

ROLE OF EMPATHY IN ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN ACADEMIC SETTING

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ABSTRACT

Empathy has increasingly been recognized as a vital socio-emotional competence that supports academic achievement by shaping students' learning experiences and educational environments. This study explores the role of empathy in academic achievement through a qualitative, phenomenological approach, focusing on the lived experiences and perceptions of students and teachers. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns linking empathic interactions with learning outcomes. Findings indicate that empathy contributes to academic achievement primarily through indirect pathways, including enhanced social competence, emotional regulation, motivation, and a strengthened sense of school belonging. Teacher empathy emerged as a particularly influential factor, fostering supportive classroom climates that promote engagement and persistence in learning. While direct relationships between empathy and academic grades were found to be context-dependent, empathy consistently functioned as a foundational resource that enables conditions for sustained academic success. The study underscores the importance of integrating empathy into educational practices and policies, highlighting its role not merely as a moral attribute but as a key socio-emotional facilitator of academic achievement.

I. INTRODUCTION

Empathy, broadly defined as the capacity to understand and share the feelings and perspectives of others, has gained increasing attention in educational research as a critical socio-emotional competence. Traditionally, academic achievement was viewed primarily as a function of cognitive ability and instructional quality; however, contemporary frameworks emphasize the role of social and emotional factors in learning outcomes. Empathy contributes to positive classroom interactions, effective communication, and supportive learning environments, all of which are essential for sustained academic engagement. Research in educational psychology suggests that students with higher levels of empathy tend to demonstrate better peer relationships, reduced behavioral problems, and greater adaptability to academic demands (Feshbach & Feshbach, 2009; Zorza et al., 2013).

At the student level, empathy has been linked to academic achievement through its influence on self-regulation, social competence, and motivation. Empathic students are more likely to cooperate with peers, seek help appropriately, and engage in collaborative learning, which enhances understanding and retention of academic content. Empathy is also associated with executive functions and emotional regulation, both of which are known predictors of academic performance (Cid-Sillero & Santiago-Ramajo, 2018). Empirical studies across diverse educational contexts, including secondary and higher education, indicate positive correlations between empathy

scores and academic or clinical performance, suggesting that empathy supports learning both directly and indirectly (Hojat et al., 2002; Bozkurt & Ozden, 2010).

Beyond individual student traits, teacher empathy plays a pivotal role in shaping academic achievement. Teachers who demonstrate empathy foster a sense of belonging, psychological safety, and motivation among students, which in turn enhances learning outcomes. Recent studies show that teacher empathy positively predicts students' academic achievement through mediating factors such as school belongingness and engagement (Cai et al., 2023; Sarwer et al., 2024). These findings underscore empathy as a multidimensional construct operating at both interpersonal and institutional levels, highlighting its significance not only as a moral or social value but also as a key contributor to academic success.

II. METHOD

Participants

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how empathy influences academic achievement from the lived experiences and perceptions of students and teachers. A qualitative approach is appropriate because empathy is a complex, multidimensional, and context-dependent construct that is best understood through participants' narratives, meanings, and interactions rather than solely through numerical indicators (Cooper, 2011; McAllister & Irvine, 2002). By privileging participants' voices, this design allows for an in-depth understanding of how empathic relationships within educational settings shape motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes. A phenomenological approach is employed to capture how individuals experience empathy in academic contexts and how these experiences relate to achievement. Phenomenology is suitable because it focuses on understanding shared meanings across participants while acknowledging individual perspectives (Mikkonen et al., 2015).

Participants are purposefully selected to include students and teachers who have direct experience with teaching–learning interactions, as prior studies indicate that teacher–student empathy plays a critical role in shaping academic engagement and success (Martinsone & Žydžiūnaitė, 2023; Sarwer et al., 2024). Data are collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews, allowing flexibility to probe participants' perceptions while maintaining consistency across interviews. Interview questions focus on experiences of empathetic interactions, perceptions of emotional support in learning environments, and perceived links between empathy, motivation, and academic performance. In line with qualitative best practices, interviews are audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and richness of data (Zhao et al., 2021). Where feasible, supplementary data such as reflective journals or classroom observations may be used to enhance data triangulation.

