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Exploring the Relationship between Empathy, Friendliness, and Group Inclusion in Primary School Social Dynamics

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Abstract: *Empathy plays a pivotal role in fostering harmonious development among children. The present study aimed to explore the relationships among empathy, friendliness, and group inclusion in third and fourth-grade students, as well as to identify factors influencing students' inclusion or exclusion within peer groups. The study involved 78 students from third and fourth grades in two counties in Romania. Data were collected through self-reported questionnaire measuring empathy and friendliness, and a sociometric test to assess group inclusion. The questionnaires were completed under the supervision of a teacher. Quantitative data analysis was processed to validate the relationship between variables. The factors influencing students' inclusion or exclusion within peer groups were identified through qualitative analysis of the recorded responses from the sociometric test. Results revealed positive correlations between cognitive empathy and friendly demeanour, as well as between the level of comfort intention (one dimension of empathy) and inclusion in group activities. Personality traits (such as friendliness, humour, kindness, cheerfulness, creativity) emerged from the qualitative analysis as primary criteria used by children for group inclusion or exclusion. These findings not only inform classroom practice but also contribute to theoretical understanding, with quantitative results confirming findings from previous research. Teachers are encouraged to use these scientifically validated results to address group management issues. Based on these findings, researchers can focus on future investigation of these variables.*

Keywords: *affective empathy; cognitive empathy; comfort intention; friendly attitude; group inclusion.*

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Introduction/Literature review

Empathy is a concept that has been quite extensively addressed in psychological and educational research, being defined in a variety of ways. It is generally accepted that empathy is a multifaceted psychological concept that helps individuals to recognize, understand and react to emotions expressed by other individuals (Cuff et al., 2016).

The most common formula of empathy, and the one addressed in the analyses of the present study, is the one that sums up three pillars: emotional contagion - found even in animals, it allows the communication of the emotional state experienced and the offering of an intuitive response in relation to other individuals: this facet represents the fundamental, primitive component of empathy (Asada, 2015); affective empathy - the positive or negative affective reaction triggered by the emotion observed in another individual (de Wied et al, 2010); cognitive empathy - the ability to identify, recognise, name or classify the emotions of others in a conscious and accurate way (Decety & Jackson, 2004) which is considered the most refined facet of empathy; prosocial motivation (comfort intention) - an individual's desire to be actively involved in supporting a person experiencing various emotional states. The latter component is the one that calls for cognitive and affective empathy skills simultaneously: the person acts only after receiving emotions and filtering them through reason (van den Bedem et al., 2019).

Friendship is generally seen as a positive relationship between two or more people, characterised by helpfulness, intimacy, and trust. APA Dictionary defines friendship as ”a voluntary relationship between two or more people that is relatively long-lasting and in which those involved tend to be concerned with meeting the others’ needs and interests as well as satisfying their own desires. Friendships frequently develop through shared experiences in which the people involved learn that their association with one another is mutually gratifying” (VandenBos, 2018). The quality of friendship lies precisely in the positive aspects such as safety, confidentiality or support that should govern this type of relationship (Öztürk, 2019). The same author also argues that the quality of friendship improves with age. In recent years, an expanding body of research has aimed to investigate children's friendships (Griffiths, 1995; Hey, 1997), along with their social networks and support systems (Bryant, 1994; Erwin, 1998; Nestmann &

Hurrelmann, 1994) and developmental variables (Kutnick & Kington, 2005). In relation to gender, it has been shown that girls show a more obvious improvement than boys in this respect (Berndt, 2004).

If we refer to an individual's membership in a collective, inclusion or, conversely, exclusion is characterised by a set of perceptions, beliefs, values that other members of the group adopt. In the case of children, it has been shown that the group and the relationships established within it influence the child's development (Clipa & Schipor, 2015). On the one hand, if harmonious, friendly and open relationships are established within the group, the child will be more emotionally stable and open to learning. On the other hand, if within the group, the child feels anxiety, withdrawal, blame, he will be more prone to internalization (Papalia et al., 2010). Children start to affiliate to groups at the age of 3-4 years, either spontaneously (e.g. in playgrounds) or in an organized way (e.g. in kindergarten), showing a very high tendency to affiliate compared to other species (Fuchs, 2019). Once a child is introduced to a group, stereotyping mechanisms - the association of an individual with certain principles, values, beliefs of the group (Mulvey et al., 2010) - emerge and influence how the child acts, including how they respond empathically, or not, to various situations they encounter.

