

**Teacher Empathy for a Positive Socio-Emotional Classroom Climate in the Early
Years' Classroom: Teachers' Perspectives**

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Abstract

This study explored the use of teacher empathy in the kindergarten classroom and its influence on the socio-emotional classroom climate. A qualitative methodology was employed, making use of semi-structured interviews with seven kindergarten educators who were recruited through purposive and convenience sampling. Reflective thematic analysis of data produced four global themes which indicated that teacher empathy positively influenced the socio-emotional class atmosphere. Results show that: (a) the teachers' empathic stance supported them to prioritise and focus on their students' socio-emotional wellbeing and happiness; (b) their empathic attitudes motivated them to create an inclusive classroom climate where no child felt excluded; (c) teachers' focus on their students' wellbeing enabled them to prioritise a warm classroom atmosphere where young children could develop positive relationships with one another; and (d) teacher empathy facilitated child-focused teaching which encouraged meaningful engagement with learning, promoting children's holistic wellbeing and academic success. All of this created a positive and inclusive socio-emotional classroom atmosphere where all children feel secure, motivated to learn, and enabled to succeed to enhance their wellbeing. Teacher empathy was also found to support teacher resilience. The findings lead to suggestions for including empathy training as a regular part of teacher education to increase educators' sensitivity and responsivity to the holistic and wellbeing needs of students.

Keywords: empathy, positive classroom climate, socio-emotional education, teacher education, kindergarten

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Preamble

“They may forget what you said - but they will never forget how you made them feel”

- Carl W. Buehner (1971)

The above quote highlights the lasting impact of emotions in our lives. Indeed, everyone can identify a teacher way back at school, who with their caring and empathic approach, made students feel loved and understood. On the contrary, some may remember other teachers who with their critical approach made them feel scared or anxious. The teacher's approach and the resulting climate it creates can either support a nourishing learning experience for students or create a turbulent one. Although there is no one single component that creates a positive socio-emotional climate, adopting the child's point of view may help educators to understand children's realities, and this may instil a more caring approach in the teacher. Such care and understanding may then lead to students feeling safe and accepted in the classroom.

My interest in teacher empathy and classroom climates reflects both my personal and professional development. Almost at the end of this two-year M.Psy journey, I have come to acknowledge that although the psychological techniques and the assessment tools that I use are important in my work with my clients, it is through genuineness and empathy that I connect with these children and their families. In this sense, the 'how' is more important than the 'what'. Often, in my encounters with clients, 'just' being present, listening and understanding created a holding atmosphere which made all the difference. Whenever I felt empathy and conveyed it to my clients, I noticed that they felt truly understood, opening the door for connection through our relationship.

In this sense, teachers play a similar role in the lives of the children they teach. Their ‘being’ in the classroom, how they interact with their students, how they make them feel, leaves a big mark on children. Thus, like the psychologist, the teacher too can try to understand the students’ perspectives, feelings as well as their behaviours, and convey this understanding through their actions.

This reflection instigated me to explore further how educators utilise empathy in their daily interactions with students, and whether this in turn, impacts the classroom climate. Furthermore, this dissertation will involve an early years’ context since such settings are highly important for children’s development and set the stage for future educational experiences.

Rationale

In educative settings, empathy has been described as “the ability to express concern and take the perspective of a student” (Tettegah & Anderson, 2007, p. 50). In the early years’ classroom especially, empathy is crucial as teachers not only educate children but also help to satisfy their socio-emotional needs (Brendgen et al., 2006). To do this, educators need to develop an empathic attunement with their students, as this helps them to understand their feelings and behaviour (Cooper, 2004). Through this understanding, teachers are supported in facilitating positive relationships with children (Makoelle, 2019) and with parents (Farstad-Peck, 2012). When this process occurs, teachers may leave a profound impact on the classroom atmosphere.

At this age, the environments that children inhabit play an important role in their overall development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) as the early years of education are crucial in laying the groundwork for academic and social success later in life. Hence, since children spend a large amount of their time at school, the type of classroom climate can deeply affect their

functioning and growth (Barr, 2016). In fact, it has been recognised that a positive class climate in the early years' classroom is important because it is associated with better academic outcomes, less internalised behaviour, an improved socio-emotional competence, and more motivation and engagement to learn (Cooper, 2004).

Although educators can have an important influence on the classroom atmosphere, there has been limited research on the influence of teacher empathy in the creation of a positive socio-emotional classroom climate, which has been proven to be conducive for learning (e.g., Cooper, 2004), especially in early years' classrooms. In fact, empathy has been identified as an important teacher characteristic, but there have been very few studies on teacher empathy and how this influences relationships with children (Swan & Riley, 2012). In the local context, the only research on teacher empathy was done with primary school teachers (Agius, 2017). Thus, the present study seeks to explore further how empathy supports the creation of a positive socio-emotional atmosphere in the early years' classroom.

Relevance of the Study

Learning is a holistic endeavour incorporating the affective as well as the cognitive elements (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). Thus, students' unmet emotional needs may impede the learning process. Nonetheless, these emotional needs are met in positive teacher-student as well as student-student relationships (Poulou, 2016), which are in turn greatly influenced by teacher empathy in early years' classrooms (Farstad-Peck et al., 2015). This research is therefore designed to contribute to the available body of literature regarding empathy in the classroom, with the primary aim of this dissertation being to collect and share data on teachers' understanding and practices related to empathy in addressing young children's needs and emotional development. Such knowledge may provide educators with more awareness on these important classroom processes. Lastly, this study might also have

positive influences on teachers' professional development if teacher empathy is found to be positively related to the socio-emotional classroom climate.

Research Agenda

This study aims to explore further how teacher empathy affects the socio-emotional climate of a classroom. Furthermore, data will be collected on teacher's beliefs and perceptions on empathy and how educators use this phenomenon to deal with the needs and emotions of the children placed under their care. The study therefore aims to investigate the following research questions: "How is classroom climate influenced by teachers' use or lack of empathy?". This also entails two more specific questions, namely: "How do teachers use empathy in the classroom?" and "What do teachers think about the role of empathy in their classroom?".

Theoretical Framework

A social constructionist framework is applied in this study to access the participants' beliefs around empathy, and how these influence their actions and behaviours in the classroom. Social constructionism considers knowledge to be constructed between people through a social process (Harper, 2011). Thus, there is no one true meaning or truth, but rather, individuals develop meanings through social interaction with other people (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Social constructionists believe that this process is achieved through social discourse (Andrews, 2012). In line with this framework, this research study aims to explore participants' unique discourse to grasp the different meanings that teachers attribute to the use of empathy in their teaching.

Layout of the Study

Following this introduction, a review of the previous literature on the role of empathy in teaching and the significance of classroom atmosphere specifically in the context of early childhood education will be given in the second chapter. Chapter 3 will present a thorough description of the methodology employed for this study, including an outline of the steps followed during data collection and analysis. The fourth chapter will give an account of the findings of the study. These will be discussed and juxtaposed against the relevant data in the fifth chapter. Lastly, Chapter 6 will conclude this study by presenting the limitations as well as implications of this research study together with recommendations for future research and professional development.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter presents a review of the relevant research on the role of teacher empathy and its relationship with the socio-emotional class climate in the early years' classroom. I will first start by introducing the concept of empathy. Following this, the significance of early childhood education as well as the role of empathy within this context will be discussed. Next, conceptualisations of the socio-emotional classroom climate will be presented. Then, the role of teacher empathy will be explored in relation to those elements that contribute to such climates including emotional support, teacher-student relationships, child-focused teaching, and classroom management. Lastly, the final part of this chapter will focus on the importance of developing empathy in teachers through training.

The Three Components of Empathy

Etymologically, the word “empathy” derives from the Greek *empathēia* which translates to ‘in feeling’, denoting the emotional nature of this experience (Cunningham, 2009; Vaquier et al., 2020). Nonetheless, different definitions of empathy have been produced from research across multiple disciplines including psychology (Batson, 2009; Rogers, 1969), social-neuroscience (Singer & Lamm, 2009) and nursing (Yu & Kirk, 2008). There has not been an agreement regarding its definition (van Baaren et al., 2009). In fact, empathy has been described as being an ambiguous concept which is difficult to measure (Swan & Riley, 2012).

