their age.

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Among the identified external influencing elements, all participants cited the influence of familial upbringing and acknowledged the significant role played by parents as a determining factor. According to four participants, children are prone to emulate the behaviour exhibited by their parents. If parents possess a heightened degree of empathy, it is likely that their children will exhibit improved empathic behaviour. Five teachers mentioned the family atmosphere, and believed that a family that spoils children too much or where the atmosphere is too harsh is not conducive to the development of empathy for children.

At the same time, All participants posited that kindergarten environment and activities can foster children's empathy. Six teachers specifically noted that activities which have an impact on children's empathy may not align with the educational activities outlined in the national curriculum. Instead, these activities are typically encountered in daily life activities or arise during transitional sections between activities. Among them, two teachers proposed that the development of empathy does not necessitate specialised training, but rather, it is fostered through the environmental and atmosphere present in the kindergarten, which gradually enhance children's empathy levels.

Additionally, three teachers highlighted the crucial function of social interaction with peers in children's development prior to the age of three, when they enter the kindergarten. They contended that social interaction encountered by children during the pre-kindergarten phase contributed to the subsequent development of empathy. Notably, two of them made reference to the influence of the epidemic on children, that the lockdown policy limited children's opportunities to interact with peers and other people outside their families, which made them become too dependent and hard to understand others' emotions.

4.2 Research question 2: what practices do teachers currently engage in to enhance children's empathy

4.2.1. Theme 1: enhancing children's empathy in the kindergarten

All participants acknowledged that it is crucial to cultivate children's empathy in their daily routines such as bedtime or eating time. They employ many strategies, such as incorporating transitional links or engaging in daily life activities, to effectively increase children's empathy-related skills. Three teachers also believed that children's empathy and related skills can be developed by social emotional lessons. Though there was one teacher expressing that they did not implement specific educational activities aimed at fostering children's empathy, according to three participants, while a dedicated social-emotional course on empathy may not exist, the cultivation of empathy frequently occurs within the context of other area's lessons as shown in this statement.

4.2.2. Theme 2: challenges

When it comes to strategies for cultivating children's empathy, teachers admit that there are still some dilemmas and obstacles. The following three subthemes summarise the complaints of teachers, deficiencies in the evaluation system, the limited freedom of teachers to design lessons, and parents who do not cooperate well.

To be specific, seven participants reported that the existing evaluation system, which involves empathy for children, is deemed imperfect. Thus, six of them frequently depend on their customary observations to discern the specific children who require additional guidance and intervention. Another teacher protested that the kindergarten has become a laboratory for academics in colleges

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and universities, and the evaluation scales designed by them are often changing and too complicated, which is not conducive to teachers' evaluation of children.

Three teachers expressed helplessly that the kindergarten curriculum is fixed and it is difficult to innovate new educational activities, which is one of the reasons why they prefer to cultivate children's empathy through activities other than group lessons.

Four participants reported that there was a lack of fluid collaboration between the families and kindergarten. They expressed the belief that the passive involvement of parents had a detrimental effect on the cultivation of empathy in children.

From what participants shared about their practical experiences related to children's empathy, we can find that while they have some different strategies to improve children's empathy, they are still encountering some barriers in the practice. In the following section, teachers' responses will be critically discussed to answer the two research questions.

5. Discussion

5.1. Discussion on the meaning and benefits of empathy

Every teacher who participated in the interviews demonstrated a certain level of comprehension of the meaning of empathy. A significant majority of the instructors employed a consistent Chinese term to denote empathy, which may be translated into English as "perspective-taking". The concept of empathy as recognised by teachers in this study aligns with cognitive empathy, which refers to children's ability to comprehend the emotional and mental states of others [20]. Actually, according to Cuff et al., the cognitive and affective aspects of empathy are in fact interconnected [8].

However, though teachers seemed to express an accurate understanding of empathy's meaning, when it comes to identifying empathy, they exhibited limited understanding of its developmental trajectory. A portion of the teachers held the belief that children are incapable of displaying empathy until they reach three years old. One of the participants even believed that children do not start to show empathy until they are five years old. Young children are in fact able to behave empathetically, as demonstrated in teachers' accounts of children's empathic behaviours

In the study done by Grosse et al., it was demonstrated that environments with high-quality teacher-children interactions lead to improvements in children's social-emotional development [21]. Teachers won't be able to effectively improve the children's empathetic behaviour or use efficient strategies to increase their empathy if they are unable to recognise the children's already-present empathetic tendencies.

While the particular benefits participants emphasised varied, teachers shared the view that empathy plays an important role in developing children's interpersonal communication abilities. The findings suggest that the existence of empathy in the EYE environment helps early children begin to learn to recognise the emotions of others and to take steps to regulate their own emotional experiences accordingly. The stories shared by the teachers also showed children who are empathic show the ability to behave in an appropriate social manner, making it easier for them to build friendships and do better in group activities. This view is supported by a study conducted by Curby et al., which showed that early years children who exhibited empathetic behaviour had a higher possibility of being popular and interacting with others more frequently than their peers [22].

