

EMPATHY COMPETENCY OF HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS

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Abstract. Although empirical studies have shown the role of teachers' empathy in enhancing connection with students as well as improving teaching quality, empathy competency in teachers has not been researched much in Vietnam. This study was conducted to investigate the empathy capacity of high school teachers in three areas: Hanoi, Hai Duong, and Hoa Binh, and examine the impact of demographic factors such as age, gender, and seniority of work on the level of teachers' empathy. A total of 412 teachers were invited to participate in the study through semi-structured interviews and answered two survey tools including the Basic Empathy Scale (BES) of Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) (Davis, 1980, 1983). The results showed that high school teachers within the current study demonstrated a fairly good level of empathy; Female teachers showed better empathy competency with students than male teachers; Teachers in Hai Duong showed the best empathy and teachers in Hoa Binh showed the third highest empathy. Notably, teachers with less than 5 years of experience and more than 15 years of experience had low empathy, while teachers with 10-15 years of experience had the best empathy capacity. Accordingly, the article includes suitable discussions and suggestions for further studies on empathy capacity in teachers.

Keywords: empathy, competency, high school teachers.

1. Introduction

Thanks to diversified teaching and learning activities, teachers and students are greatly exposed to mutual interaction. This results in various kinds of emotions within students. In particular, when they acquire new knowledge, achieve encouraging performance, and connect with teachers and friends; students might feel interested, excited, or even worried, bored, and hopeless [1]. So, it is suggested that teachers should identify and notice those feelings so that they can share their students' emotions. This would lead to better relationships between teachers and students, which can improve teaching and learning quality [2]. Empathy is one of the social-emotional features, that is proven to have a strong relation with interactive quality and teacher-student connection. As a matter of fact, unlike self-awareness of emotions, empathy emphasizes greater care about others rather than oneself. Also, empathy is linked with the capability of acknowledging and understanding students' emotions and needs [3]. Regarding this point,

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Mortiboys (2005) demonstrated that in addition to intensive specialized knowledge and excellent teaching methodology, teachers should be equipped with emotional intelligence to reflect their knowledge and pedagogy at most [4]. It cannot be denied that emotions play an important role in making decisions, which are even crucial in making valid decisions. Therefore, it is now time to emphasize the vital role of students' emotions as well as teachers' sharing and empathy during the teaching and learning process. One of the prominent components of emotional intelligence is empathy, which is closely linked with sharing and understanding others' emotions. Many authors suppose that empathy should refer to understanding the emotions of other people to give appropriate emotional reactions [5, 6]. So, effective empathy is linked with experiencing the emotions of other people and cognitive empathy is linked with understanding those different emotions.

From a psychological perspective, empathy is defined based on two mainstreams. In the former one, based on the affective perspective, empathy means emotional reactions to other people's emotions. In other words, when a person shows affective empathy with someone else, he/she would not only understand but also experience similar feelings [7] and he/she can also "catching" those emotions, which is so-called emotion contagion [8]. In the latter one, based on the cognitive perspective, empathy refers to the capability of understanding other people's feelings by identifying their viewpoints and interpreting their non-verbal signals. Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright (2004) indicated that the theory of intelligence would converge with the definition of empathy [9]. Moreover, models of emotional intelligence, for example, the four-dimension model by Mayer & Salovey (1997), consider cognitive empathy as the capability of precisely identifying different kinds of emotions on other people's faces and understanding them [10]. This means the ability to predict when those emotions will appear.

Previous studies have proved the importance of empathy in pedagogical activities. The research by Wink, Larusso and Smiths (2021) indicated that teachers having cognitive empathy (ability to understand students' boredom and loss) would be open-minded, effectively communicate with students having behavioral problems, tend to use appropriate strategies, and have strong connections with students [11]. As a consequence, occupational pressure and exhaustion would be much lower. However, teachers having poor empathy would have negative and harsh perspectives toward their students' behaviors. Especially, these teachers might easily get into conflicts, which reflects their poor capability of solving problems. Therefore, in this case, occupational pressure would be higher.