Nonetheless, Preston and Hofelich (2012) suggest that there is a consistent amount of literature on the nature of empathy. Empathy generated much attention during the 1950's due to the influence of psychologists such as Carl Rogers (1957) who described it as “to sense the client's world as if it is your own, without losing the ‘as if’ quality” (p. 95). Such descriptions highlight the affective elements of empathy, that of feeling the emotions of someone else

whilst stressing the vicariousness of such a concept, referring to the act of entering the world of another (White, 1997). Kohut (1984) was then responsible for emphasising empathy as a crucial element in interpersonal communication, claiming that it is meaningful in human interaction as it causes an end result, that of a reaction or action. Similarly, Davis (2004), argues that empathy connects the feelings of a person with the behaviour of another.

Cognitive and Affective Empathy

In the research literature, there is a clear dichotomy between cognitive and affective empathy (Meyers et al., 2019; Stietz et al., 2019). The cognitive element refers to one's capacity to become aware of and to understand the psychological state of someone else, by presuming what others are thinking and experiencing (Decety & Jackson, 2006). This type of empathy depends on the cognitive process of perspective taking which incorporates bracketing your own point of view to consider that of another person (Preston & Hofelich, 2012). This, according to Walter (2012), allows us to effectively perceive what someone is feeling without us feeling the same emotion.

Contrastingly, the affective element of empathy does not comprise of a rational understanding of the other's experience, as it is rather a felt response to another's emotional state (Hoffman, 2000; Rankin et al., 2005). Therefore, affective empathy is experienced as being similar to the affective state of the other person. It is the ability to "respond with care" to the other's experience (Swan & Riley, 2012, p. 4).

Research on developmental disorders and personality has shown that these two constructs are distinct from each other. For example, Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright (2004) found that those individuals on the Autism spectrum have average levels of affective empathy but have difficulties with cognitive empathy. Neuroscientific studies have also supported the notion that cognitive and affective empathy are correlated with different brain areas (Mackes, 2018;

Zaki et al., 2009). However, in trying to define it, most researchers have rejected this dichotomy. Instead, there is a wide agreement that empathy is not one single concept but is rather a complex phenomenon encapsulating different but connected cognitive and affective elements (Preston & Hofelich, 2012, Walter, 2012).

Nonetheless, researchers have queried whether emotions are required to feel empathy or whether perspective taking can be seen as being ‘empathy’ on its own. Cognitive only empathy can explain how teachers realise that their students are not comprehending or how therapists understand their clients’ experiences (Cuff et al., 2016). However, although the process of understanding others compares to the process involved in cognitive empathy, as it also uses perspective taking, the lack of an affective element appears to be incongruent with the idea that empathy is mainly an emotional experience. Perhaps the term *empathic understanding* originally coined by Rogers (1967) is more suitable for such scenarios (Cuff et al., 2016).

Adopting a social cognitive neuroscience approach can help to add understanding to the cognitive and affective elements as well as provide an explanation of the neural basis of empathy (Decety, 2013; Rameson & Lieberman, 2009). Neuroscientific research on empathy has largely revolved around the neural processes by which affective states are linked between two persons. The mirror neuron mechanism (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004) has strongly dominated such research. Functional neuroimaging studies have shown that neural mirroring is an unconscious process that allows us to subjectively experience others’ mental states, producing the emotional experience of empathy (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Gallese, 2003). Thus, this mirror mechanism allows us to understand the feelings of the other, as mirror neurons fire not only when we experience a feeling but also when we perceive another person experiencing a feeling; they serve as a neural link, connecting other’s feelings with our own (Gallese, 2003; McDonald & Messinger, 2011).

Compassion as a Third Component

An appropriate alternative to the cognitive-affective dichotomy might be that of Heberlein and Saxe (2005) who argue that although cognitive and affective empathy can be considered as distinct from each other, the interaction between them is an important one, as the emotional component can be thought of as the essence of empathy whilst the cognitive element can be considered as the process with which this essence is created. In line with this idea, empathy can be regarded as a dual-process model, consisting of the ability to understand other's emotions or situations, resonating with them, and using that understanding to help the other (Decety & Howard, 2013; Walter, 2012). This introduces a third component in empathy that Davis (1996) terms *empathic concern*. This concept refers to the ability to feel compassion for the other. Hence, whilst researchers have argued over what constitutes empathy, it seems that three components have been distinguished, namely perspective taking, sharing of an emotion, as well as feeling of compassion (Blair, 2005).

One view that might be seen to capture the above three elements is that put forward by Decety and Meyer (2008). The authors draw on findings generated from both cognitive neuroscience as well as developmental neuroscience, and propose that empathy is made up of three elements:

- a) Affective Sharing: This is the process of sharing feelings with another.
- b) Self and Other Awareness, which is the ability to differentiate between one's experiences and emotions and those of another.
- c) Mental Flexibility and Self-Regulation: Mental flexibility allows the person to be able to adopt the other's perception. Self-Regulation is what allows the very same person not to become engulfed by the experience of the other, by regulating their own emotions. Thus, they will act objectively.

This model does not, however, sufficiently account for the behavioural component of empathy, which “involves verbal and non-verbal communication to indicate an understanding of an emotional resonance with the other person” (Lam et al., 2011, p. 163). Gerdes and Segal (2009) present what appears to be a more comprehensive framework to empathy that incorporates the decision-making process together with affective and cognitive empathy. They explain that empathy involves the felt response to the other’s feelings, the cognitive processing of one’s own feelings as well as those of others, and lastly, a decision-making process to take an empathic action. Affective and cognitive empathy are not sufficient in the classroom, as teachers need to be able to not only adopt their students’ perspective and feel their students’ feelings, but also to be able to use these to convey this care to their students through their actions in the classroom. To support their students’ learning and overall wellbeing, educators need to create a warm and supportive classroom climate by responding to their needs (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education [EADSNE], 2014). Empathy can help teachers to create such a climate as they are able to ‘feel with’ their students, enabling them to adopt their students’ perspective (Farstad Peck et al., 2015).

Cooper (2011) focused on the role that empathy plays in learning relationships. She reported that empathy greatly impacts classroom processes and went on to identify three different types of empathy which are found in classroom interactions. The first one is *fundamental empathy* which is essential for the start of empathic relationships. It involves the appropriate characteristics for empathy such as adopting a positive approach, being interested in the other and showing enthusiasm. It also encapsulates the right means of communication through facial expressions, body language and tone of voice. Fundamental empathy may then develop into *profound empathy* which is characterised by a complex level of understanding seen in closer relationships. Profound empathy allows teachers to create positive emotions and interactions, using fun and humour. This kind of empathy also involves focusing on the

good found in every student, valuing the differences found in their classroom as well as encouraging tolerance. All these generate positive emotional attachments and create positive emotions in the classrooms. The third and last kind of empathy identified by Cooper (2011) is *functional empathy*. This is shown when teachers create a mental model of their students, they try to understand students in groups and establish an empathic relationship with their whole classroom. They do so by creating rules, establish boundaries as well as finding ways of creating cohesion between their students.

For the purpose of this research, it is important to differentiate between empathy, sympathy and compassion which are at times used interchangeably in both everyday language and research (Gladkova, 2010). Brown (2012) describes sympathy as recognising distress in someone but, unlike in empathy, there is degree of distance between the observer and the person who is suffering. It often involves a self-centred approach and may also invoke feeling pity for the other. Therefore, with sympathy, the person's motivation to help may be linked to the relief of one's own distress (Smajdor et al., 2011). This allows them to take a step back from the other's suffering (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). Compassion and empathy are related as they both share the same desire to "to better relate and understand others' experiences" (Jiménez, 2017, p. 1). However, compassion is better thought of as what drives individuals to alleviate the other's pain, it compels people to act (Nowak, 2011).