Measures

Data analysis follows a thematic analysis procedure. Transcripts are coded inductively to identify recurring patterns and meanings related to empathy and academic achievement. Initial open coding is followed by the development of broader categories and themes that capture relationships between empathic practices and educational outcomes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To enhance trustworthiness, strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail are employed, ensuring credibility, dependability, and confirmability of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Procedure

Ethical considerations are central to the study. Participants provide informed consent, and confidentiality is maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage. Given the emotional nature of discussions around empathy and academic challenges, participants are informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. This ethical approach aligns with qualitative research standards in educational and psychological research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Across education research, empathy emerges as an indirect but powerful contributor to academic achievement. Rather than operating as a simple cognitive predictor like IQ, empathy shapes achievement through social–emotional pathways: improving student–teacher relationships, enhancing peer collaboration, strengthening school belonging, and supporting self-regulation and motivation. Evidence spans early adolescence, higher education, medical education, and vocational contexts. While a few studies report weak

or context-dependent direct effects, the dominant pattern shows empathy acting as a mediator or facilitator that creates conditions for sustained academic success.

III. RESULTS

Table 1: Thematic Analysis: Role of Empathy in Academic Achievement

Theme	Description	Illustrative Findings
1. Empathy as a Social–Emotional Facilitator	Empathy supports emotional understanding and prosocial behavior, which indirectly enhances academic engagement and persistence.	Students with higher empathy demonstrate better cooperation, reduced conflict, and improved classroom participation, all of which support achievement.
2. Teacher Empathy and Learning Climate	Teacher empathy fosters supportive classroom environments that enhance motivation and academic outcomes.	Empathetic teachers improve students' sense of belonging, engagement, and perceived support, leading to higher achievement.
3. Empathy, Belonging, and Motivation	Empathy strengthens students' sense of school belonging, which mediates academic success.	School belonging partially or fully mediates the relationship between teacher empathy and student achievement.
4. Empathy and Executive/Self-Regulatory Functions	Empathy interacts with executive functions (e.g., effortful control, planning) to predict academic performance.	Empathy enhances peer relationships and self-control, indirectly supporting learning outcomes.
5. Domain-Specific Academic Contexts	The empathy–achievement relationship varies by discipline (e.g., medicine, language learning, STEM).	In medical education, empathy predicts clinical competence; in language learning, empathy supports achievement via communicative engagement.
6. Mixed or Context-Dependent Effects	Some studies find weak or non-significant direct links between empathy and grades.	Empathy may not directly predict GPA but remains important for professional competence and psychosocial adjustment.

IV. DISCUSSION

The literature indicates that empathy contributes to academic achievement primarily through indirect mechanisms. First, empathy enhances social competence and emotional regulation, allowing students to collaborate effectively and remain engaged in learning tasks (Feshbach & Feshbach, 2009; Zorza et al., 2013). Second, teacher empathy plays a pivotal role, shaping classroom climates that promote motivation, trust, and belonging—key predictors of sustained academic effort (Meyers et al., 2019; Cai et al., 2023). A recurring theme is mediation: empathy improves outcomes not by directly raising test scores, but by fostering school belonging, engagement, and self-regulation, which in turn predict achievement (Sarwer et al., 2024). In specialized domains such as medical and vocational education, empathy is strongly linked to performance quality and professional competence, extending the meaning of “achievement” beyond grades (Hojat et al., 2002; Jang et al., 2010). However, the relationship is not universal or linear. Some studies report non-significant correlations between empathy and GPA, suggesting that contextual, cultural, and disciplinary factors moderate its influence (Javaeed et al., 2022; Kim, 2024). Overall, empathy should be understood as a foundational socio-emotional resource that enables academic success rather than a standalone academic skill.

V. CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that empathy plays a significant yet largely indirect role in academic achievement. Rather than functioning as a direct predictor of grades, empathy contributes to academic success by enhancing social–emotional processes such as motivation, self-regulation, peer collaboration, and students' sense of belonging. The

analysis highlights teacher empathy as particularly influential, as it shapes supportive learning environments that foster engagement and persistence. Overall, the evidence suggests that empathy operates as a foundational socio-emotional resource that creates conditions conducive to sustained academic achievement across diverse educational contexts.

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