

Empathy in the educational relationship

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Abstract

Il presente contributo si propone di considerare la rilevanza che il concetto di "empatia" occupa nell'ambito della relazione educativa. A tal fine, per evitare le trappole riduzionistiche di riferimenti tanto generici quanto superficiali, si chiarisce il termine empatia anche alla luce degli studi empirici condotti negli ultimi anni e dell'evoluzione che il concetto stesso ha avuto in ambito filosofico, psicoanalitico, negli studi della psicologia umanistica e della psicologia dello sviluppo. Il lavoro si conclude con alcune considerazioni di carattere pedagogico sul ruolo dell'empatia nella relazione educativa.

This present contribution intends to consider the importance that "empathy" as a concept occupies in the educational relationship. To this end, in order to avoid reductioning traps of references which are so much generic as superficial, the word "empathy" is clarified also on the basis of the empirical studies of the latest years and of the evolution that the concept itself has had in the studies of humanistic psychology and developmental psychology, within the philosophical, psychoanalytical spheres. The work ends with some pedagogic comments about the empathy role in the educational relationship.

The concept of «empathy» occupies a prominent place within the educational relationship between teacher and pupil. Over time however, the concept has lost its meaning and has instead acquired generic and ambiguous connotations. When it is employed in different operational contexts (psychotherapy, supportive relationships, developmental psychology, educational relationships) its meaning is far from being unified; as a matter of fact empathy has been attributed characteristics that do not belong to it. M. Contini warns of the risk of rhetorical use of the term in the pedagogical discourse. Though she acknowledges «the "density" that

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empathy involves in terms of the communicative relationship, especially in education which is characterised by the asymmetry of roles, knowledge and power – and thus by a specific responsibility of the educator»¹, Contini highlights two positions on the subject, which may result in the danger of simplification.

The first position values empathy as a necessary element and one inherent to educational practice, a sign of the teacher's commitment. However, empathy often «reaches the level of an informal chat, thus ignoring the historical materiality of an educational practice characterised by distortions in communication and claiming a “must be” behaviour, as ideal as it is unimpeachable»². The second position belongs to those who, in the light of possible relational implications of the empathic process, dismiss it as a «manipulative attitude, emblematic of an educational act marked by sentimentality: the pressure to decipher and understand the experiences of the learners involves a mutual emotional enmeshment and a subtraction of commitment and energy to the area of cognitive processes»³.

In order to avoid the dismissive trap of general and shallow references to empathy, it is necessary to explain the theoretical concept behind it and reconsider the empirical studies carried out in recent years. This can help achieve a summary, albeit provisional, of the concept of empathy in order to proceed in the best possible way towards providing indications that help to experiment with new empathic communication methods in the field of the educational relationship.

The evolution of the concept of empathy

a) In the field of philosophy

The literal meaning of «empathy» is «what one feels inside», from the Greek *empathēia*. The neologism «empathy» was used for the first time by E. Titchener⁴ in 1909, in an attempt to translate the German word «*einfüh-*

¹ M. Contini, *La comunicazione intersoggettiva fra solitudini e globalizzazione*, La Nuova Italia, Milano 2002, p. 162.

² *Ibidem*.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ E. Titchener, *Experimental psychology of the thought process*, McMillan, New York 1909.

lung», used at the end of the 19th century in the field of aesthetic philosophy, and introduced into psychology by Th. Lipps⁵.

Prior to this, R. Vischer, taking up the reflections of his father F.Th. Vischer on imagination and the symbolic value of nature, had used the term *empfindung* to indicate the ability to grasp the life of inner nature, in other words one's own body. The concept of connecting-with-the-internal is the fundamental movement of the aesthetic contemplation of nature.

The concept of empathy was fully acknowledged in the philosophical and aesthetic reflection of the early years of the 1900s thanks to Th. Lipps. He used the term empathy to explain the nature of the aesthetic experience, conceived in terms of «inner participation» involving the whole person. Empathy is, therefore, the point at which one is in tune with the perceived object. According to the scholar, «nothing can be the object of aesthetic contemplation if it is not indeed contemplated, in other words learned, internally [...]. This process involves inner movement and activities. I am my own movement and activity»⁶. With the passage of time, Lipps extends the concept of empathy to the field of interpersonal relationships.

