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## Assessing students' perspectives on how empathy shapes learning achievement: a case study at Toplica Academy of Applied Studies

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### Abstract

*This paper explores the way in which empathy influences students' academic success at Toplica Academy of Applied Studies. In order to provide increased support to students in reaching their academic goals, teachers are encouraged to demonstrate sensitivity toward students' emotional experiences, as well as compassion in addressing their needs and expectations. At the same time, teachers should keep a clear focus in directing their students to achieve academic results. Together, these practices embody the notion of teacher empathy. The paper further examines how such empathy is expressed through teachers' conduct, classroom interaction, and overall professional behaviour. The aim of the conducted survey was to evaluate students' attitudes and perceptions regarding teacher empathy and its influence on their motivation, participation, and overall academic success. Four key areas were explored: teachers' empathy toward students, empathy within the student community, that is among students, the incorporation of empathy into teaching practices, and its effects on learning outcomes and academic achievement. The findings emphasize the importance of integrating empathy into educational practice and demonstrate how teachers contribute to a supportive learning atmosphere. The analysis of the results indicates specific areas for improvement, as well as strategies for increased teacher empathy. These include implementing student-centred instructional strategies, recognizing the emotional and psychological influences on students' academic achievements, and encouraging open and transparent communication.*

**Keywords:** teacher empathy, student achievement, student-centred instruction

### 1. Introduction - empathy in education

Despite the existence of numerous definitions of the term “empathy”, they can be summed up into empathy being a complex and multi-dimensional psychological phenomenon related to an individual's ability of understanding, feeling and reacting to emotions, thoughts and needs of other people. The term “empathy” was derived from the German word “Einfühlung” (Wispé, 1986). Wispé defined empathy as a cognitive and emotional process that involves understanding another person's feelings or experience without losing objectivity or becoming emotionally overwhelmed. According to Hoffman (1989), empathy includes care for others and the desire to help them. On the other hand, Davis (1980) emphasizes the ability to experience other people's emotions, thought and feelings. It holds a central role in building good and positive interpersonal relationship. Baron-Cohen and Wheelright (2004) highlight the natural and spontaneous adjustment of our thought and feelings with that of others, and the ability of putting ourselves into other people's positions. Considering some of the mentioned definitions, the different aspects of empathy emphasized by authors can be said to form its essence.

In education, empathy has a very important function as it enables teachers to have a deeper understanding of their students' emotional and cognitive states. It can make teachers be more objective in their approach and at the same time connect with their students more easily and develop positive and encouraging behaviours in the classroom (Cooper, 2011). Moreover, it creates a safe environment in which students can achieve their full potential and academic success (Warren & Herd, 2022). It presents one of the basic elements of emotional competences of teachers because it contributes to better understanding of students' needs, emotions and behaviours, which ensures a more efficient and humane educational process (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Empathy drives student achievement by creating a classroom climate in which

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students feel safe to take risks, express themselves, and engage in meaningful learning activities. This kind of environment has been shown to enhance skill acquisition and academic performance, as demonstrated in studies on developing students' public speaking competencies (Novaković & Teodosijević, 2017).

Empathic teachers contribute to building relationships of trust and mutual respect between themselves and students, which can increase motivation, engagement and readiness to cooperate. If the teacher can understand students' emotional states, motivation and active participation in teaching activities should improve. In addition, empathy contributes to more efficient classroom management as it enables teachers to recognize the potential conflicts and problems before they escalate, and to adjust the communication to different students' needs. Empathic teachers can also contribute to creating a positive, supportive and motivating atmosphere and this directly affects the quality of the relationship between students and teachers because empathic teachers build trust, thus increasing students' readiness to be more open and to cooperate (Stojiljković, et al. 2012). Empathic teachers build trust, which makes students feel accepted, understood and acknowledged, which positively affects their emotional stability and the feeling of safety in the classroom. Moreover, taking into account the emotional state and needs of students increases their intrinsic motivation for learning. They can get involved in the teaching process more easily and become more active participants. In addition to empathy having positive effects on learners' achievements, it can also contribute to teachers' professional satisfaction, as it positively affects the psychological states of teachers in terms of preventing dissatisfaction and reduction of stress (Tibu & Horga, 2018). Empathy presents a professional competence of teachers and, therefore, directly affects the efficiency of teaching, students' achievement and education of students in general (Fuller et al. 2021). When teachers express the ability to understand the emotional states, needs and individual challenges of students, an encouraging and safe environment for learning is created, which is the basic prerequisite for achieving results in education.