The development of empathy can also benefit children's cognitive and academic development. Two teachers claimed that children who demonstrate high degrees of empathy show a high level of rule awareness, which benefits their academic success. Children's ability to comprehend rules is facilitated by the growth of empathy, which in turn improves their focused engagement in academic

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activities and, eventually, their academic achievement. The viewpoint she offers complements the findings made by Denham et al., which assert that early years children who frequently express negative emotions are more likely to show less tenacity and enthusiasm for their academic goals [23].

5.2. Factors affecting empathy development

All teachers paid more attention to the influence of the acquired environment on children's empathy. The living and educational environments to which young children are exposed have a significant impact on their empathy development. Empirical research by Bandura et al. found that young children are thought to imitate the behaviours of others they come into contact with and that cognitive development occurs through observation and imitation [24]. Thus, young children develop their socio-emotional skills gradually through interaction with the outside world, which involves interaction with their families and their peers.

The role of family in children's empathy has received unanimous recognition and attention among teachers. Meanwhile, young children's interactions with people outside of their parents prior to entering kindergarten have been similarly identified by teachers as contributing to the development of empathy. However, due to external factors, such as city-wide lockdown measures after the outbreak of Covid-19, little interaction between neighbours in major Chinese cities and the lack of standardised educational provision for children under three have reduced such opportunities, limiting children's development of empathy. Teachers who mentioned this point of view had been teaching for more than five years, showing that their understanding of their children's empathetic development was based on years of observing and evaluating their children and they believe that children's empathy needs to be nurtured over a long and sustained period of time.

5.3. Discussion on teachers' current practices for cultivating young children's empathy

The results of the study found that most of the teachers had limited experience designing educational activities with the main goal of improving children's empathy. One reason for this is that as Chinese educational policy promotes child-initiated play activities and is gradually reducing group lessons, there is limited instructional time allocated to social-emotional education.

Another reason is that those kindergartens do not place enough emphasis on empathy development, and teachers usually limited to selecting lessons from existing resource libraries based on the based on predetermined themes, resulting in limited autonomy in curriculum design and access to relevant resources.

It mainly integrate empathy cultivation into daily activities such as storytelling, outdoor activity summaries, conflict mediation, and individual conversations. It can be seen that the strategies adopted by the teachers are not systematic but fragmented, hoping to develop children's empathy through daily inculcation and subtle guidance.

Furthermore, teachers lack simple and practical empathy assessment tools and existing professional empathy assessment scales are overly complex and impractical for frontline preschool teachers. The assessment results are rarely used for parental feedback or teaching improvement, thus easily becoming tools for research data collection or formalized kindergarten management, increasing teachers' workload.

Generally speaking, when developing children's empathy, some teachers attempt to have a clearer picture of children's developmental status so that they can conduct individualised teaching activities. However, due to the lack of assessment tools, the low priority given to empathy by kindergarten

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leadership, and the limited educational resources, they mainly resorted to developing children's empathy through fragmented verbal guidance during life activities or transition activities.

6. Conclusion

The concept of empathy is difficult to specify, and different subject areas have different definitions of empathy, but the consensus of this research's teachers' understanding of the concept of empathy is perspective-taking and defined empathy in a way that was closer to cognitive empathy, which resulted in their understanding of young children's displays of empathy in a way that was also more oriented towards behaviours that were guided by cognitive development. The findings imply that though EYE teachers in this research have basic knowledge of empathy, they still need to continue to strengthen their professional competence and enrich their understandings of empathy and teaching strategies, because of an overly cognitive understanding of empathy and an underestimation of the developmental level of empathy in young children, there could be a lack of attention to empathy development in kindergartens. This implies that there is a need to enhance frontline teachers' understanding of empathy, but this can only be achieved based on the updating of national curricula and policies. This study, therefore, also provides some factual basis for future national curriculum regulations and educational policies for preschool education in China.

This study also has some limitations. Firstly, this study is limited by the approach to recruiting participants. Though all EYE teachers in the research kindergartens had been invited, only teachers who were interested in this research topic were recruited. However, perspectives from teachers who were not interested in this research topic might yield different answers to the research questions.

In addition, the interview process relied solely on self-reported measures, which may have partially biased the results due to differences in sharing methodology. Interviewees' recollections may be influenced by subjective factors, which may lead to inaccurate or biased information, and their recollections may not fully reflect the behaviours and experiences in the actual situation. Further studies might need to increase the methods of data collection, such as observation, and the use of triangulation to further enhance the credibility of the findings.

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