The theme of empathy, in reference to intersubjectivity and the subject-object relationship, is reassembled into a single problem in the thoughts of E. Husserl and the school of phenomenology. In *Ideen*, empathy (or entropathy) is examined with reference to objective knowledge of the world and the authentic understanding of man understood as other-than-me. «All that is true of me, – writes Husserl – is also true, to my knowledge, for all men, within my reach in my surrounding world. By experiencing them as men, I understand them and accept them as “me”, as I am, and each of them refers to their own surrounding natural world. All this however happens in a way through which I conceive my and their surrounding world as one and same objective world. This world is only different in the way in which it comes to our awareness. Each has its own place from which to view things and thus these things look different to everyone»⁷. This lays

⁵ Th. Lipps, *Empfindung inner nachahmung und organ-umhinderungen*, in «Archiv für die gesamte Psychologie», 2 (1903); Th. Lipps, *Ästhetik: psychologie des schönen und der kunst*, 2 voll., Leipzig, Hamburg 1903-1906; Th. Lipps, *Estetica*, in A. Pinotti (ed.), *Estetica e empatia. Antologia*, Guerini, Milano 1997, pp. 184 and 188.

⁶ T. Lipps, *Estetica*, cit., pp. 184-188.

⁷ E. Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, 1913; Italian translation: *Idee per una fenomenologia pura e per una filosofia fenomenologica*, vol. 1, *Introduzione generale alla fenomenologia pura*, Einaudi, Torino 1965, p. 61.

the foundations for overcoming a one-sided and subjective conception of reality and, thanks to the intersubjective relationship, envisaging the possibility of a true understanding of the objective reality of space and time due to the intersubjective relationship. Only different subjects in a relationship of mutual understanding can thus experience the objective world.

E. Stein resumed and deepened the reflections of E. Husserl. From the end of 1913 till the end of 1916, the young scholar was engaged in the dissertation on «The problem of empathy in its historical development and phenomenologically considered»⁸. In her work, Stein attempts to locate the essence of empathy, defined as «the experience of a consciousness other than our own»⁹, in which all the «actuality of others' lives creates a sort of foundation of the acts in which the experience of others is captured»¹⁰.

Empathy is different from the acts of pure consciousness. While the external perception is always relative to something that stands before me here and now, empathy puts me in front of an object that does not have the essence of «originary», it is not immediately present, but it must be «made present». Take as an example the experience of understanding a friend's pain: empathy certainly has the characteristics of the act of originary (I understand the pain here and now), but the content (the other's pain) does not have originary inasmuch as it is the experience of another person. In this sense, empathy is similar to memory, to the expectation, to fantasy: originary acts through which non-originary realities are given. However, these differ because, while in empathy the subject of the experienced empathy differs to the subject that empathises, in other situations it is the subject that remembers, expects and fantasises.

Through empathy, it is possible to perceive the experience (the lived experience) of another, as long as one sees it from the perspective of the person who experienced it (adopting the person's point of view); at the same time, the experience of the other can not be grasped in its originaryity, since the otherness is irreducible. M. Nicoletti illustrates this problem well in his introduction to the work of Stein, when he says:

⁸ The thesis was published in 1917 under the title *Zum Problem der Einfühlung*, Buchdruckerei des Waisenhauses, Halle. The author chose not to publish the first strictly historical chapter of her work in the published edition. The Italian translation was by M. Nicoletti, with a foreword by A. Ardigò, and it was published in 1985 (E. Stein, *L'empatia*, Angeli, Milano 1985).

⁹ E. Stein, *L'empatia*, cit., p. 64.

¹⁰ *Ibi*, p. 56.