## 2. Research objectives and methodology

Given the central role of empathy in shaping learning experiences and academic outcomes, the aim of this study was to examine its manifestations within the tertiary level education context, focusing on both instructional and peer interactions. In order to examine this, a methodological framework was designed to assess students' perceptions and experiences of empathy.

In this study, our aim was to investigate the ways in which students at Toplica Academy of Applied Studies perceive and interpret the presence of empathy within the academic environment, as well as the extent to which such perceptions influence their learning experiences and educational success. Specifically, the research aimed to assess students' subjective experiences of the empathy demonstrated by their instructors, whether they feel genuinely understood, respected, and supported in relation to their academic and personal needs, and the challenges they encounter throughout their studies. In addition, the study also addressed the role of peer empathy, emphasizing the importance of mutual understanding, collaboration, and emotional support among students as factors that contribute to the creation of a more cohesive and inclusive learning community. Furthermore, the study analyzed the extent to which empathy is reflected in pedagogical practices and instructional strategies. Finally, the goal was to determine how the presence of empathy within the teaching and learning process contributes to the development of a supportive educational environment, how it enhances students' motivation and active participation, and, consequently, leads to improved academic achievement and more meaningful learning experiences.

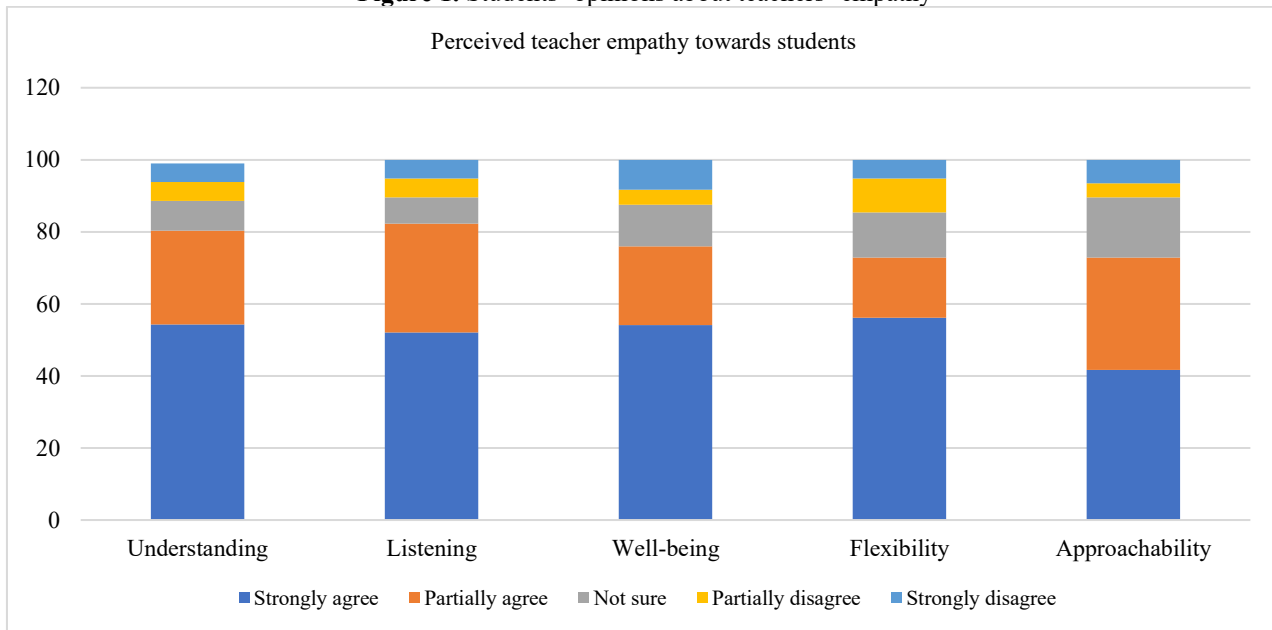
A structured online questionnaire administered via Google Forms was conducted to collect data. The questionnaire was designed to measure multiple dimensions of empathy as experienced in the educational context. It included both closed-ended items for measuring quantitative data, and open-ended questions for providing qualitative data. The questionnaire was structured to assess four key dimensions: perceived instructor empathy, empathy among peers, empathy reflected in teaching methods, and the perceived impact of empathy on academic success. The study population included 97 students enrolled at Toplica Academy of Applied. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and all respondents were informed about the purpose and confidentiality of the study in accordance with established ethical research standards. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. Qualitative data obtained through open-ended responses were analyzed thematically in order to identify patterns and recurrent themes in students' responses. This mixed-method design enabled the integration of numerical results with the descriptive responses, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how empathy functions as a pedagogical and social factor in higher education settings.