Thus, teachers' empathy means their capability to put themselves in their students' shoes to identify and understand the emotions that those students are experiencing. At the same time, teachers should reflect their great care, positive listening skills, and mutual sharing of students' troubles. Then, they would be compassionate with students' "abnormal" behaviors to provide timely support. In other words, the empathy competency of high-school teachers means their capability to put themselves in their students' position to feel and understand their emotions and problems. Then, teachers can help students to overcome their troubles. So, the empathy competency of high-school teachers is comprised of two main elements: first, teachers' knowledge of identifying and sympathizing with students' emotions and problems; second, their emotional sharing with students' cases to help them resolve current problems. Within this point, it is clear that

empathy and compassion are related to kindness – one of the core qualities for students to develop, especially in today's world of increasing negative problems among students' behaviors and their relationship with teachers. Therefore, it is essential and practical to explore teachers' empathy competency. Based on that background, this study aims at (1) first, analyzing the reality of empathy competency of high-school teachers and (2) second, pointing out the impact of certain demographic criteria like age, gender, and number of working years on those teachers' empathy competency and empathy level. Then, further discussion would be provided with suggestions for further study approaches regarding teachers' empathy competency.

2. Content

2.1. Methodology

2.1.1. Research participants

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

	Criterion	Number	%
Number of working years	Lower than 5 years	40	9.7
	5-10 years	40	9.7
	10-15 years	125	30.3
	More than 15 years	207	50.5
Position	Form teacher	206	50.0
	Subject teachers	165	40.0
	Youth Union officer	6	1.5
	Managers	20	4.9
	School psychologists	7	1.7
	Others	8	1.9
Gender	Male	101	24.5
	Female	310	75.2
	Other	1	0.2
Location	Ha Noi	207	50.2
	Hoa Binh	103	25.0
	Hai Duong	102	24.8
Total		412	100

This study covered high school teachers (secondary schools and high schools). The authors applied a random and convenient sampling method to choose research participants in 3 cities, namely Ha Noi, Hai Duong and Hoa Binh. The total number of

participants was 412 who were categorized as stated in the following Table 1.

2.1.2. Methods and measurements

The authors conducted a survey questionnaire to evaluate teachers' empathy competency. We also carried out semi-structured interviews, each of which was 15 - 30 minutes in length. The survey tools were comprised of 2 measurement scales:

The Basic Empathy Scale – BES (Jolliffe and Farrington, 2006) [13]: There were 20 statements, particularly, 11 statements described affective empathy and 9 others defined cognitive empathy. All of these statements were designed based on a Likert scale with 5 levels ranging from 1 score – extremely disagree to 5 score – extremely agree. The empathy of teachers can be calculated in 2 ways: either by total score of BES, or specific score of affective empathy and cognitive empathy. The scale score would vary from 20-100. There was approval by Jolliffe for applying his scale in the Vietnamese samples. In this study, BES would be reliable with Cronbach Alpha of 0.70.

Interpersonal Reactivity Index- IRI (Davis, 1980, 1983) [14]: This scale would measure the structure of empathy. It was developed based on the perspective that empathy should be a collection of different relevant components. This tool included four sub-scales for each specific aspect of empathy. Each subscale was developed with 7 items. The subscale "Perspective taking" measured the tendency of applying/putting on psychological viewpoints of other people in casual life (eg: "Sometimes, I try to understand my friends by imagining what everything would be like from their perspective"). The subscale "Empathic Concern" reflected the tendency to experience empathy and compassion with unhappy people ("I usually have gentle care for those with bad luck"). The subscale "Personal Distress" considered the tendency of overcoming troubles and discomfort to understand others' pain ("Being in a tense situation makes me terrified"). The subscale "Fantasy Scale" measured the tendency to put oneself in fictional situations ("When I read an interesting story, I usually imagine how I would feel if similar cases happened to me"). In this study, the authors excluded the subscale evaluating imagination. Therefore, there were three subscales, including Perspective taking, Empathic Concern, and Personal Distress; each of them was comprised of 7 statements with Likert 5 scale ranging from 0 – Completely untrue for me; 1 – partially untrue for me; 2 – neutral; 3 – partially true for me; 4 – Completely true for me. The total scale would vary from 0 to 84. In this study, the scale would be reliable with Cronbach Alpha of 0.75.