«This is the fundamental structure of the intersubjective relationship: consciousness is structurally open to the external reality that is given to it in an ordinary way, nevertheless the concept of consciousness cannot be limited to it; in a similar way, the “I” is open to the “I” of others. It captures them as centres of orientation of the world other than oneself, it captures the psychic life and it can “empathise” the experiences. However, even during the moment of maximum participation and identification, the “I” does not disappear, it does not “blend” with the “I” of another, but it remains beside it, both intimately linked to it and yet different. It is this continuity of diversity that allows empathy as the lived experience of the well-determined “I”: if the “I” were to be annihilated, eliminated or – conversely – absorbed by the other, the possibility to live the experience of subjects “different” from us would not exist»¹¹.

With the empathic act, the subject assumes the angle of perception of the other, but is not to be confused with them: the “I” and the “You” remain separate and, paradoxically, this distinction is what makes the encounter possible. As rightly highlighted by L. Boella, in the Steinian conception «empathy is the broadening of one’s experience, making it possible to accept the pain, the joy of others, while maintaining the distinction between me and the other. Empathy is “the realisation of”, the grasping of the reality of pain, of the joy of others, not suffering or rejoicing in person or identifying with»¹².

Empathy, as an authentic relationship between people, is based on the opening of the I to the You, but at the same time it is also based on the irreducibility of the ego and of its being authentically itself. Here, the constitutive openness to others goes hand in hand with the freedom of the I in the awareness that the intensity of the empathic relationship is not resolved in the fused dimension, but in that of mutual recognition.

¹¹ M. Nicoletti, *Introduzione*, in E. Stein, *L’empatia*, cit., pp. 36-37.

¹² L. Boella - A. Buttarelli, *Per amore di altro. L’empatia a partire da Edith Stein*, Cortina, Milano 2000, pp. 69-70; for more on the theme of empathy cfr. L. Boella, *Sentire l’altro. Conoscere e praticare l’empatia*, Cortina, Milano 2006.

b) In the psychoanalytic field

Already in 1899, S. Freud had expressed a concept similar to that of empathy, describing the ability to make another person's experiences one's own through hysterical identification. By means of this identification process, the subject can express, with the neurotic symptom, the experiences of other people and suffer what they suffer¹³. In 1921, Freud describes empathy (or identification¹⁴) as the process «which plays the largest part in our understanding of what is inherently foreign to our ego in other people»¹⁵, and in another passage he says: «a path leads from identification by way of imitation to empathy, that is, to the comprehension of the mechanism by means of which we are enabled to take up any attitude at all towards another mental life»¹⁶.

However, if Freud and Ferenczi¹⁷ attribute a significant role to the empathic ability to identify with the patient, other authors disagree and see empathy as a vague concept that is unscientific and contrary to the fundamental rules of the neutrality of the therapist¹⁸.

It was not until greater attention was paid to borderline and narcissistic disorders, and the study of H. Kohut and the development of so-called Psychology of the Self, that a full appreciation of empathy in the psychoanalytic process developed. From the 1960/1970, the psychologists of the Self criticised the traditional psychoanalytic approach, considering it too mechanistic and lacking in empathy. They believe instead, that empathy can foster an experience that is likely to encourage the patient's development. In 1957 H. Kohut, in an article in which he prepared the ground for the next evolution of Psychology of the Self, defined the term «vicarious introspection» or «empathy» as the method of understanding the patient's

¹³ S. Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, Deuticke, Leipzig-Wien 1900 (1989); Italian translation: *L'interpretazione dei sogni*, Boringhieri, Torino 1973, pp. 153-154.

¹⁴ The English translators did not always use the term *empathy*, whereas the Italian edition of Freud's works, published by Boringhieri, translated the term *einfihlung* with identification.

¹⁵ S. Freud, *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*, Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, Leipzig, Wien und Zurich 1921; Italian translation: *Psicologia delle masse e analisi dell'Io*, Boringhieri, Torino 1971, p. 296.

¹⁶ *Ibi*, p. 298.

¹⁷ S. Ferenczi, *The elasticity of psychoanalytic technique*, in S. Ferenczi, *Final contributions to the problems and methods of psychoanalysis*, Hogarth Press, London 1928, pp. 87-101.