## 3. Results analysis and discussion

The analysis of the first five questionnaire items which center around students' opinions about teachers' empathy indicates that students largely perceive their teachers as empathetic. The results to the first statement indicate that teachers show understanding for students' needs, as more than 54.3% of respondents strongly agreed, 26% partially agreed, 8.3% were not sure, 5.2% partially disagreed, and 6.2% strongly disagreed. Analysis of the second statement "Teachers are willing to listen to students' problems", approximately 52% strongly agreed and 30% partially agreed, confirming that most students perceive their instructors as open and approachable in communication. In response to the statement "Teachers show interest in students' well-being, not just their academic performance", the majority of students again expressed

agreement (54% fully, 22% partially). However, 11% of students remained undecided, which may indicate uneven experiences of empathy. In terms of the fourth statement “Teachers are flexible when students have legitimate reasons for delays in fulfilling their obligations”, over 56% strongly agreed, while 17% partially agreed and 12% were undecided. This reflects a generally positive perception of instructor flexibility, though some uncertainty persists among some students. In response to the fifth statement “I feel free to approach my instructors if I have academic or personal problems”, the distribution of responses was more varied: 42% strongly agreed, 31% partially agreed, while 17% were uncertain and 10% disagreed (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Students' opinions about teachers' empathy

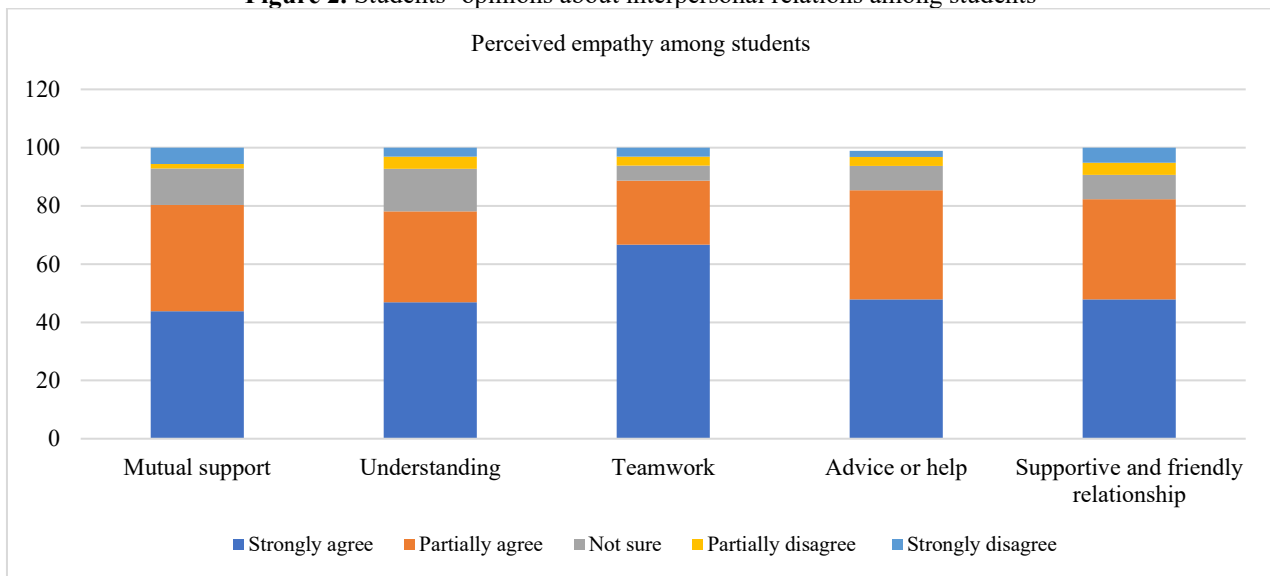


Source: Authors' research

The data related to the first set of five statements indicates a consistently high level of agreement. For the first four questions, more than 70% of students perceive their teachers as empathetic. This indicates that empathy is a visible aspect of the teaching culture, especially in areas directly related to academic support and flexibility. The highest levels of strong