2.2. Results and discussion

Reality of empathy competency of high-school teachers

Based on the average score of BES and IRI, the authors categorized the empathy competency of high-school teachers into the following 4 levels:

Table 2. Levels of empathy

No	Average score	Level
1	Below 50	Poor
2	50 - 65	Average
3	66 -81	Fair
4	Higher than 82	Good

To give objective results, in both scales, it was agreed that the structure of empathy should be comprised of 2 components, namely affective empathy and cognitive empathy. As stated in Table 2, in general, *teachers' empathy competency was at a fair level* with the average score Mean_{BES}=67.52; Mean_{INDEX}=38.92. The comparison with Max score of the scales showed similarity in teachers' self-evaluation in regard to their empathy. However, in terms of BES, high-school teachers exposed the best empathy (variation between total score and max score =18.48).

Table 3. The average score of empathy levels based on two scales (self-evaluation by teachers)

BES				Index			
Mean	Standard deviation	Min	Max	Mean	Standard deviation	Min	Max
67.52	5.75	53	86	38.92	6.76	14	61
Variation: Max-Mean =18.48				Variation: Max-Mean = 22.08			

An in-depth analysis of the two components of empathy competency, namely “cognitive empathy” and “affective empathy” illustrated that for all two scales, *high-school teachers showed higher affective empathy than cognitive empathy* (Table 3). This was reflected not only by the higher average score of affective empathy but also by the highest score at the subscale of affective empathy.

Table 4. Average score of components of empathy competency

Criterion	BES			Index		
	Cognitive empathy	Affective empathy	Total	Cognitive empathy	Affective empathy	Total
Mean	31.70	35.82	67.52	18.39	20.53	38.92
Standard deviation	3.04	4.40	5.75	3.39	4.70	6.76
MIN	22	23	53	2	6	14
MAX	41	48	86	28	43	61

The correlation between components of empathy competency: In order to explore the relationship between the two components, namely cognitive empathy and affective empathy, the authors carried out a correlation test Pearson r in 3 scales (Table 4). It was found that there was a positive correlation between cognitive and affective empathy with $r = 0.16^{**}$, $p = 0.00$. At the same time, the total score of BES had a positive correlation with the cognitive component with $r = 0.65^{**}$, $p = 0.00$, and with the affective component with $r = 0.85^{**}$, $p = 0.00$. Similar results were found in regard to Index, in particular, cognitive empathy had a positive correlation with affective empathy, $r=0.37^{**}$, $p=0.00$.

Those correlations stated that when teachers could recognize students' troubles and boredom, high-school teachers would have emotional sharing with them. Especially, the strong and positive correlation between the affective component and total BES indicated

that if teachers could share with students' unhappiness, they would better understand their students, which clearly illustrates their empathy.

Table 5. The correlation between components of empathy competency

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Cognitive component (1)	-	0.16**	0.65**
Affective component (2)	0.16**	-	0.85**
Total BES (3)	0.65**	0.85**	-
p	0.000	0.000	0.000
Cognitive component (1)	-	0.37**	0.58**
Affective component (2)	0.37**	-	0.78
Total Index (3)	0.58**	0.37**	-
p	0.00	0.00	0.00

Teachers' empathy competency based on different criterion

Gender

Table 5 shows the difference in terms of male and female teachers. In particular, for both scales of BES and Index, female teachers got better empathy than male ones. However, to consider the statistical significance of that difference, an independent sample *t*-test was carried out, which indicated that in both BES (*p* = 0.00) and Index (*p* = 0.00), the difference got statistical significance. In general, for the sample of this study, female teachers should share with students more effectively than male ones.