¹⁸ H. Hartmann, *Essays in Ego Psychology*, International Universities Press, New York 1964, pp. 369-403; T. Reik, *Listening with the third ear*, Grove Press, New York 1948.

inner world¹⁹. According to psychologists of the Self, empathy provides the ability to understand the experience of another person. The fundamental element of the empathic understanding is the ability to grasp the status of the other's Self and the other's experience of the observer. Kohut sees empathy as the key to accessing the mental world of the patient. Empathy and introspection play a fundamental role in the therapeutic relationship²⁰. R.R. Greenson considers empathy as the possibility to share and experience the feelings of another person in order to understand him or her better. This experience of emotional contact implies a splitting of the Ego/I of the analyst, and a movement that carries the analyst from the position of neutral observer to that of participating subject, and vice versa²¹. According to R. Schafer, adequate empathy paves the way for change that can be activated by interpretation, which though it may not be sufficient by itself, could produce therapeutic effects, according to the author²².

Today, although considerable differences remain between the various psychoanalytic schools, the notion of empathy seems entrenched in the vocabulary of dynamic psychology²³. In psychoanalytic psychotherapy, the therapist empathises not only with the state of mind and the experience of the current patient, but also with the content and dynamics of conflicts of the past, withdrawn from the consciousness of the subject. A sufficiently shared definition was developed by B. E. Moore and B. D. Fine,

¹⁹ H. Kohut, *Introspection, empathy and psychoanalysis. An examination of the relationship between mode of observation and theory*, in «J. Amer. Psychoanal. Assn.», 7 (1959), pp. 459-483; Italian translation: *Introspezione, empatia e psicoanalisi: indagine sul rapporto tra modalità di osservazione e teoria*, in H. Kohut, *La ricerca del Sé*, Boringhieri, Torino 1982, pp. 25-49.

²⁰ H. Kohut, *Introspection, empathy and the semi-circle of mental health*, in «Int. J. Psycho-Anal.», 63 (1982), pp. 395-407; H. Kohut, *Il ruolo dell'empatia nella guarigione psicoanalitica*, in H. Kohut, *How Does Analysis Cure?*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1984; Italian translation: *La cura psicoanalitica*, Boringhieri, Torino 1986. For a critical analysis of "empathy" in the work of H. Kohut, cfr. M. Fornaro, *Kohut: il metodo e le illusioni dell'empatia*, «Psicoterapia e scienze umane», 3 (1993), pp. 87-109; for subsequent developments cfr. A. Carusi, *Empatia: il dibattito post-kohutiano*, «Psicoterapia e scienze umane», 4 (2001), pp. 59-83.

²¹ R.R. Greenson, *L'empatia e le sue vicissitudini*, in R.R. Greenson, *Explorations in Psychoanalysis*, International Universities Press, New York 1978; Italian translation: *Esplorazioni psicoanalitiche*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1999, pp. 125-135.

²² R. Schafer, *The Analytic Attitude*, Basic Books, New York 1983; Italian translation: *L'atteggiamento analitico*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1984.

²³ For a comprehensive presentation of the concept of Empathy in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, cfr. D.M. Berger, *Clinical Empathy*, Jason Aronson Inc., Northvale, New Jersey, London 1987; Italian translation: *L'empatia clinica*, Astrolabio, Roma 1989; S. Bolognini, *L'empatia psicoanalitica*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2002.

according to which empathy is a «particular way of perceiving the mental state or the experiences of another person. It is an “emotional knowledge” of another human being, rather than an intellectual understanding. To empathise is to temporarily share, to experience the feelings of another person. One participates in the quality, but not the quantity, the type and not the intensity of the feelings»²⁴. A. Saraval, in *The Psychoanalytic Theory* edited by A.A. Semi, considers an empathetic understanding one of the main features of the analyst: «the main skill that an analyst must have is empathy, the ability to tune in to the patient’s emotions at whatever level, even the most regressive; the capacity to understand what is not expressed verbally, by experiencing the primary and preobjective identification that qualifies the relationship of the mother with the child since – as some claim – it was in the womb»²⁵.