The Significance of Early Childhood Education

Empathy is an important element for early childhood education (ECE) settings. ECE provides the foundation for children's educational journeys as it aims to support their holistic development including their emotional wellbeing whilst facilitating a love for learning (Bautista et al., 2016). Thus, an empathic approach in education allows teachers to

understand their students' socio-emotional and academic functioning to better support them (Cooper, 2004).

As this study investigates the role of empathy in ECE, it is important to highlight first the importance of this phase of children's education. In Malta, there are Kindergarten classes catering for pre-primary children aged three to five years (EADSNE, 2009) found in every town's primary school. Although pre-primary education is not obligatory, most four-year olds in Malta attend kindergarten (Ministry for Education and Employment [MEDE], 2014).

Extensive research has established that ECE is crucial for children's socio-emotional development and learning (Garcia et al., 2016; Pianta et al., 2009). During their kindergarten years, children start to develop their abilities that equip them to be self-confident and empathic, and able to understand and relate well to others (Sollars, 2010). Through interactions with others, children can achieve successful socio-emotional development which provides them with the self-confidence required to achieve later goals (Troshikhina & Manukyan, 2016).

However, this development requires sensitive adults who know how to read children's cues to understand what they are feeling and respond appropriately. Empathy is critical in ECE since children undergo rapid development during this developmental period and their experiences as well as their relationships at this time highly influence their future wellbeing (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). In fact, research has shown that high quality ECE is related to fewer behaviour difficulties and more interpersonal skills in children, (National institute of child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2006), with the positive effects at times prolonging even to adolescence (Vandell et al., 2010). Empathy can therefore help educators to be in tune with children's ongoing development, and consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development and Bruner's (1978) views about scaffolding, they can then

provide the appropriate support for the development of positive self-esteem, relationship skills and self-confidence (Sollars, 2010).

ECE is also important for creating the basis of children's school success by fostering school enjoyment. Contrary to the more formal schooling found in later primary years, the *National Policy of Early Childhood Education and Care* (Early Childhood Education and Care Working Group, 2006) stresses the importance of a pedagogy based on play. Such a pedagogy is based on "communication and interaction" (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008, p. 638) to guarantee the child's enthusiasm in the learning process (Bartolo et al., 2019). Indeed, play creates opportunity for children to be independent and to succeed, paving the way for children to develop a positive school related self-concept as a failing school experience at this age may have detrimental effects on a child's wellbeing (Callus, 2007).

The Role of Teacher Empathy in ECE

As already indicated above, teacher empathy is defined as an educator's ability to obtain a thorough understanding of their students' personal experiences, as well as their capacity to offer care through their behaviour, as a response to children's emotions (see Meyers et al., 2019). Therefore, it follows that similarly to the way doctors offer their patients superior care when they empathise with them (Mercer et al., 2016), teachers provide their students with a better education when they are empathic (Swan & Riley, 2015). In fact, in *Freedom to Learn*, Rogers (1969) conceptualised teacher empathy as being "the most potent factor in bringing about change and learning" (p. 157). Similarly, in a meta-analysis of teacher-student relationships, teacher empathy was found to be one of the compelling signs of improved academic performance as well as positive behavioural and affective outcomes (Cornelius-White, 2007).

Various research has shown that empathy is one of a teacher's most essential abilities (Cooper, 2011; Tettegah & Anderson, 2007). When teachers adopt their students' perspectives, and resonate with their students' thoughts and feelings, they are then able to promote children's wellbeing. By being empathic, educators can effectively support students in their emotional as well as their academic development. Such a process improves meaningful learning (Agius, 2017; Peart & Campbell, 1999). Furthermore, educators can rely on their empathic understanding (Cuff et al., 2016; Rogers, 1967) to act as the *more knowledgeable other* (Vygotsky, 1978), providing the appropriate scaffolding to address the needs of every student. Moreover, and perhaps even more important than offering cognitive support, early years teachers need to provide scaffolding of an emotional nature by providing direction, support and intervention whilst offering continuous motivation and encouragement to guide their students at their appropriate pace (Cooper, 2002). Such a process can help to create positive classroom interactions as well as a warm class atmosphere which ultimately promotes students' socio-emotional wellbeing and learning (Meyer & Turner, 2007).

The Importance of the Classroom Climate in an Early Years Setting

Social wellbeing is not merely an individual phenomenon but also entails a positive group experience. Since children spend most of their waking hours in classroom contexts, their experience in these settings may influence their social emotional wellbeing and academic functioning. According to the bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), children do not develop in a vacuum, but rather, they are greatly impacted by the experiences in their contexts. At school, this translates to the interplay between them and their peers as well as their teachers in what Bronfenbrenner (1979) refers to as *proximal processes*. These processes determine the quality of the classroom climate (Khalfaoui et al.,

2020) and therefore, when a bioecological perspective is applied to the classroom, it is seen as one of the main micro-contexts in which children develop (Melhuish et al., 2015).

A classroom socio-emotional climate can be defined as the global atmosphere found in a classroom, moulded by the interactions in that setting, including how the teacher relates to their students, the student's responses to their teacher as well as the quality of the students' interactions amongst themselves (Gazelle, 2006). In simpler terms, it also refers to the extent of which a classroom operates smoothly, distinguished by positive interactions or contrarily, the degree to which a classroom is characterised by hostility, behavioural problems, and chaos (Gazelle, 2006; Khalfaoui et al., 2020). Thus, it follows that a positive classroom climate is identified by a shared sense of belongingness, by mutual respect, warmth, and enthusiasm (Reyes et al., 2012). Research has demonstrated that in these kinds of settings, children develop better language (Cameron et al., 2008) and improved arithmetic abilities (Horan & Carr, 2018) and experience less behavioural difficulties (Luckner & Pianta, 2011; Mashburn et al., 2008). Hence, the climate found in a classroom, can serve to either support or hinder children's learning and the social interactions that occur in the class as it influences pre-schoolers learning and social development (Brophy-Herb et al., 2007; Howes et al., 2011).

Teachers' Influence on the Class Emotional Atmosphere

Buyse et al. (2008) define classroom emotional climate as the overall emotional support experienced by students. Such support is reflected in the extent to which teachers display warmth, sensitivity, and responsivity with children (NICHD, 2003). This definition implies that the teacher is an important influence on the type of emotional atmosphere found in a classroom. In fact, research by Mashburn et al. (2008) demonstrates that certain teachers are more able than others to create a positive emotional climate. Although these studies may have

disregarded other elements that contribute to the overall class climate, there is no doubt that through their behaviours and interactions in class, teachers are able to strongly influence the class atmosphere. For instance, the teacher can display high emotional support by offering respect, support, and sensitivity or else provide low emotional support through sarcasm, anger, and frustration (Buyse et al., 2008; Pianta et al., 2010).

To create a positive emotional climate, teachers typically have an awareness of their students' level of functioning in both the academic as well as the social domains and adapt their teaching to respond to their needs: this is termed *teacher sensitivity* (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Teachers who are emotionally supportive tend to invest in more personal involvement with their students, by getting to know their students in a holistic way and perhaps even by asking them specifically about their lives (Pianta et al., 2003).

It is hardly surprising then, that research shows that a supportive emotional classroom climate is associated with higher academic results in mathematics and literacy (Pianta et al., 2008), less negative behavioural outcomes and improved social competence (Howes, 2000; Mashburn et al., 2008). Receiving teacher emotional support has also been found to act as a protective influence for at-risk students (Buyse et al., 2008; Merritt et al., 2012). These findings are in line with multiple theories indicating that when children experience positive interactions with adults, they are better able to develop emotional regulation, social skills, and their own empathic understanding (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Howes et al., 1994; Wentzel, 2002).

Teacher Empathy, Interpersonal Relationships and Class Climate

Empathy is a crucial element in the development of warm relationships as it creates understanding and attunement (Eisenberg, 2000). When teachers adopt empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard in their classrooms, they facilitate healthy

relationships characterised by trust and warmth with their students (Wentzel, 2002).