agreement were recorded for flexibility (56.2%), meaning that teachers are perceived as understanding when students face legitimate difficulties, and understanding (54.3%) – students feel that their needs are recognized and acknowledged. This suggests that teachers are particularly successful at showing empathy in academic or procedural situations, such as workload, deadlines, and performance expectations. This type of support can reduce stress, improve student satisfaction, and enhance academic engagement. While the majority of students recognize and value the presence of empathy in their teachers' behavior, the results regarding the fifth statement highlight a need to strengthen students' sense of psychological safety and the perceived accessibility of teachers.

The next part of the research focuses on interpersonal relations among students, specifically examining how they perceive empathy and mutual support within their academic groups. In response to the statement “In my group, students support and help each other,” 43.8% strongly agreed and an additional 36% partially agreed. This indicates that a clear majority of students experience a sense of mutual solidarity and willingness to assist their peers. Similarly, for the statement “Students show understanding for the challenges and problems of their peers”, nearly 47% of students strongly agreed. This further confirms that empathy is present and actively expressed in everyday student interactions. When it comes to teamwork, the results show that 67% of respondents view collaborative work as an opportunity to develop empathy. This strongly suggests that group assignments and shared tasks have a positive impact on interpersonal dynamics among students. The fourth statement, related to counting on colleague's support received responses of 48% respondents who strongly agree and 37% who partially agree, pointing to a high level of peer reliability and mutual support. Finally, for the statement “Relationships among my colleagues are friendly and supportive”, respondents agreed, with approximately 48% strongly agreeing and 34% partially agreeing (Figure 2).