c) *In the field of humanistic psychology*

In the Rogerian perspective, empathy or empathic understanding is the correct perception of the user’s interpretive scheme. To perceive empathically means to detect and understand the other’s subjective world. The operator must be able to «feel» the user’s feelings (for example, confusion or insecurity, fear or joy) «as if» they were their own, but never confuse them with their feelings, their insecurities, their fears or their joys. The operator capable of empathy is prompted by their genuine intention to understand the other in his own language, to think in his own words, to discover his subjective universe in order to grasp the significance of the situation for that user²⁶. Having an attitude of empathy with another person

²⁴ B.E. Moore - B.D. Fine, *A Glossary of Psychoanalytic Association*, New York 1968.

²⁵ A. Saraval, *La tecnica classica e la sua evoluzione*, in A.A. Semi (ed.), *Trattato di psicoanalisi*, vol. I. *Teoria e pratica*, Cortina, Milano, p. 544.

²⁶ Empathy is one of the fundamental characteristics of the supportive relationships as developed by C.R. Rogers: cfr. C.R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person. A Therapist’s View of Psychotherapy*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 1961; Italian translation: *La terapia centrata sul cliente*, Martinelli, Firenze 1970, pp. 57-58 and pp. 92-94; C.R. Rogers - R. Kinget, *Psychothérapie et relations humaines. Théorie et pratique de la Thérapie non-directive*, Editions Nauwelaerts, Lovanio 1965-1966; Italian translation: *Psicoterapia e relazioni umane*, Boringhieri, Torino, pp. 92-93; C.R. Rogers, *Empathic: an unappreciated way of being*, in «The Counseling Psychologist», 5 (1975), pp. 2-10; C.R. Rogers, *A Way of Being*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 1980; Italian translation: *Un modo di essere*, Martinelli, Firenze 1983, pp. 118-138; B. Giordani, *Psicoterapia umanistica da Rogers a Carkhuff*, Cittadella, Assisi 1988, pp. 70-74; G. Bartholini, *La terapia centrata sul rapporto*, EDB, Bologna 1996, pp. 93-99; D. Bruzzone, *Carl*

«means to live temporarily in the life of another, moving around in it delicately without judging [...]. It means frequently controlling the accuracy of one's own perceptions in each other's company, and to be guided by the reactions you receive. You are the trustworthy companion in the interior world of the other. By signalling the possible meanings in the flow of experiences of the other person, you help them to focus on this valuable form of contact, to experience the meanings more completely, and to proceed in the experience»²⁷.

The attitude of empathic understanding denotes a certain heterocentric sensitivity determined by the system of values, feelings and needs of the operator. This means that the capacity for empathy refers to a «way of being» of the operator, in part the result of his personality and in part a result of a training process that also implies the change of the self. The empathic process involves the ability to «enter into the other's personal world and be at ease, as if in one's own home. This involves being sensitive, moment by moment, to the change of experienced meanings that flow in the other person»²⁸.

Empathic understanding is a fundamental aspect of the operator-user relationship and, according to Rogers, it is on this that we base our relationship of help. This is not a technique but an attitude; it is not practiced on the already explicit and verbal aspects of interpersonal communication, but on what is not said, on what is «behind» the appearances, on the deep feelings. Only when you perceive what is behind the user's words, the «real» meaning of their actions, can you establish a deep relationship with them.

The meanings are not always obvious and manifested or explicit in the first approach. Therefore, it is necessary for the user to understand what is hidden behind their words and actions. Empathy, in the Rogerian practice, is the relational tool through which the operator can facilitate the process of «re-appropriation»: «it is this form of deeply sensitive empathy that is important in order to make a person able to get closer to themselves, to learn, to change and to evolve»²⁹.

Rogers. *La relazione efficace nella psicoterapia e nel lavoro educativo*, Carocci Faber, Roma 2007, pp. 110-116.

²⁷ C.R. Rogers, *Un modo di essere*, cit., pp. 122-123.

²⁸ C.R. Rogers, *Empathic: an unappreciated way of being*, in «The Counseling Psychologist», 5 (1975), pp. 2-10.