When it comes to the relationships between empathy, friendliness and group inclusion, the literature has identified a positive two-way relationship between empathy and friendliness (de Wied et al., 2007; van den Bedem et al., 2019). It has also been shown that bonding friendships within the group leads to an increase in the overall satisfaction of group members, while decreasing the rate of conflict and contributing to better group cohesion (Schäfer et al., 2021).

The present study aims to study the relationships between the three mentioned variables and verify the results from the literature on a sample of Romanian students. The starting point of the study is the attempt to find various valences that could improve children's psychosocial development and improve educational practices in the classroom. As a result, we believe that the three conceptual pillars of the study offer ample possibilities for further exploration in terms of improving intergroup relations in the classroom.

Present study

Research aim

This study aims to examine the association between empathy, friendly attitude, and group inclusion among third and fourth-grade students. Additionally, gender differences in the recorded level of affective empathy are targeted.

Objectives and Hypotheses

The main objective of the study is to identify the correlational relationships empathy with both friendly attitude and group inclusion among primary schoolchildren. Another objective of the study is to uncover a set of factors that may influence the inclusion or exclusion of children within the peer group, with the aim of optimizing the quality of relationships within the student group.

Analysing the information available in the literature, we proposed the following hypotheses:

H1: The level of empathy correlates significantly with the level of friendly attitude in young school children.

H2: There is a significant correlation between cognitive empathy and friendly attitude among 3rd and 4th graders.

H3: The level of comfort intention significantly correlates with the level of inclusion in group work activities among young schoolchildren.

H4: There are gender differences in affective empathy among young schoolchildren.

Method

Participants

For this research attempt, data were collected from a sample of 78 children aged between 9 and 11 years, enrolled in either third or fourth grade, selected from three schools in Romania. Regarding class distribution, the sample was divided into two equal parts, with 50% (N=39) of students in the third grade and 50% (N=39) in the fourth grade. In terms of gender, the sample consisted of 41% male subjects (N=32) and 59% female subjects (N=46).

Procedure

The data were acquired in written form subsequent to obtaining parental consent. Questionnaires comprising both validated scales and the sociometric test were distributed and completed in the conventional format by 4 primary school teachers. After receiving the necessary information and clarifications, each pupil completed the self-reported questionnaire and the sociometric test, under the supervision of a teacher.

Measure

The self-reported questionnaire was constructed by combining two scales and a sociometric test.

Friendliness scale (Goldberg et al., 2006) is a 10-item instrument (example item: "I am quick to make friends with other people"). Responses are organized in 5 steps from 1-False to 5-True. Five items are scored positive and 5 are reversed items. The Alpha Cronbach coefficient recorded by this scale was α=0.667.

Empathy Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents (EmQue-CA) (Overgaauw et al., 2017) is composed of 14 Likert three point items from 1-False to 3-True. This scale consists of three subscales measuring: affective empathy (example item: "If my mother is happy, I am happy too."), cognitive empathy (example item: "If a friend is sad, I understand why they feel that way.") and comfort intention (example item: "If a friend is sad, I like to comfort him."). The Alpha Cronbach coefficient value was α=0, 628.

To assess inclusion, we employed a sociometric approach [as outlined by Nash (1973), and utilized by Pollard (1985). During class sessions, children were prompted to designate a peer whom they preferred as a classmate for various school activities. The sociometric test used consists of 6 items that measure inclusion within the class of students through three factors: inclusion in school activities, inclusion in extracurricular activities and inclusion in group work activities. For each factor there is a question asking the student to name peers with whom they would like to do a certain type of activity and a question asking to name peers with whom they would not like to do that type of activity. For each nomination, students were also asked to give reasons for their choice. An index was calculated for each factor and used in the quantitative analyses.