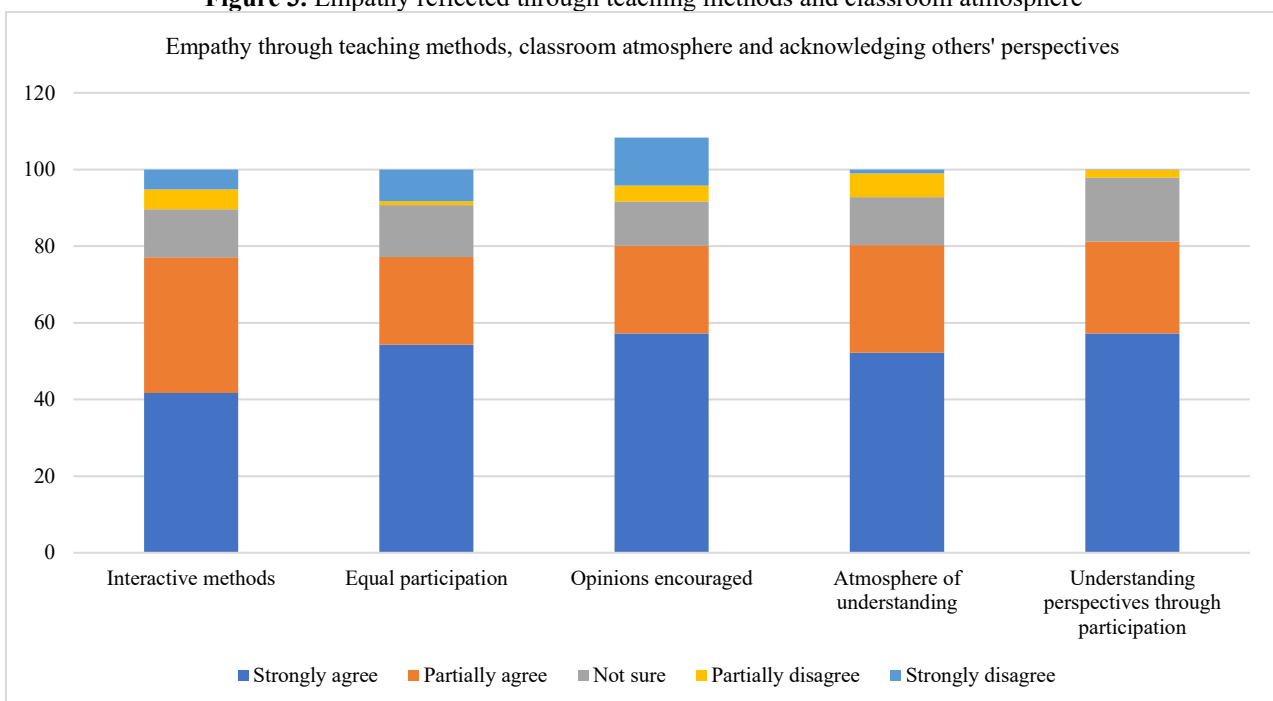
**Figure 2.** Students’ opinions about interpersonal relations among students



Source: Authors’ research

This part of the research focuses on expressing empathy through teaching methods, classroom atmosphere, and the acknowledgment of diverse perspectives. When asked whether “Teachers use interactive methods to encourage better understanding among students”, 42% of respondents strongly agreed, while an additional 35% expressed partial agreement. These results suggest that students recognize and value the instructors’ efforts to promote collaboration and mutual understanding. In response to the statement “Teamwork groups are organized to ensure equal participation for all”, more than 54% of students strongly agreed. This finding indicates a high level of perceived equality and inclusion within group work activities. Furthermore, 57% of students strongly agreed with the statement “Teachers encourage students to express their opinions and respect different viewpoints”, highlighting a classroom culture that supports open dialogue and the free exchange of ideas. Regarding the statement focused on classes being held in an atmosphere which promotes dialogue and mutual understanding, 52% of students strongly agreed, with an additional 28% expressing partial agreement. The responses indicate that most students perceive the classroom as a safe space for communication. Finally, 57% of students fully agreed with the statement that participation in class activities makes students better understand others’ perspectives. It can be concluded that well-designed instructional activities contribute significantly to the development of empathy. In summary, these findings clearly demonstrate that interactive teaching methods, teamwork, open communication, and the acknowledgment of diverse perspectives have a direct and positive impact on empathy development and the creation of a supportive classroom environment (Figure 3).