According to research by Cooper (2010), such relationships tend to have important long-term effects, some of which can also be “transformative” (p. 90), on “pupils, on teachers, on teaching and learning and on classroom climate” (p. 90).

Moreover, applying a bioecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) to the relationships found in the classroom would indicate that interactions within one domain would likely impact relationships in another domain. Thus, empathic teacher-child relationships may also have an impact on the quality of the relationships that children create with their peers. In fact, research by Davis (2001) indicates that the relationship between a child and their teacher in ECE, significantly influences the child’s development of prosocial behaviour and social skills with other students in the classroom. Thus, when teachers guide and support students to become aware of their own emotions, children are more equipped to develop empathy for their classmates (Agius, 2017; Simpson & Sacken, 2014). Indeed, a classroom in which children engage in perspective taking and compassion is more likely to have a socially inclusive climate which Juvonen et al. (2019) define as being “characterised by positive peer relationships and intergroup harmony” (p. 250). Such positive relationships and interactions in class, can significantly contribute to children’s engagement with ECE (Bartolo et al., 2019), school belongingness and overall wellbeing (Juvonen et al., 2019). Contrastingly, experiencing peer rejection and a lack of friendships at school may lead to a disengagement with schooling, lower academic achievements as well as more emotional stress (Juvonen, 2006; Ladd et al., 2008).

Furthermore, teacher empathy not only influences the development of relationships in the classroom context but also shapes interactions with parents. Research in child development and ECE has repeatedly established the positive influence of family involvement in young children’s schooling experiences (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; Ihmeideh & Oliemat,

2014). Moreover, parental involvement has recently been identified as being an important element for an inclusive ECE (Bartolo et al., 2019). Empathy then, can support teachers to understand students' perspectives and values, as well as those of their families. Such an understanding allows them to bracket away any judgements and thus, form positive relationships with parents (Farstad-Peck, 2012). These positive interactions then lead to increased motivation, academic success, and improved socio-emotional adjustment in children (Fan & Chen, 2001; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2005).

Engagement in Meaningful Learning

When applying an ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to ECE, one realises that a positive climate is also affected by the learning and teaching processes occurring in class. An environment where children are engaged in their learning creates the opportunity for learners to achieve a sense of mastery leading to the development of self-competence and motivation (Dunst et al., 2000). The Maltese *National Curriculum Framework* (NCF) (MEDE, 2012) recognises the importance of the child's prior knowledge in creating positive learning experiences, viewing a child-centred approach as being ideal in a Kindergarten setting. The role of teachers, then, is to be responsive to children's interests and, to capitalise on these, in order to offer children the right activities that allow for motivation towards learning (Odom & Wolery, 2003). This is in line with the current learning outcome frameworks (LOFs) for early years' classrooms, put forward by the Maltese Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes (MEDE, 2018). These LOFs promote an emergent curriculum, which is a philosophy of teaching that "begins with the child" (Stacey, 2009, p. 4), involving play-based learning, participation, and relationship building (Cassidy et al., 2003; Jones & Reynolds, 2011). When curricula are based on children's

interests, they are more likely to be flexible and adaptable to address every child's needs, thus creating a unique and meaningful learning process for all (Bartolo et al., 2019).

Empathy would help teachers to facilitate the application of the emergent curriculum and child-centred teaching. Cognitive empathy (Decety & Jackson, 2006) would allow educators to obtain a better understanding of how every student is making sense of their current learning experiences. It enhances the teacher's appreciation for the students' prior knowledge as well as their interests, enabling them to collaboratively create more engaging learning opportunities to foster their students' success and wellbeing (Agius, 2017; Gage & Berliner, 1998; Simpson & Sacken, 2016). Such processes improve the class' motivation and engagement which in turn creates more success, thus creating more motivation, leading to a positive virtuous circle (Cooper, 2004).

Furthermore, through empathy and perspective taking, teachers would be better supported to create an inclusive learning environment through cooperative learning. Cooperative learning is characterised by group instructional activities where young children learn together (Johnson et al., 2013). When children learn together in a group, they are more likely to develop compassion, friendships, acceptance, and support towards their peers (Roseth et al., 2008). All of this acts as a protective factor against social exclusion and peer rejection which then contributes to a positive and socially inclusive class climate (Juvonen et al., 2019).

Teacher Empathy and the Use of Classroom Management

A classroom's socio-emotional climate is also highly influenced by the type of classroom management techniques that the teacher uses (Valente et al., 2020). Through empathy, educators are able to use discipline to create environments characterised by safety, where every child feels cared for. In line with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1970), a safe classroom environment is crucial for students' overall wellbeing to engage in the cognitive processes

required for learning. In this context, safety refers to psychological and emotional protection from harm rather than physical safety (Lacoe, 2016) though physical safety is a necessary foundation. Such safe environments are created using clear rules and boundaries implemented as part of positive teacher-student relationships (Moore & Hansen, 2012). In these classrooms, children can risk, initiate their own learning, and are encouraged to “openly express their individuality” (Holley & Steiner, 2013, p. 50).

Moreover, when children feel safe, accepted and part of a predictable environment, they are less likely to engage in disruptive behaviour (Lacoe, 2016). Indeed, research suggests that empathic teachers tend to experience fewer problematic behaviours in their classrooms compared to those educators who adopt a more punitive approach to behaviour management (Okonofua et al., 2016). On the contrary, Blum and Libbey (2004) indicate that when children do not feel connected with their teachers, they are more likely to misbehave, creating a tense classroom climate.

This delineates the importance of teacher empathy in cultivating nourishing teacher-student relationships. When teachers show empathy even in maintaining discipline, they contribute to the creation of a supportive class climate, where children perceive them as supports (Stojiljkovic et al., 2012). These educators are more likely to adopt *referent authority*, where they demonstrate genuine care for their students, getting to know them and their interests (Savage & Savage, 2010). Through this care and empathy, these teachers gain a more thorough understanding of their students’ struggles and are less likely to disregard what is important to the child (Duy, 2013). In such cases, therefore, children follow class rules and respect their teacher because they perceive their educator to care about them (Marzano, 2013).

Depending on their educational philosophy and what they perceive to be the root of the child’s misbehaviour, teachers can engage in different classroom management styles, thus

influencing the relationships with their students and the class climate (Barr, 2011; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2006). Teachers who believe that children can regulate their own behaviours, engage in the *self-discipline approach* to classroom discipline, which mainly entails giving children choice and responsibility for their actions, with minimal extrinsic motivators (Moore & Hansen, 2012). This approach requires teachers who are empathic, caring and accepting to build positive relationships with their students. Contrastingly, teachers who believe that children need to be taught how to behave, adopt the *desist approach* to classroom management which allows educators to have all the power and responsibility to control the classroom using a mixture of reprimands and punishments (Moore & Hansen, 2012).

Taking all of this into consideration suggests that when teachers think of themselves as being able to understand and address their students' needs, children will probably feel cared for. This process facilitates positive student-teacher relationships, creates the potential for a nourishing socio-emotional classroom climate and improves the educator's class management abilities (Cornelius-White, 2007; Makoelle, 2019).

Developing Teacher Empathy

Given the importance of teacher empathy, it is important to then ask: How can teachers develop empathic attitudes and skills?

Research indicates that empathy can be developed and improved after receiving adequate training (Gerdes & Segal, 2009). Teacher training should focus on developing student teachers' empathic qualities as direct instruction could create a shift in teachers' perceptions of children and their behaviour (Barr, 2011; Hen & Goroshit, 2016), possibly creating more teacher sensitivity (Buyse et al., 2008). In fact, research by McAllister and Irvine (2002) indicates that those teachers who received direct instruction on using empathy, showed more

sensitivity to their students' needs which translated to more relevant and student-centred teaching.

