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## CONCEPTUALISATION OF EMPATHY FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF PEDAGOGIC COMMUNICATION

This paper is focused on the conceptualisation of empathy. It follows the ideas with which empathy is connected in interpersonal communication, with a special emphasis on the approach to empathy in pedagogic communication. The purpose of the contribution is to reveal what meanings are attached to the concept „empathy“ in two sources of data whose analysis will constitute the basis of the present research: academic texts and empiric data. The basis of the analyses is the cognitive approach to meaning whose essence is finding connotations.

*Key words: empathy, pedagogic communication, pedagogic communication, empiric data, connotations.*

„An inherent part of human life is to be entitled to understand another and be understood by another,“ says the representative of the philosophy of education N. Pelcová [1, p. 291]. It is apparent from the author’s words that people measure the quality of their lives by the attainment of mutual understanding. Understanding is a significant indicator not only of successful interpersonal communication, but also of man’s relationship to the world. The concept of understanding stands at the focus of many fields of study; its various aspects are accentuated in dependence on a specific scientific paradigm. It is also an important concept in pedagogical context, which includes specific social, social psychological and personal characteristics. It turns out that if we view understanding through the prism of pedagogy, this concept is frequently accompanied by another concept, empathy. Our paper will therefore seek semantic relationships between these two concepts by means of a comparing the meaning of understanding and of empathy in the specialist pedagogic discourse, with conception drawn from the ideas of contemporary pupils and students.

We consider the matter through the prism of cognitive approach to language, drawing mainly from the conception of the linguistic picture of the world. According to J. Underhill [2], this approach reveals the processes that are at play in understanding the world, emotional sharing in understanding the world, the influence of culture on the perception of the world, personal approach towards the world and changes in the comprehension of the world that happen as part of our development process. The extent of sharing the view of the world is key. The view is shared by a nation, a particular culture, but it is also created by an individual as a member of a particular nation. In our paper, we shall observe the extent of sharing the view of the world which is narrowed down to the environment of Czech school, and which will be represented by an expert pedagogic community and lay population – particular pupils and students.

### **Conceptualisation of understanding and empathy from the viewpoint of pedagogy**

„A specific quality of educational relationships is that they are not reduced to a formal exchange of information only, but they also have a personal, often unfulfilled, nature; the ability of the teacher to react to a word, look, gesture, can fulfil, personalize, and concretize the originally ambivalent relationship and utilize it for the sake of teaching and education. In the moment of empathetic understanding, the teacher becomes important for the pupil, often becomes a role model and a mentor, and influences the pupil's attitudes, hierarchy of values, interest and enthusiasm for a given subject or activity“ [1, p. 285].

N. Pelcová links the quality of education to the quality of interaction which must be motivated by the teacher's effort for empathy towards the pupil. Empathy arouses trust in the pupil, motivates him or her to willingness to follow the teacher, to take up the teacher's values and acquire knowledge. If empathetic understanding occurs, then, according to N. Pelcová, the potency is created for the fulfilment of educational and teaching goals.

Pedagogues agree that the frontal method of teaching based on the transmission of knowledge is mostly failing; that the essence of teaching is a shared activity whose basic form is dialogic communication. Dialogue expresses, creates, and re-creates interpersonal relationships which are the basis for understanding the world, society, as well as oneself [3]. Apart from reaching comprehension which is oriented towards pragmatic information, the goal of pedagogic dialogue is to move towards understanding, which concentrates mainly on interpersonal relationships. Empathy contributes a great deal to harmonic interpersonal relationships, and it represents the ability of man to understand the feelings and motives of other people. In dialogue and by means of dialogue one can reach an intersection of various different world views. Such dialogue is an enrichment, a way to negotiate common meanings and sharing of experience.

There are three approaches to pedagogic communication which, through the prism of cognitive linguistics, can be expressed by corresponding metaphors [4].

1. THE PUPIL IS A VESSEL – this metaphor expresses authoritarian conception of teaching; the teacher's manner of imparting knowledge to the pupil

is a one-way process and the pupil becomes a passive recipient. This approach goes entirely against the full-fledged pedagogic dialogue. Reddy's metaphor of pipeline is quite fitting: FINDINGS ARE OBJECTS, LANGUAGE EXPRESSIONS ARE VESSELS, and COMMUNICATION IS SENDING [5]. Contemporary pedagogues distant themselves from this conception; also, research on real pedagogic communication confirms that there has been departure from the directive manner of pedagogic communication.

2. THE PUPIL IS A PARTNER – this metaphor corresponds to the democratic conception of teaching where pedagogic dialogue is motivated by the effort to listen. Its substance is the teacher's endeavour to understand the pupil; with regard to the principles of cognitive approach to language, we can say that the determinant is an effort to reveal the linguistic picture of the pupil's world. This approach to communication in teaching corresponds to the metaphor COMMUNICATION IS CONNECTION.

3. THE PUPIL IS AN INSPIRING PARTNER – this metaphor again corresponds to the democratic conception of teaching where listening transforms into mutual understanding. It is a balanced dialogue in whose initiation the teacher and pupil take turns. Such communication is an inspiration for everyone involved and it reveals new options – not only to the pupils but also to the teachers [6]. This approach corresponds to the metaphor COMMUNICATION IS A SHARED SPACE.