²⁹ C.R. Rogers, *La terapia centrata-sul-cliente*, cit., p. 93.

d) *In the developmental psychology field*

The 60's saw a growth in interest in empathy, including in the field of developmental psychology. There was a shift in focus onto the cognitive aspects of the phenomenon and an attempt to identify objective measurement tools to assess the development of the capacity of empathic understanding. Priority was given to the aspects related to the capacity to adopt the perspective and role of another person, to recognise their emotions and assume supportive and helpful behaviours. Many authors have placed an emphasis on the cognitive aspects of the empathic relationship, emphasising above all the capacity to identify with another, to put oneself in their point of view, and to understand the way in which they evaluate a situation. Attempts were made to identify the cognitive processes that mediate the capacity to withdraw from the self to understand the other. H. Borke linked empathy to the ability to recognise emotions and to assume the role of another (role taking)³⁰; while more recently M. Bruchkowsky has studied the development of empathy in children, seen as the skill of understanding the emotional state of the other person, focusing on so-called «empathic cognition»³¹.

It should be noted that the misuse of the term «cognitive empathy», as opposed to that of «emotional empathy», is misleading and causes the reader to confuse some of the processes involved in the empathic relationship with empathy *qua talis*. Empathy is a radical experience that involves the person as a whole and, while not a unitary or one-dimensional phenomenon, cannot be understood reductively as a cognitive process; «empathy is always an emotional experience, because in any case it requires a sense of shared feelings, albeit with a different degree of sophistication in the cognitive mediation»³².

Following the direction of the latest research in the field of developmental psychology, S. Bonino, A. Lo Coco and F. Toni propose an evolutionary and multi-dimensional model of empathy, one that synthesises

³⁰ H. Borke, *Interpersonal perception of young children: egocentrism or empathy?*, in «Developmental Psychology», 5 (1971), pp. 263-296; H. Borke, *The development of empathy in Chinese and American children between three and six years of age: a cross-cultural study*, in «Developmental Psychology», 9 (1973), pp. 102-108.

³¹ M. Bruchkowsky, *The development of empathic cognition in middle and early childhood*, in R. Case (ed.), *The mind's staircase*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale 1992, pp. 153-170.

³² S. Bonino - A. Lo Coco - F. Tani, *Empatia. I processi di condivisione delle emozioni*, Giunti, Firenze 1998, p. 14.

the elements derived from empirical research. The synthesis proposes a subdivision of the empathic processes into different forms of sharing that correspond to the different cognitive and affective processes involved.

1. *Emotional contagion*. With the term «emotional contagion», the authors suggest that all the «forms of immediate emotional and involuntary sharing are characterised by the absence of cognitive mediation. These are automatic reactions to the expressive stimuli experienced by another person: the emotion is thus not shared vicariously, but directly»³³.
2. *Egocentric empathy or parallel sharing empathy*. This second type of empathic sharing urges the subject to recognise the emotions and their understanding through the association between the event and one's own personal experience. The internal emotional state of the other remains unknown, and the Ego tends to attribute to it its own emotions based on similar experiences. It is a form of empathy that M.L. Hoffman has defined as «egocentric»³⁴, based more on the event rather than the participation in the feelings of the other. There is a «parallel sharing»³⁵ of the experience of the other, centred on the association between the latter and the experience of the observing subject. It is an empathic sharing in which the limited cognitive mediation and the lack of differentiation between the self and the other lead to a «parallel» and egocentric answer, focused mainly on the observer, and not on the observed.
3. *Participatory empathy*. In order to reach the sharing and representation of emotions of the lived experience, and the viewpoint of the other person, we need to progressively overcome egocentricity in order to take on the perspective and the role of the other (role taking). Empathy through participatory sharing leads to the vicarious experience of the other person's emotions, while clarifying that one's own emotions are separate. It is necessary to be able to represent the person's

³³ *Ibi.*, p. 19.

³⁴ M.L. Hoffman, *Interaction of affect and cognition in empathy*, in C. Izard - J. Kagan - R. Zajonc (eds.), *Emotions, cognition and behavior*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1984, pp. 103-131.