Training on empathy may also be beneficial for teachers' wellbeing as studies suggest that empathy can foster resilience which then supports individuals during periods of stress (Fredrickson, 2001; Reivich & Shatte, 2002). Teacher characteristics such as their overall stress levels, their self-efficacy beliefs as well as their way of relating to their students shape the classroom atmosphere (Virtanen et al., 2017). Research by Jennings and Greenberg (2009) shows that teachers who report stress and burnout, struggle to demonstrate empathy in their classrooms and to tolerate student misbehaviour. These teachers may also experience a lowered sensitivity to students' needs, negatively influencing children's wellbeing (Kokkinos et al., 2005). When this occurs, educators may engage in more negative relationships with students, negatively influencing the class atmosphere (Yoon, 2002).

Resilience can therefore help teachers to keep on engaging in caring relationships with students and their families despite the possible presence of stressful circumstances (Sumsion, 2003). Perhaps more importantly, through empathy, teachers can create a positive classroom atmosphere which may serve to bolster an educator's joy in teaching, therefore creating a positive cycle which might then protect teachers against stress and burnout (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Need for Present Study

As it has been already suggested, young children spend a considerable amount of time at school, and thus, a positive classroom climate can help to facilitate their socio-emotional wellbeing whilst encouraging their engagement with schooling. Although one of the most important influence on children's learning and classroom processes is the teacher, there has been limited research on empathy in teaching in ECE (Swan & Riley, 2015).

Previous research in the local context has highlighted the positive influence of empathy on the inclusive climate of the primary school classroom (Agius, 2017). Indeed, this recent study demonstrated that empathic teachers created an inclusive classroom which facilitated every child's academic success, as they strived to include all their students and to provide the necessary support for each child (Agius, 2017). Although the present study will focus on teacher empathy, it will explore this phenomenon in relation to the socio-emotional domain. As previously highlighted, young students' unmet socio-emotional needs impede their learning process and their overall development. Without an understanding of the role of teacher empathy in early years classrooms, these unmet needs may hinder children's wellbeing.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the relevant literature on the nature and importance of teacher empathy for the creation of positive classroom climates and students' socio-emotional wellbeing and learning. It has shown the need for a better understanding of how teachers exercise empathy to be able to promote its development in educators. This is the aim of the present study that seeks to shed light on how kindergarten teachers use empathy with their students, and how this influences the classroom atmosphere. The next chapter describes the Methodology employed in this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter aims to provide an outline of the research design employed in exploring the influence of teacher empathy on the early years' classroom climate. After reviewing the rationale behind the qualitative research methodology, a description of the participant selection process is given. An account of how the data was collected and analysed will also be outlined. The final part of this chapter will highlight the ethical considerations as well as reliability and validity issues together with the use self-reflexivity practices.

A Qualitative Design

Qualitative approaches are “concerned with the quality or qualities of some phenomenon” (Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2013, p. 15). By adopting a naturalistic perspective, qualitative researchers conduct data in natural settings, and interpret it through patterns and themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Moreover, an interpretative stance is inherent to qualitative research as this type of methodology is intent on examining social phenomena through individuals' unique perspectives, therefore highlighting participants' subjective meanings and beliefs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

This study seeks to explore how kindergarten educators (KGEs) use empathy in their interactions with students, and how this then affects the quality of the classroom climate. A qualitative design was deemed best to investigate such classroom processes as it would allow for an in-depth and individualised understanding of the participants' beliefs on empathy and how this informs their behaviour (Patton, 2015). Such detailed qualitative inquiry would incorporate rich data with comprehensive descriptions of teachers' experiences which can be used to contribute to the existing knowledge of this area of study (Braun & Clarke, 2014; Tolich & Davidson, 2011).

Additionally, empathy and caring in teaching is a complex process involving the interaction of individual and environmental factors (Cooper, 2004). Thus, a qualitative method was deemed best to encapsulate the complexity of such a phenomenon as it strives to understand the uniqueness of the participants' perspectives and gives particular attention to the context in which participants function and its influence on their behaviour (Maxwell, 2013). Furthermore, since qualitative research is concerned with the uniqueness of human experience, it tends to focus on "the process rather than outcomes" (Merriam, 1988, p. xii), yielding a "complex, detailed understanding of the issue" (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 40). Hence, since the aim of this research is to explore how teachers use empathy with their students and the strategies they use to convey this, a qualitative research design allowed for an exploration of the reasons behind teachers' actions and the meaning they attribute to their behaviour (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Taking the above into consideration suggests that a qualitative approach can offer an understanding of the process by which teachers use empathy in their classrooms.

Participants

The aim of this research is to yield an in-depth understanding of teacher empathy in an early years' environment and thus, purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2019; Kuzel, 1999) was initially employed to identify a kindergarten setting which included at least some teachers who are regarded as being empathic in their classrooms. Purposeful sampling allowed me as the researcher to obtain intricate and detailed understanding from those who were most likely to be experienced in this area of interest (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1994). Nonetheless, although the aim of this research was to collect data from all the kindergarten teachers of one school, due to limitations posed by Covid-19 safety regulations, purposive sampling was supported by convenience sampling to recruit additional KGEs. It is

assumed that those teachers who agreed to participate resonated with the study because of the importance they attributed to empathy in their own approach with students. This process allowed me to gain information about how early years educators perceive the use of empathy as well how they implement it in their daily practice.

Recruiting the Participants

All KGEs from one State School were invited to participate in this study. Such a school was already known to me through my previous work in schools. The process started by obtaining permission from MEDE (see Appendix A.1). Afterwards, the Head of the school in question was contacted, given extensive information about the study (see Appendix B), and asked to provide every KGE in the school with a copy of the information and consent sheets (see Appendix C and D). Although six KGEs showed initial interest, four teachers gave their consent to participate. The assistant head of school contacted me with the respective contact details of these participants and contact was made to set up the interviews.

Since only four participants agreed to take part in this study, the Early Childhood Development Association of Malta was asked to approach their members for potential participants. Since this did not yield any consenting participants, contact was also made with a head of school of another state school that was known to me in my previous work. Schools' Covid-19 regulations posed a serious challenge to the recruitment process and therefore, permission was simultaneously sought from the Secretariat for Catholic Education (see Appendix A.2) to be able to contact every kindergarten church school in Malta. Emails were then sent with copies of information and consent sheets to every Head of school who accepted for their school to participate. This was also conducted with every independent school that caters for children who are in kindergarten. At the end of this process, three more KGEs agreed to participate; one teacher per each sector.

The table below (see Table 1) offers a brief description of the participants who were allocated pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Table 1

Participant characteristics listed according to their years of experience

Pseudonym	Year Group	Years of Teaching	Sector
Emma	KG 2	30	State
Daniela	KG 2	14	State
Olivia	KG 1	12	State
Anna	KG 2	10	Independent
Julia	KG 1	8	State
Lisa	KG 1	6	State
Maria	KG 2	1	Church

Research Design

It was initially planned to conduct both semi-structured interviews as well as classroom observations of those KGEs who accepted to participate in the study. Nonetheless, due to the health and safety precautions related to Covid-19, only one Head of school consented to the classroom observations being done. I then proceeded to gain consent from the legal guardians of those students attending this school. The KGEs were asked to distribute an information sheet (see Appendix E) and a Consent Form (see Appendix F) to the caregivers of every child in their classroom. In all classes except one, there were parents who preferred their child not to take part. Thus, since only one classroom observation was possible, data was gathered through the use of semi-structured interviews with KGEs.

Interviews

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), interviews in qualitative research are conducted to “find out from them [participants] those things we cannot directly observe” (p. 88). Hence, interviews allow the researcher to obtain thorough information about the participants’ experiences as well as the meaning they attribute to them (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Semi-structured interviews were employed in this research study as they enabled interviewees to answer questions freely and, in more depth (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Nonetheless, this kind of interview format still offers structure (May, 2011). Indeed, whilst a semi-structured interview schedule permits the researcher flexibility to engage in a co-created dialogue with the participants, it also ensures comparability and consistency (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Frankfort-Nachmias et al., 2015).