Table 6. Difference in average score based on gender

	Gender	Number	Mean	Standard deviation
Index	Male	101	37.57	7.67
	Female	310	39.38	6.38
BES	Male	101	64.81	5.47
	Female	310	68.36	5.53

Locations

In order to find out any difference in empathy competency among teachers in the 3 research locations, the author used One-way ANOVA. The results showed that *there was difference in empathy competency among teachers in 3 cities* with *p*=0.00, *F*(2)=15.09. In-depth analysis into the average score of empathy competency in 3 cities, namely Hanoi, Hoa Binh, Hai Duong with two scales of BES and Index demonstrated that among the 3 research areas, *teachers in Hai Duong showed the best empathy* (Mean =125.15; SD=5.58), which was followed by those in Ha Noi (Mean=118.10; SD=12.28) and *teachers in Hoa Binh* (Mean=117.27; SD=14.78).

Table 7. Average score of empathy competency based on location

	Number	Mean	Standard deviation	95% of confidence interval		Min	Max
				Below	Above		
Ha Noi	207	118.10	12.28	116.41	119.78	77.00	147.00
Hoa Binh	103	117.27	14.78	114.38	120.16	77.00	155.00
Hai Duong	102	125.15	5.58	124.06	126.25	103.00	139.00
Total	412	119.64	12.15	118.46	120.81	77.00	155.00

Number of working years

The authors used One-way ANOVA to analyze differences in empathy competency among teachers with different working years. It was stated that there was statistically significant difference in terms of empathy competency among teachers with different working years, with $F(3)=3.73$, $p=0.01$. It can be seen in Table 7 that teachers with 5-10 working years had the best empathy competency (Mean =123.77, SD=10.90), who were followed by those with 10-15 years (Mean = 121.31, SD=11.67), and those with fewer than 5 years and more than 15 years (Mean =117.47, SD=14.77; Mean = 118.25, SD=11.86).

Table 8. Average score of empathy competency based on number of working years

	Number	Mean	Standard deviation	95% of confidence interval		Min	Max
				Below	Above		
Fewer than 5 years	40	117.47	14.77	112.75	122.19	77.00	136.00
5-10 years	40	123.77	10.90	120.28	127.26	100.00	140.00
10-15 years	125	121.31	11.67	119.24	123.37	79.00	147.00
More than 15 years	207	118.25	11.86	116.62	119.87	92.00	155.00
Total	412	119.64	12.15	118.46	120.81		

2.3. Discussions

Being carried out with high-school teachers, this study brought about interesting and valuable findings for educational managers, policymakers, teachers, and students. *Firstly*, that teachers have empathy competency at a fair level means they are capable of identifying students' thoughts and emotions; positively listening and understanding their feelings; and showing encouraging emotions in response to students' achievements and happiness as well as negative emotions (hopelessness, discouragement) in response to students' faults. Then, students might seek their teachers' sharing of their happiness and positive feelings. This is a good signal for the connection between teachers and students, which lays the foundation for positive changes within students. Previous researchers found out a strong relationship between teachers' empathy and students' academic progress. For example, Rogers (1969) [14] demonstrated that if teachers could be capable of understanding students' internal reactions and have sensitive intelligence about

students' learning process, they would make their students greatly improve their academic performance.

Within the two components of empathy, high school teachers had greater affective empathy than cognitive empathy. In other words, these teachers reflected better sharing with students' emotions and unhappiness than identifying and understanding the reasons for their negative reactions. This can be explained by different rationales. Perhaps, these teachers lack of the skill for identifying emotions, or they have a communication gap with students, or they are too busy to spend time talking with students. Despite any of these excuses, when students have negative emotions, teachers should show their sharing and provide the most favorable conditions for their students. In the near future, it is recommended to conduct more studies on exploring influencing factors on teachers' empathy competency.