³⁵ J. Strayer, *What children know and feel in response to witnessing*, in C. Saarni - P.L. Harris (eds.), *Children's understanding of emotion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989, pp. 259-289.

internal states, with the understanding that even in similar situations, other individuals have different ways of feeling and experiencing emotions since they all have characteristics, personality and values that are different from ours. Taking on the perspective of others is a process based on the decentralisation of emotional and cognitive skills. Recent studies have highlighted how the pro-social behaviour of adults is only possible if there is an optimal level of emotional activation. N. Eisenberg and R.A. Fabes found that people unable to control their negative emotions tend to focus attention on their own needs, rather than those of others³⁶. They employ their own resources in order to meet their emotional experiences, rather than using them to help others. Only people with a controlled emotional activation are able to decentralise and pay attention to the needs and requirements of others. «Thanks to the separate representation of the experience of the other and the ability to place oneself in another's shoes, a form of differentiated and evolved empathy is therefore possible. Hoffman has defined this as empathy for the feelings of another; Strayer mentions participatory response empathy, in other words empathy that is centred on the internal experience of the other person»³⁷.

4. *General conditions empathy.* The most advanced form of empathy requires a very sophisticated cognitive mediation, in which the use of words and the differentiated representation of the other person or their history play an important role. The awareness of the self and of others as people who have a continuity in time, with a history and an identity of their own; the acquisition of formal thought, with the ability to imagine abstract and hypothetical conditions, which enables the empathic participation in the condition of another, beyond the direct perception in the «here and now»; it becomes possible to represent the other's experience in hypothetical situations and the sharing with conditions of whole social groups (the poor, the sick, the disabled, etc.).

³⁶ N. Eisenberg - R.A. Fabes, *Prosocial behavior and empathy: a multimethod developmental perspective*, in M.S. Clark (ed.), *Prosocial behavior*, Sage, Newbury Park 1991, pp. 34-61.

³⁷ S. Bonino - A. Lo Coco - F. Tani, *Empatia*, cit., p. 41.

Empathy in the educational perspective

In the educational relationship, empathic relationships must be established in order to build a meaningful interpersonal relationship, which allows for the activation of a positive process of change in the subject in need of help³⁸. Empathy creates a complex, multi-dimensional relationship in which the cognitive and affective aspects are intertwined in the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. «Empathy is to experience the internal world of the learner within one's own soul; it is to spiritually immerse oneself in order to experience all the emotional reality. It is in this way that the learners can be supported in the conscious acceptance of their fears, anxieties, worries, hopes, expectations, and they can be encouraged to act in a convenient manner»³⁹. The emotional experience of sharing implies the willingness to establish close relationships with the learner and take charge of his emotions. A necessary, but insufficient, condition is the subjects' ability to understand that the other person is different from themselves, has their own stability and continuity over time; it is for this reason that emotions and feelings are experienced differently even in similar situations. Paradoxically, the empathetic understanding is based on two different and apparently contradictory skills: on the one hand differentiation, on the other the capacity to meet the other; empathy is the result of a complex balance between the ability to recognise the feelings of another as different to one's own, and the ability to welcome them and make them one's own.

The teacher must be able to correctly capture and decode the verbal and non-verbal messages transmitted by the pupil. This applies to both the contents of communication and the emotional experience that accompanies them. The goal is to make the perspective of another one's own, in order to draw inferences about the thoughts, emotions and the reasons that qualify their experience. Education requires a progressive «destrangement» that is beneficial with respect to entering and progressing along the inter-human encounter. «The educational space is (...) electively un-distancing, as it deprives individuals of their remoteness, predisposing

³⁸ For a wide and comprehensive reflection on the use of the concept of empathy in pedagogy, cfr. A. Bellingreri, *Per una pedagogia dell'empatia*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2005.

³⁹ L. Pati, *Pedagogia della comunicazione educativa*, La Scuola, Brescia 1984, p. 219.

them to the encounter»⁴⁰. It has to be built gradually, with the cooperation of everyone involved. A progressive approach is to be cultivated, that is an «approximation» to the other, where the amazement and wonder at another's personal reality takes the place of prejudice and mistrust⁴¹.