An interview guide was developed, after a comprehensive review of literature related to teacher empathy and social emotional climate. The questions were designed to be open-ended to enable participants to speak freely about their relationships with their students, and about any specific strategies they use to create a nurturing classroom climate. Probes and prompts were then used to facilitate further exploration of certain points which were raised during the interview. A pilot interview was held with one of the participants to uncover any possible ambiguities in the interview schedule and to establish the flow of the questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Langdridge & Hagger-Johnson, 2013). The pilot study was included as part of the sample since amendments only involved small changes in the sentence structure for one of the questions.

As noted by Creswell (2019), qualitative research tends to be conducted in natural settings, particularly where the participants experience the issue that is being studied. All the interviews including those which were conducted virtually, were held at the respective schools, with the permission of the school administration. Three participants chose to have

their interview done virtually and Microsoft Teams was used for this purpose. All interviews were held in Maltese and lasted for approximately an hour each. They were also recorded with an audio digital recorder and were later transcribed verbatim. Any quotations used were then translated from Maltese into English.

Prior to the start of the interviews, I explained the purpose of the interview and how their participation would contribute to the overall study. A copy of the information sheet and consent forms were also provided, and participants signed the latter. Those teachers who opted for virtual interviews were provided with an electronic copy of the consent forms and information sheets. During the interviews, I sought to develop an authentic relationship where the participants would feel safe and supported to share their experiences with me. To do this, I demonstrated active listening, validating their account throughout, and through non-verbal behaviours such as adopting an open posture (Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2013). The cameras were switched on during the virtual interviews for all of this to be conveyed (Glueck et al., 2013). Paraphrasing and clarifying questions were used throughout the interviews to ensure an accurate understanding of the participants' experiences as well as to limit any possible interpersonal bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

For this study, a Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was selected to process and analyse data as it creates a way of “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6) out of the teachers' beliefs and actions gathered in the research interviews. It is also important to note that Reflexive Thematic Analysis values the researcher's interpretations and subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Gough & Madill, 2012) promoting a “deep reflection” on the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593). Thus, throughout the analytic process, I sought to not only to create a “rich thematic

description” of the data obtained (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.11), but also to develop “interpretative stories about the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594).

Furthermore, although Reflective Thematic Analysis is flexible in the sense that it is not bound to a theoretical framework, in this study, it will be enacted in a constructionist framing (Braun & Clarke, 2006), as it aims to explore the ways in which teachers’ behaviours towards the children in their classroom are influenced by their beliefs around empathy. A constructionist approach focuses on how the participants perceive and understand their experiences whilst highlighting patterns of behaviour which are socially influenced (Tuckett, 2005).

Data Analysis

The six phases identified by Braun & Clarke (2006) were employed to organise and analyse the data. What follows is a detailed step-by-step description of this process.

The first step involves familiarising and immersing oneself in the data gathered. To achieve this, I carried out the transcription and translation process myself to become familiar with the participants’ experiences. As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), I generated a verbatim transcription, including all verbal and non-verbal utterances. In this way, I preserved the original interview, by staying loyal to the data (Edwards, 1993).

The completed transcripts were then read and re-read, as well as continuously checked (Guest et al., 2011), which allowed me to start developing analytic sensibility (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This repeated reading was done in an active manner, as I continuously looked for “meanings, patterns and so on” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 16). This step also involved taking down my own notes and ‘hunches’ which were then referred to during coding.

In the second stage I engaged in the process of developing initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Saldana (2016), codes serve to capture a portion of the data which can

later be further analysed for meaning. Therefore, after a close analysis of the whole dataset, I identified initial codes for any aspects which were appealing both at semantic and latent levels. Each code containing associated extracts of data was put on a separate electronic file.

The third stage involved an active search for themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe themes as “capturing something important about the data in relation to the research question, and representing some level of patterned responses or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). Thus, in this step, the collated codes were thoroughly examined, and I identified possible relationships between codes. Tentative themes also started to develop. At the end of this process, I had a list of possible themes with their corresponding data extracts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the fourth stage, I continuously reviewed these tentative themes against the entire dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, this process entailed closely examining all data extracts for every theme to determine whether there was enough data to form a “coherent account” (Braun et al., 2016, p. 12), as well as to ascertain homogeneity within themes and a clear difference between themes; or external heterogeneity (Patton, 2015). Homogeneity is the extent to which data belongs to the theme, whilst heterogeneity refers to the degree in which themes differ from one another (Patton). In this phase, any previously discarded data was re-evaluated for possible coding (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). A thematic map was the end result of this stage (see Chapter 4).

The penultimate stage comprised of finalising and delineating themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this phase, each theme was re-explored to identify its “essence” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 22) as well as to determine whether these themes had sub-themes. Furthermore, themes were organised into a coherent and flowing structure to prevent overlap between the themes (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). The last step in this stage involved giving each theme an appropriate and representative name.

In the final phase, I sought to “tell the complicated story of [my] data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 23); therefore, I aimed to produce the findings of this study in a written report. In this process, I strived to achieve a balance between providing or describing the data and engaging in an “analyst narrative”, by going beyond the semantic content to provide my interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 25; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

Reflexivity

Qualitative Research involves a degree of subjectivity due to its very nature, as the “interpretation of the participants’ behaviour and collected data is influenced by the values, beliefs, experience and interest of the researcher” (Jootun et al., 2009, p. 45). Reflexivity can therefore make this process more accountable as it is defined as the “awareness of the influence the researcher has on what is being studied and, simultaneously, of how the research process affects the researcher” (Probst & Berenson, 2013, p. 814).

To engage in this self-reflexive journey, I noted my own subjective experience during data collection and analysis. Thus, my thoughts and reflections were recorded through memos (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Moreover, time was spent in conversations with professionals in the field including school leadership team members, teachers and members of psychosocial teams supporting schools. Such processes helped me to reflect on my own perceptions about education and the element of caring in teaching. These conversations also uncovered my own assumptions related to the research topic, which were then bracketed during data analysis. Indeed, I recognised and acknowledged my strong belief in the importance of caring teacher-student relationships especially in the early years’ settings. Lastly, since I had previously worked within the education department, including with the school in which the interviews took place, self-reflexivity was crucial in allowing me to explore the influence of my past role as an employee and my current experience of being a researcher in the same school was

having on the research process (Tracy, 2010). Therefore, through being reflexive, I was able to recognise the impact of my background has had on my research.

Ethical Considerations

According to Orb et al. (2000), ethics results in the avoidance of harm through the use of the right ethical principles. Although this research did not involve the study of a sensitive topic, it was important to foresee all the ethical considerations to protect the wellbeing of both the teachers and students during the research process. Approval for my research proposal was first sought from the M.Psy Dissertation Committee. Afterwards, further approval was requested from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) at the University of Malta (see Appendix I). Moreover, since I planned to conduct my research in state and church schools, permission was also obtained from the Research and Development Department within MEDE and from the Secretariat for Catholic Education.

Several measures were taken to ensure that participants would not be at risk of any harm. To ascertain voluntary participation and informed consent, participants were contacted through the school leadership team, and it was only after having agreed to take part in the research that I proceeded to contact them to set a date for the interview. Information sheets and consent forms were then sent, for them to read and sign. Right before the start of the interviews, participants were once again reminded of the purpose of this study and of their right to withdraw their participation at any time (Langdridge & Hagger-Johnson, 2013). I also explained my role as a researcher, and I again requested their permission to audio-record the interviews.

To create a safe space where participants would feel comfortable exploring their experiences, the issue of confidentiality and the strategies employed to maintain it were discussed thoroughly before the start of the interviews (Bailey, 1996). Furthermore, all

participants were given pseudonyms while identifiable details such as specific localities were omitted from the excerpts.

Reliability and Validity

Although the notions of validity and reliability are quite complex in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), several strategies were still employed to verify this study in line with those put forward by Creswell and Creswell (2017).

Self-reflexivity allowed me to be mindful of my position in the research and I therefore acknowledged the biases and experiences that I brought to this study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This awareness was critical during the data collection and data analysis process as I strived to report the participants' experiences in an authentic manner. During the interviews, I adopted an open, non-judgemental position, and I limited myself from interrupting the participants (Elliott, 2005). Moreover, as described earlier, paraphrasing was used to ensure that I captured an accurate understanding of the teachers' experiences (Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2013). Interviews were also audio-recorded to preserve their accuracy, capturing the pauses and intonations (Hermanowicz, 2002). Additionally, I strived to consider all elements of data, even those codes which appeared to be irrelevant to the research question, to ensure a genuine account of the participants' voices (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Codes and themes were also shared and discussed with my supervisor who offered alternative interpretations, therefore adding more objectivity to the coding process.