Results

Descriptive statistics

According to the descriptive statistics (Table 1), the variables friendly attitude with m=39.8 (SD=6.0, min=18, max=50); comfort intention with m=13.5 (SD=1.60, min=8, max=15) and empathy with a mean of 32.0 (SD=3.81, min=23, max=39) were noted as having a high mean. In addition to comfort intention, the other two factors making up the empathy scale had the following means: affective empathy had a mean of 12.3 (SD=2.13, min=8, max=16) and cognitive empathy had a mean of 6.24 (SD=1.84, min=3, max=9). The inclusion variable had a mean index of 0.223 (SD=0.859). For the factor inclusion in group work activities the following values were recorded: m=0.0774 (SD=0.280).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

	Empathy	Affective empathy	Cognitive empathy	Comfort intention	Friendly attitude	Group inclusion
N	78	78	78	78	78	75
Mean	32.0	12.3	6.24	13.5	39.8	0.0774
Median	32.0	13.0	6.00	14.0	40.0	0.125
Standard deviation	3.81	2.13	1.84	1.60	6.00	0.280
Minimum	23	8	3	8	18	-0.929
Maximum	39	16	9	15	50	0.615

Quantitative analysis

H1: *The level of empathy correlates significantly with the level of friendly attitude in young school children.*

The verification of this hypothesis was accomplished through a Pearson correlation analysis. The values of the analysis indicate the presence of a weak, non-significant positive correlation (r=0.203, p=0.075,). Hypothesis 1 is rejected. Correlation indices can be consulted in Table 2.

H2: *There is a significant correlation between cognitive empathy and friendly attitude among 3rd and 4th graders.*

The hypothesis was tested by conducting a Pearson correlation analysis. The results of the analysis revealed a statistically significant, but weak, positive correlation (r=0.225, p=0.047). This suggests that there is a positive relationship between cognitive empathy and friendly attitude among young students, with increases in one corresponding to increases

in the other. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is supported. Further details regarding the correlation indices can be found in Table 2.

H3: *The level of comfort intention significantly correlates with the level of inclusion in group work activities among young schoolchildren*.

The hypothesis was examined through a Pearson correlation analysis. Analysis values indicate the presence of a statistically significant, but weak, positive correlation (r=0.267, p=0.021). This suggests that as the level of comfort intention increases, so does the level of inclusion in group work activities among young students. Hypothesis 3 is supported. Further details regarding the correlation indices can be found in Table 2.

Table 2: Results of correlation analyses of variables empathy, affective empathy, cognitive empathy, friendly attitude, comfort intention, group inclusion

	Empathy	Cognitive empathy	Friendly attitude	Comfort intention	Group inclusion
Empathy	—				
Cognitive empathy	0.716 ***	—			
Friendly attitude	0.203	0.225 *	—		
Comfort intention	0.558 ***	0.161	0.128	—	
Group inclusion	0.146	0.043	-0.037	0.267 *	—

H4: *There are gender differences in affective empathy among young schoolchildren*.

The hypothesis was tested by conducting a T test for independent groups. The results revealed that there are differences in affective empathy between the two categories of subjects (t(df)=76.0; p=0.008). Girls had a higher level of affective empathy with a mean of 12.8 (SD=2.17) than boys with a mean of 11.5 (SD=1.87). Hypothesis 4 is confirmed. The indices can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Gender differences in affective empathy

		Statistic	**df**	**p**
Affective empathy	Student's t	2.72	76.0	0.008

Quantitative analyses were performed using the statistical analysis program Jamovi.

Qualitative analysis

We collected a series of qualitative data through sociometric test. These data were grouped into several categories resulting into a series of factors influencing the inclusion or exclusion of pupils in school activities, extracurricular activities and group work activities. We noticed that in all three areas of inclusion, the criteria reported by the children were generally similar. Tables 4 and 5 illustrate the criteria specified by our subjects.