### **Conceptualisation of understanding and empathy from the viewpoint of pupils and students**

The research population was made of 192 respondents. 66 pupils of the 6th and 7th grade of an elementary school in the Liberec region, 62 pupils of a secondary school in Klatovy and 64 students of Pedagogic faculty of the Technical University in Liberec. This way we could observe how the picture of pedagogic communication changes in relation to age and education of respondents. We were surveying the conceptualisation of understanding and empathy in an indirect manner, because it was apparent that elementary school children in particular did not know the meaning of the word empathy. We decided to form the following question: „What is a good teacher like? Name five qualities a good teacher should have.“

We proceeded from the assumption that the teacher plays a key role in successful pedagogic communication. We observed whether the picture of a good teacher will evoke qualities related to understanding and empathy.

#### **I. Answers from elementary school pupils**

We gathered 304 out of expected 330 answers from 66 pupils, 26 answers were unidentifiable. On the basis of proximate semantic attributes, we assorted the respondents' answers into semantic categories. The basic categories of answers and the most frequent concrete examples are listed as follows.

**1. Orientation towards interpersonal relationships** – 180 in total, out of which 71 is explicitly related to communication. Examples: *polite, kind, patient, understanding, communicative, listening, helpful, friendly.*

**2. Sense of humour** – 53 in total. Examples: *witty, entertaining, funny, uses humour.*

**3. Teaching methods** – 49 in total. Examples: *ability to teach, can explain, teaches well.*

**4. Authority** – 22 in total. Examples: *has authority, natural authority, evokes respect.*

## **II. Answers from secondary school pupils**

We gathered 297 out of expected 310 answers from 62 students, 12 were unidentifiable. Consequently, in accordance with the first group, here we list the basic categories of answers and the most frequent concrete examples.

**1. Orientation towards interpersonal relationships** – 144 in total, out of which 31 communication and 12 empathy. Examples: *empathetic, accommodating, understanding, communicative.*

**2. Teaching methods** – 57 in total. Examples: *creative, able to engage attention, industrious, can impart plenty of knowledge, inspirational.*

**3. Erudition** – 27 in total. Examples: *qualified, clever, well-educated, expert on the subject.*

**4. Sense of humour** – 18 in total. Examples: *witty, sense of humour, entertaining.*

**5. Authority** – 13 in total. Examples: *authoritative, respected, able to uphold his/her authority.*

## **III. Answers from university students**

We gathered 300 out of expected 320 answers from 64 students, 20 were unidentifiable. Again, here we list the basic categories of answers and the most frequent concrete examples.

**1. Orientation towards interpersonal relationships** – 165 in total, out of which 82 communication and 58 empathy. Examples: *empathetic, tolerant, trustworthy, trusting, humane.*

**2. Teaching methods** – 95 in total. Examples: *chooses diverse methods, creative, encourages interest in the field, teaches with enthusiasm, encourages activity.*

**3. Erudition** – 30 in total. Examples: *is an expert, well-educated, understands his field.*

**4. Authority** – 10 in total. Examples: *natural authority, authority figure, able to earn respect.*

After comparing answers from all three groups of respondents we came to conclusion that they share certain distinct and noticeable tendencies, but there are particular differences as well. What they have in common is the emphasis on teacher's qualities that foster the development of positive interpersonal relationships in which communication, followed by empathy, play the most significant role. Both university students and secondary school pupils explicitly mention empathy, only elementary school pupils do not. However, we cannot infer from it that empathy is not relevant to them; it may only mean that they are not

familiar with this foreign term. E.g. qualities listed by these pupils, such as understanding, listening, helpful, are in fact substantial aspects of empathy. Sense of humour is important for elementary school pupils, less so for secondary school pupils, while university students do not mention it. An explanation could be possibly found within the framework of developmental psychology which shows that in the post-adolescent age, entertainment does not carry such value as it does in childhood and adolescence. An opposite situation can be seen in the case of emphasis on teacher's erudition; elementary school pupils do not mention it, whereas secondary school pupils as well as university students regard it as important.

In summary, we can claim that the research proved the key role of teacher's communication skills in terms of all qualities, competencies and abilities that make up the picture of a good teacher. In the forefront, there is especially the ability to lead a dialogue based on the effort to reach understanding among all involved, part of which are expressions of empathy of the teacher towards students.

Our research confirmed the opinions of experts on the matter of pedagogic communication. In order for pedagogic communication to be successful, it is necessary that it is realized as a dialogue which will not be aimed primarily towards comprehension, transformation of the educational content; but which will be motivated by the effort for understanding. Understanding originates in trust, respect and tolerance, and prevents us from a biased perception of the world. The basis of understanding is listening to communication partners. Reciprocity is typical for understanding – it is a two-way process and occurs in a dialogue. Pupils and teachers who aim at knowledge, cognition, and mutual knowing each other, are motivated to participate in a dialogue.

Empathy, as it emerges from the ideas of pupils and students, is part of understanding; nevertheless, it is a one-way process. The research showed that the pupil expects empathy from the teacher, while the pupil alone is in the role of its recipient. According to our respondents, it is desirable for the pedagogic communication to be guided by the teacher's efforts for empathy towards the pupil, whereas it is not expected of the pupil to display empathy towards the teacher. The idea of empathy in pedagogic communication is based on the image of a teacher who listens to the pupil, respects his or her personality, is able to identify with his or her emotions and needs. Such teacher inspires trust and incites the pupil's desire for knowledge, for participation in dialogue that leads towards understanding. A good teacher, as I. Semrádová says, „prevents the reinforcement of a fragmented, black-and-white, stereotypic, trivialized approach to the world, oneself, and others“ [7, s. 528].

#### ЛІТЕРАТУРА

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