Secondly, based on the positive correlation between affective empathy and cognitive empathy, it can be inferred that when high-school teachers are aware of their students' sadness and unhappiness, they tend to share their sharing with students' emotions. Especially, the strong and positive correlation between affective empathy and total scale of empathy demonstrates that if teachers have sympathy and sharings with students' sadness, they would understand these emotions. Then, these teachers would have higher empathy than others. This finding is really valuable to the authors, especially in regard to designing experimental programs to improve teachers' empathy competency. To begin with, it is essential to equip teachers with the capability of identifying emotions, and seeking for reasons for students' various emotions. This must be considered from the student's perspective. In fact, although the cognitive component of empathy focuses on thoughts; the affective component concentrates on emotions, which is defined as a similar perception with other people's feelings. Then, it is possible for teachers to have appropriate sharing with students' needs and wants.

Especially, based on the strong and positive correlation between components of empathy, it is believed that if one of the two components is trained, empathy would be greatly affected and vice versa. Teachers' empathy is a crucial part of the teaching process because they should understand students' personal and social situations. At the same time, they should show their care about responding to students' positive and negative emotions as well as integrate that care into students' behaviors. So, teachers' empathy is a psychological feature and structure, which is developed during occupational activities and varies among different individuals. Teachers' empathy competency effectively helps them not only to show their empathy with other people in general but also easily feel empathetic with certain students, which is even greater than with others [16].

Thirdly, in terms of gender-based, in this study, female teachers had better empathy with students than male ones. This can be explained by to distinctive features of the two genders. In fact, the female teachers would be more sensitive to students' unhappiness than the male ones. Sometimes, the responses of male teachers are reflected through actions rather than emotions. The findings of this study based on high-school teachers are similar to those based on high-school students with the same scale of BES. In the research by Bui Thi Thu Huyen (2019) [15] with high-school students in Hanoi as the participants, it was proved that affective sympathy was stronger than cognitive one. In this study, it is interesting to find out that the results from BES with students and teachers

in Vietnam were the same as the sample in the study by Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) [12], who developed BES, which revealed that affective empathy was much higher than cognitive empathy in both male and female participants. Also, despite Eastern or Western culture, it is the same for all females in showing their empathy with the surrounding people, who have the tendency to share emotions in a more frequent and clearer basis than understanding the unhappiness of their friends. Therefore, empathy in general and female empathy in particular is usually higher than that of males.

In addition, the analysis of differences in empathy competency based on working years indicated that teachers with 5-10 years of working experience got the best empathy with their students. However, those with experience of fewer than 5 years and more than 20 years got the same empathy competency. This is a noticing finding, which requires more intensive studies to consider the affecting factors on empathy competency of high-school teachers. Logically, compared with young teachers, those with more working years should be better at identifying students' emotions. Nevertheless, in this case, the result was different. So, there must be other affecting factors that contradiction.

3. Conclusion

This study helps in drawing the picture of reality about empathy competency among high-school teachers in Ha Noi, Hai Duong, and Hoa Binh. The findings showed that these teachers had empathy competency at a fair level. Also, female ones got better empathy than male ones. There was even a difference in empathy competency based on different locations. In particular, although teachers in Ha Noi did have empathy competency as well as those in Hải Dương, they got better empathy than teachers in Hoa Binh. Another valuable finding in this study was that teachers' empathy competency varies depending on their number of working years.

Despite its valuable findings, this study was limited to some extent. First, it only covered teachers' empathy competency based on teachers' self-evaluation, which was not objective. If there had been perspective from students, the assessment would have been more complete. In addition, the study only clarified the reality of teacher's empathy competence and differences based on gender, location, and working years; it untapped any affecting factors on those differences. These limitations are suggestions for further studies in the future so that the picture of the empathy competency of teachers in Vietnam can be more complete and diversified.

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