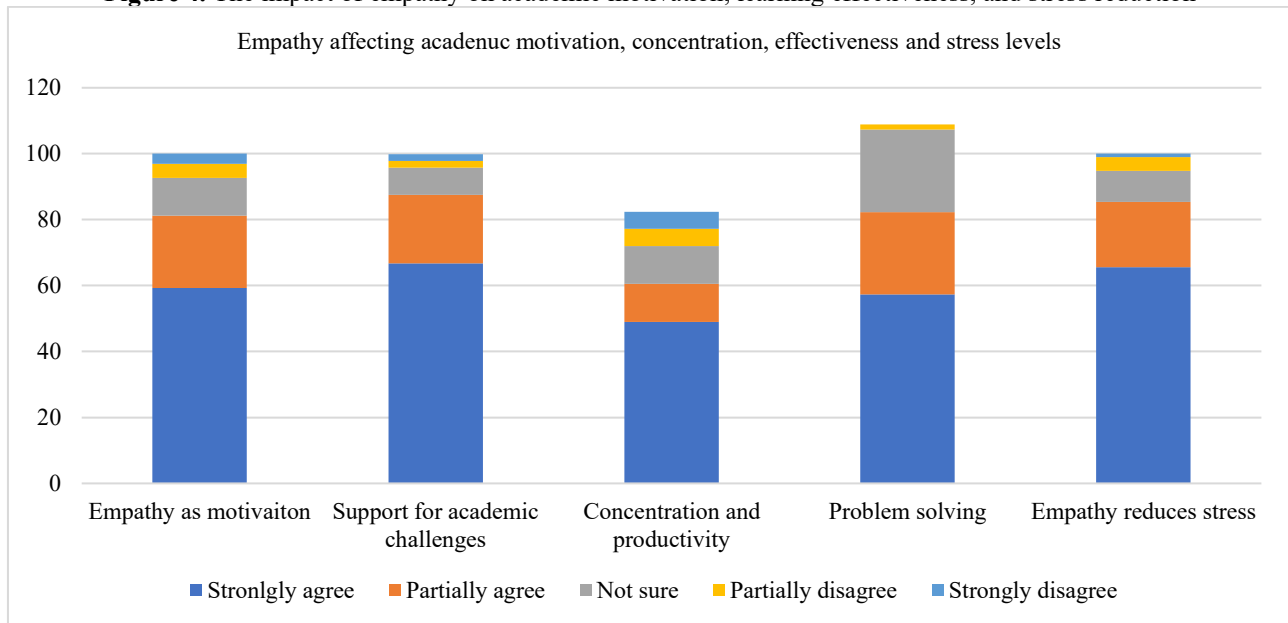
**Figure 3.** Empathy reflected through teaching methods and classroom atmosphere



Source: Authors’ research

The next part of the research examines how empathy influences students' academic motivation, concentration, effectiveness, and stress levels. In response to the statement "Teacher empathy increases my motivation to learn", 59% of students strongly agreed, with an additional 22% expressing partial agreement. These findings emphasize the strong positive impact that teacher support has on students' intrinsic motivation. The statement about facing academic challenges being easier when supported by teachers and peers received even higher affirmation, with 67% of respondents strongly agreeing. This emphasizes the importance of perceived safety and understanding within the educational environment. When asked about the absence of empathy, 49% of students strongly agreed and 26% partially agreed with the statement. Furthermore, 57% of students fully agreed with the statement "An empathetic classroom environment improves my problem-solving skills and learning efficiency". These results suggest a clear connection between emotional support and cognitive performance. Finally, 66% of students strongly agreed that "Better-developed empathy in the education system would reduce student stress", pointing to the significant role that emotional support plays in promoting well-being. In conclusion, these findings indicate that empathy is not merely an emotional or interpersonal value but a critical determinant of students' academic motivation, concentration, mental health, and overall academic success (Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** The impact of empathy on academic motivation, learning effectiveness, and stress reduction



Source: Authors' research

#### 4. Qualitative results

In addition to the quantitative analysis presented in the previous section, this part of the paper focuses on the qualitative dimension of the research. Open-ended survey questions were analyzed to gain deeper insight into students' personal experiences, perceptions, and suggestions related to empathy in the academic environment. This qualitative approach allows for a more precise understanding of how empathy is experienced, interpreted, and valued by students, highlighting specific behaviors, challenges. This part presents these key qualitative findings, organized around recurring themes that emerged from student responses.