Credibility was enhanced through a "rich, thick description", including verbatim excerpts of what the participants shared during the interviews (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128). This was done to allow the readers to decide on the transferability of the research results, which is the degree to which findings in this study can be transferred to another situation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1994).

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodology employed in this study. It also presented the rationale for the qualitative research design, selection of participants and semi-structured interview schedules and procedures. This was followed by an account of the data analysis procedure as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2019) for Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Finally, reference was made to the use of self-reflexivity processes, ethical considerations as well as issues related to reliability and validity. The next chapter will present the findings of this study.

Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings

This chapter provides the findings of the reflective thematic analysis process conducted on the interviews with the seven teachers who participated in this research. These results seek to address the research question regarding how kindergarten teachers constructed their use of empathy in their interactions with students and how this affected the classroom's socio-emotional climate. First, an overview of the participants' contexts is given. This is followed by an outline of the four global themes including their subthemes. Then, an in-depth account of each theme illustrated with excerpts from the data is presented.

Overview of Participants' Contexts

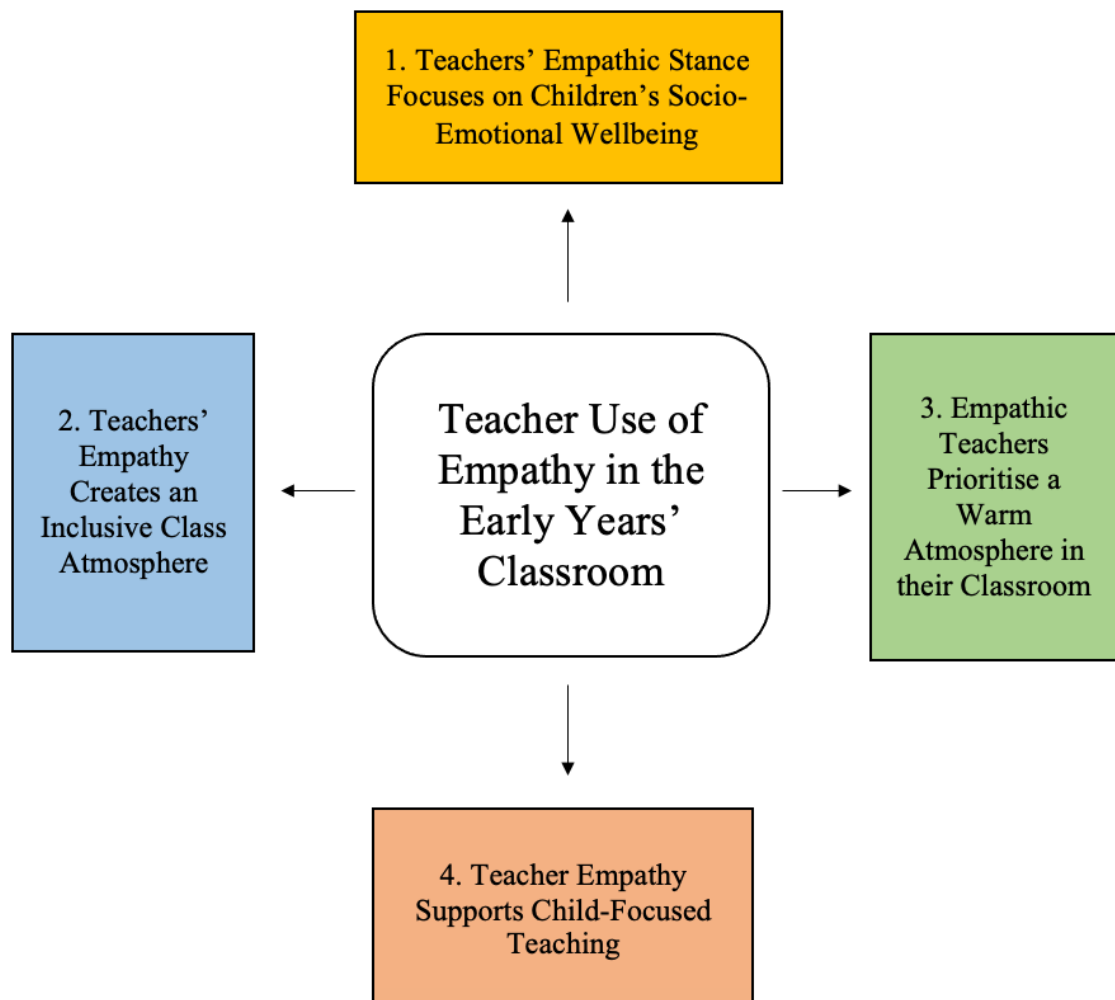
All participants who took part in this research happened to be female, with four participants teaching in kindergarten one and three of them in kinder two. Additionally, participants' teaching experience varied widely as it ranged from one year to thirty years. KGEs also received different training; most of them attended vocational training in childcare, whereas one participant previously studied social work and read for a post-graduate course in ECE. Furthermore, teachers were recruited from different schools pertaining to different sectors, and most of them worked in state schools. Indeed, only one participant worked within an independent setting and another teacher taught in a church school.

It is worth noting that the selection of participants depended on their own perception of their empathic capabilities. Nevertheless, what was striking was how although they had different levels of experience, training, and worked in different schools, they all described homogeneous teaching styles and similar ways of relating to their students.

Overview of Themes

The results were organised under four global themes and their associated organising and basic themes (see Table 2). These identified common perceptions featured among all seven teachers: (1) they held an empathic stance in their classroom which supported them to concentrate on their students' happiness and socio-emotional wellbeing; (2) their empathic attitudes led them to actively create an inclusive classroom atmosphere where no one was left out; (3) their quest for having happy students allowed them to prioritise a warm classroom environment where children feel cared for and could develop positive relationships with each other; and lastly, (4) teacher empathy supported child focused teaching which promoted meaningful engagement with learning, ultimately facilitating children's happiness and academic success.

Nonetheless, different teachers spoke about engaging in different levels of empathy and this was found to influence their behaviours differently. Therefore, although all maintained that their classroom atmospheres were positive, each one's actual description reflected varying levels of empathic understanding of students and classroom harmony. Most of these teachers engaged in high teacher empathy as they demonstrated a thorough understanding of children's socio-emotional and academic functioning through perspective taking (Decety & Jackson, 2006). They also shared their students' feelings and felt compassion for them which then motivated these participants to engage in empathic action to respond to children's needs (Gerdes & Segal, 2009). Contrastingly, although Olivia still described how she used empathy with children, at times, she demonstrated sympathy, characterised by a lack of empathic understanding and affective sharing as well as a more judgemental behaviour towards students and their families.