Table 4: Inclusion factors

Inclusion factors	Specifications
Positive personality traits	friendliness, humour, kindness, cheerfulness, creativity, love, energy, kindness, curiosity
High scholastic achievement criteria	cleverness, seriousness, seriousness, skill, involvement, high language or artistic ability
Sports performance criteria	proficiency in a particular sport
Physical traits	pleasing physical appearance
Relational qualities	understanding, offering help, empathy, offering advice
Leadership qualities	collaboration, information, organization

Table 5. Exclusion factors

Exclusion factors	Specifications
Aggressiveness	behavioural or verbal aggressivity
Negative personality traits	displaying undesirable behaviours, indiscretion, irony, arrogance
Disruptive traits	verbal expression in inappropriate ways and in inappropriate situations, use of too high a tone, restlessness
Low school performance criteria	low academic achievement, poorly developed artistic skills, lack of involvement
Poor interpersonal skills	shyness, poor or insufficient communication

As the above-mentioned results show, schoolchildren consider friendship, relational abilities and school performance criteria when including a person in their group and exclude those who display problematic behaviours, who may be more mischievous, who show aggression or who disrupt activities in any way. Overall, children showed willingness to offer positive rather than negative traits to other children. Besides that, according to their age characteristics, they mentioned some superficial criteria as physical aspects and material goods owned, the focus was on the personality traits of the peers in the group and their behaviour.

Discussions

This study has shown that there are several correlations between the main variables chosen, that there are gender differences in the analyses carried out and has revealed several inclusion or exclusion criteria that children unconsciously adopt when placed in communication situations with other children in the group.

As other studies have shown (van den Bedem et al. 2019; Boele et al. 2019), there is a relationship between certain facets of empathy and friendly attitudes in children. Van den Bedem et al. (2019) showed that only in the case of cognitive empathy and prosocial motivation there are significant bidirectional relationships with friendliness, but not in the case of general recorded empathy. Thus, the results obtained by testing the first two hypotheses in this study reinforce the authors' claims. The levels of cognitive empathy and friendly attitude were positively associated, and a direct proportional relationship was established between them.

In the case of the relationship between the level of comfort intention and the level of inclusion in group work, evidence was found to support the existence of a positive relationship between the variables. Thus, it was shown that students' desire for others to feel comfortable, willingness to help and comfort them in unpleasant situations leads to their acceptance by peers in group work activities. This validation may refer to the cooperative skills that a student needs to be able to serve the purposes of group work activities, comfort intention or prosocial motivation being part of these skills (Andrieş, 2021).

Another result that supports what has been demonstrated by other researchers is the gender difference in levels of affective empathy.

In line with Sun et al. (2018), girls also showed higher levels of affective empathy compared to boys in the present sample.

Through the qualitative analysis carried out, we were able to obtain several criteria that students use when participating in peer group activities, criteria for their inclusion or exclusion. On the one hand, we can draw an alarm signal on what teachers should be careful of when working on peer group cohesion. On the other hand, we can highlight the positive elements that the students mentioned as criteria for creating a positive relationship in the classroom, information that teachers could develop in their activities. These criteria can also form the basis for preventive programs or activities to combat bullying in the classroom, isolation or to discourage problematic behaviour on the part of students.

Conclusions

The present study focused on verifying correlations between empathy and friendly attitude, between cognitive empathy and friendly attitude, and between comfort intention and inclusion in group work activities in 3rd and 4th grade students. Both the rejection of the first hypothesis and the confirmation of the next two validated the existence of the relations between the study variables, as mentioned in the literature. Also consistent with the literature were the results of the hypothesis that tested for gender difference in affective empathy, with girls recording higher levels. The novelty of this study was the content analysis which revealed several inclusion and exclusion criteria in/out of the group used unconsciously by the children, with most references to personality traits.

The main limitation of the study is the small number of respondents and the type of sampling, which prevents the generalizability of the data to the larger sample. Another limitation could be the physical completion of the data, which in some cases resulted in illegibility or decoding difficulties.

The main advantage of the present study is the content analysis, which revealed a series of very useful information, primarily in direct classroom practice, this type of analysis being less thorough in the field of group relationships.

The information gained from this research can be useful both in terms of improving educational practice in the classroom and as a starting point for future research in this area that wishes to explore more deeply the issues of harmonious child development, empathy or behaviour within groups of children.

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