The space of the educational relationship is configured as the space of the «us-ness» defined by the communicative reciprocity, in which the experience of listening and of being listened to, of understanding and being understood and of welcoming and being welcomed can be carried out⁴². V. Iori called this space «home of education», that is an area in which one can experience sharing, communication, full self-expression and the taking care of others⁴³.

«Empathy is the possible condition through which the educational relationship, understood as a practice of co-significance, can present itself and take place. [...] The teacher and learner learn to live in a common world and discover their ability to relate in an authentic dialogic relationship. It is the discovery of belonging to an identical universe of meaning but one that is reflected differently in each individual. The greatest proximity brings here, together, the greatest differentiation. The empathic co-significance does however have an educational value that is even more specific and meaningful because it allows the learners to give a name to their desires of being, which are an integral part of them»⁴⁴.

In the educational relationship, the emotional experience of empathic sharing is based on the teacher's ability to correctly identify the affective states of the other and to acquire the point of view of others. However, at the same time, it also requires a deliberate and conscious act that arises from the identified strategy needed to achieve the educational goals. «With this empathic understanding, the educator, without intervening directly and immediately, contributes to the clarification of the emotional existence

⁴⁰ V. Iori, *Lo spazio vissuto. Luoghi educativi e soggettività*, La Nuova Italia, Scandicci (FI) 1996, p. 84. With the word «de-estrangement» the author indicates the process through which one lets the other come closer by removing him or her from the distance between them.

⁴¹ F. Cassano, *Approssimazione. Esercizi di esperienza dell'altro*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1989, pp. 7-9.

⁴² M. Corsi, *Il coraggio di educare. Il valore della testimonianza*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2003, pp. 242-243.

⁴³ V. Iori, *Lo spazio vissuto*, cit., pp. 78-81.

⁴⁴ A. Bellingeri, *L'empatia come categoria pedagogica ed educativa*, in «Pedagogia e Vita», 5 (2001), pp. 118-119.

of the learners, by supporting them in the identification of their goals»⁴⁵. The recognition of the experience of others, and differentiated representation of the others' emotional states, are indispensable, but not sufficient for empathic understanding in the context of the educational relationship. The recognition and sharing of the emotions of others are not sufficient to produce empathy. «In fact, the attention and care for the other, imply a form of ethical love that one could not give without the deliberate pursuit, conscious and free acquisition and possession of the virtue of selflessness. Now, it is in the quality of virtue that empathy can become the educating factor in an interpersonal relationship: it can transform the empathic understanding in help so that the other can reach their “authentic self”, and can become themselves according to their own ability»⁴⁶. This relationship stems from the precise intention of the teacher that guides their availability to openness and listening. These are aimed towards the construction of an intersubjective space in which the other, feeling accepted and recognised, will be able to achieve specific educational goals. «In this reference to intentionality we find the pedagogical value of reflection on empathy as a means, in fact the core, of communication-relationship. In fact, it ranks right at the distinction between the two terms of the process: it favours the transition from the categories of communication of messages, to those of the inter-subjective relationship and settles the externality of the communicative act to the interiority of the personal experience»⁴⁷.

In this perspective, the interpersonal dialogue is not only instrumental in manifesting contents, ideas, feelings and emotions, but it also helps reveal the other, the authentic encounter with the You. Relationships are not simply a mere characteristic of being human, but they are the fundamental element of the person. It is the space in which the two parts of the educational relationship (teacher and learner) are involved in an authentic dialogue that promotes the recognition and respect of the other, while promoting a path of growth towards full “humanisation”. This attitude makes it possible to help the other, not only for what they already are, but also for what they can and should become.

⁴⁵ L. Pati, *Pedagogia della comunicazione educativa*, cit., p. 220.

⁴⁶ A. Bellingreri, *L'empatia come categoria pedagogica ed educativa*, cit., p. 111.

⁴⁷ R. Cerri Musso, *Empatia e comunicazione familiare*, in «La Famiglia», 206 (2001), p. 46.