Students most strongly recognized teacher empathy in moments of personal or health-related challenges. Extending deadlines, demonstrating understanding, and providing emotional support were highlighted as particularly impactful. These gestures not only helped students manage their academic responsibilities more effectively, but also created a sense of psychological safety and trust within the learning environment. This form of support emerged as a crucial factor in maintaining motivation and reinforcing students' engagement with their studies. When describing the qualities, they most value in their teachers, students frequently mentioned patience, openness, accessibility, and a genuine willingness to listen. These characteristics are perceived as fundamental in shaping an educational climate where students feel heard, respected, and encouraged to express their needs. A teacher's ability to balance academic expectations with understanding personal circumstances appears to play a central role in shaping students' emotional and academic experiences. Peer-to-peer empathy also emerged as a significant dimension of students' academic lives. Many respondents noted that mutual support is frequently demonstrated through sharing study materials, encouraging one another, and providing emotional reassurance during stressful periods, such as examination weeks. This informal support network functions as an important resource that not only helps reduce academic stress but also strengthens the sense of belonging within the student community. To further enhance empathy in the academic context, students proposed increasing opportunities for collaborative learning. They emphasized the benefits of group work, open discussions, and dedicated spaces where various opinions can be freely expressed. According to their responses, such interactive formats generate a stronger sense of connection, mutual respect, and collective problem-solving, thereby contributing to both personal and academic

growth. Despite these positive perspectives, students also identified several challenges that can limit the presence and effectiveness of empathy in the classroom. The most dominant among these were content overload, insufficient communication, and a perceived formal distance between teachers and students. Such factors can create emotional barriers, reduce trust, and make it more difficult for students to seek support when needed. Finally, students offered concrete and constructive recommendations for addressing these issues. They suggested introducing targeted teacher training programs focusing on emotional and empathetic competencies, implementing anonymous feedback mechanisms to encourage honest communication, and fostering greater accessibility and open dialogue between teachers and students. By addressing these structural and relational aspects, higher education institutions can strengthen empathy as a key element of both teaching practice and the broader academic culture.

Overall, the qualitative analysis highlights that empathy plays a central role in shaping students' academic experiences and perceptions of their learning environment. Students recognize and value empathetic behaviors from both teachers and peers, especially in moments of personal difficulty. At the same time, they identify structural and relational barriers that can limit the expression of empathy, but also offer concrete, actionable strategies for improvement. These insights provide a valuable foundation for developing more inclusive, emotionally supportive, and pedagogically responsive educational practices in higher education.

## 5. Implications

The results of this study clearly indicate that teacher empathy plays a significant role in shaping a supportive and motivating classroom environment. Student responses consistently indicate that when they feel understood and accepted, their motivation to learn increases while stress levels decrease. Empathetic teachers are perceived as fostering a climate of psychological safety, in which students feel more confident to ask questions, participate actively, and engage meaningfully with the learning process. According to students, this approach not only enhances academic achievement but also strengthens their self-confidence and sense of belonging.

The findings further point to the importance of student-centered teaching approaches, such as active learning, teamwork, and interactive instructional methods, which were associated with higher levels of engagement and deeper understanding of course content. When the classroom is perceived as a space of dialogue rather than a one-way transfer of knowledge, students report feeling more connected to the material and more responsible for their own learning. Moreover, students emphasized that academic success is closely tied to psychological well-being. High levels of stress, anxiety, or feelings of isolation can hinder learning. This makes emotional and psychological support from both teachers and peers essential. Empathetic teachers, as described by students, often take on roles that go beyond instruction, acting as mentors and trusted sources of guidance.

Finally, open and reciprocal communication was identified as a key factor in building mutual trust and reducing emotional distance between teachers and students. When communication is transparent and inclusive, students feel respected and supported, which in turn strengthens their sense of belonging to the academic community. Together, these findings highlight empathy not as a peripheral element of education but as a core component of effective and inclusive teaching practice.

## 6. Recommendations

Based on the results, several recommendations have been formulated to strengthen empathy in higher education. The findings suggest that teacher training programs focused on emotional intelligence could be introduced as a structured way to enhance empathetic competencies. Empathy is not solely an inherent personal trait but a skill that can be developed and refined through targeted education, reflection, and professional development (Ratka, 2018; Schwartzkopf et al. 2025). By equipping educators with the tools to better understand and respond to students' emotional needs, institutions can create more supportive learning environments.

The results also emphasize the significance of active listening and open communication as central elements of empathetic teaching. Transparent and reciprocal dialogue allows teachers to better understand student needs while simultaneously helping students feel that their emotions, challenges, and perspectives are genuinely valued (Martín de Hijas-Larrea et al. 2025). This approach contributes to building trust and reducing perceived distance between students and faculty.

Another important recommendation is adapting teaching methods to students' emotional and situational needs. Flexibility in teaching approaches, such as allowing for differentiated learning experiences and recognizing personal challenges, was identified by students as a critical factor in creating an inclusive and encouraging academic climate. The importance of this is also highlighted. Through regular self-assessment, educators can identify their strengths and areas for growth, which in turn supports the development of an empathetic classroom culture (Rieckhoff et al. 2020).

In summary, these recommendations offer concrete steps toward shaping an educational environment in which intellectual development is possible, as well as student's emotional well-being and sense of belonging. By integrating emotional

intelligence training, authentic communication, and encouraging reflective teaching practices, higher education institutions can establish learning spaces that are both academically rigorous and emotionally supportive.

## 7. Conclusion

This study provides strong empirical evidence for the central role of empathy as a core pedagogical and social factor in higher education. Grounded in the conceptual understanding of empathy as a multidimensional psychological construct encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components (Wispé, 1986; Hoffman, 1989; Davis, 1980), the findings confirm that its presence in educational settings significantly shapes students' learning experiences, motivation, and academic success.

Based on the conducted research, three key conclusions can be drawn that highlight the central role of empathy in higher education. First, teacher empathy directly contributes to higher levels of student engagement, motivation, and academic success. When students feel understood, respected, and supported, their intrinsic motivation increases, and they are more willing to participate actively in the learning process. This sense of psychological safety strengthens their self-confidence and encourages deeper involvement in classroom discussions, collaborative activities, and independent learning. By recognizing and responding to students' emotional and academic needs, teachers can create a learning environment where students can thrive both intellectually and personally. Second, empathy should not remain solely an individual personal trait that depends on the goodwill or personality of specific teachers. Instead, it should become an integral, structured component of teaching practice, deliberately embedded in instructional methods, communication strategies, and teacher-student interactions. A systemic approach to empathy involves incorporating it into curricula, teacher training programs, institutional policies, and everyday classroom practices. This kind of intentional integration allows empathy to function as a stable and sustainable driver of educational quality. It also ensures that all students, regardless of background or circumstance, benefit from an inclusive and supportive academic climate. Third, the findings reveal a need for further research in this area, particularly within the context of higher education. While this study confirms the importance of empathy in shaping student outcomes, there remains much to explore regarding how empathy can be effectively developed, implemented, and sustained over time.

The role of empathy in education is beneficial and essential. Empathy represents a fundamental pedagogical competence and a cornerstone of inclusive, supportive, and effective learning environments. It creates spaces in which students feel safe to engage, question, and grow. Integrating empathy into everyday teaching practices helps institutions raise academic standards and support students' personal well-being. Rather than being perceived as an optional extra, empathy stands as a crucial element in driving real and lasting educational change.

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