Figure 1*Global Themes Chart*

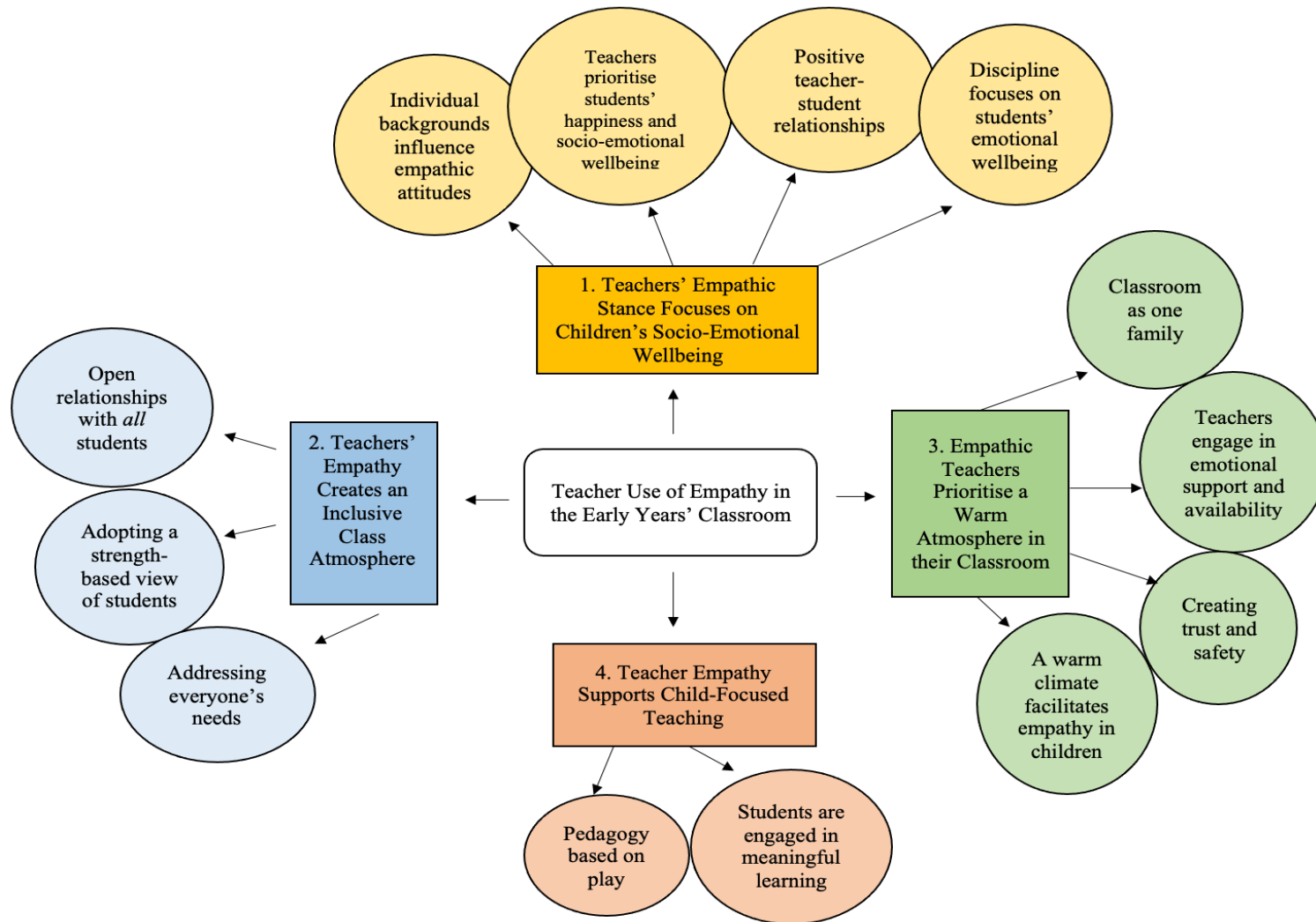


Figure 2

Global Themes and Organising Themes Chart

Table 2*Overview of Themes*

Global Themes	Organising Themes	Basic Themes
1. Teachers' empathic stance focuses on children's socio-emotional wellbeing	Teachers' individual backgrounds influence their empathic attitudes	<i>Self-awareness allows teachers to improve their practice and resilience</i>
		<i>Teacher experience of stress decreases their empathic capacity towards children</i>
	Empathic teachers prioritise the happiness and socio-emotional wellbeing of their students	
	Through empathy, teachers create meaningful and positive relationships with children	<i>Understanding supports empathic action to foster children's wellbeing</i>
		<i>Empathic interactions and attitudes extended towards children's families</i>
	Empathic teachers consider students' emotional wellbeing in their use of discipline	<i>Teachers' attitudes influence their class management style</i> <i>Empathy helps teachers to understand children's behaviours</i> <i>Teachers use discipline to encourage students to reflect on their behaviour</i> <i>Using positive reinforcement to develop their self-esteem</i>

Global Themes	Organising Themes	Basic Themes
2. Teachers' empathy creates an inclusive class atmosphere	An open relationship with all their students	<i>Making an effort to connect with every child</i>
		<i>Applying strategies that foster nourishing relationships with every child</i>
		<i>Listening to students makes them feel validated</i>
		<i>Recognising and addressing the individual needs of students</i>
		<i>An inclusive class climate fosters belongingness</i>
	Empathy supports teachers to adopt a strength-based perspective of students	
	Empathic teachers aim to address everyone's needs in their classroom	<i>Using empathy with the whole classroom</i>
3. Empathic teachers prioritise a warm atmosphere in their classroom	Teachers view the classroom as one family	<i>A positive class climate fosters school enjoyment</i>
	Teachers engage in emotional support and availability	<i>Demonstrating respect for student voice</i>
		<i>Showing warmth and affection</i>

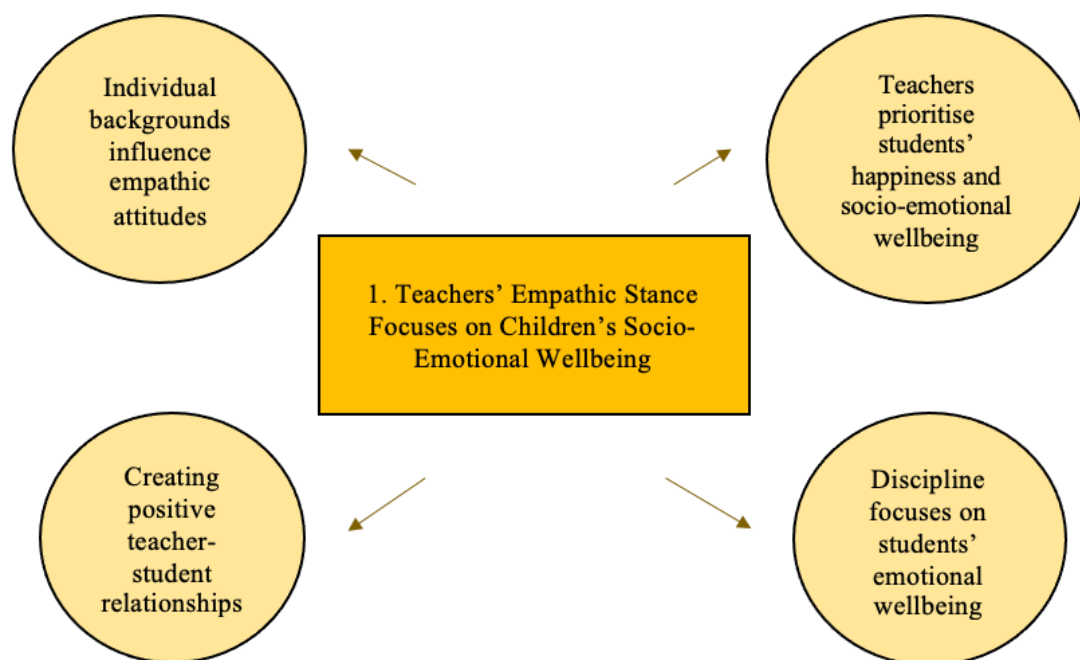
Global Themes	Organising Themes	Basic Themes
	Teachers actively strive to create trust and safety	<i>Using rules to create familiarity</i> <i>Fostering a psychologically secure environment</i>
	A warm climate facilitates the development of empathy in children	<i>Empathic teachers guide their students to take each other's perspective</i> <i>Students feel connected to their teacher and copy her empathic attitudes</i> <i>Positive climates are composed of harmonious relationships between students</i>
4. Teacher empathy supports child-focused teaching	A pedagogy based on play to engage young learners	
	Teachers aim to motivate students to engage in meaningful learning	<i>Adjusting activities to foster students' excitement</i> <i>Teaching based on children's interests for success and wellbeing</i>

Global Theme 1: Teacher's Empathic Stance Focuses on Children's Socio-Emotional Wellbeing

These participants had different personal backgrounds, values, and beliefs. Yet, perhaps influenced by the selection process, they all perceived themselves as being empathic teachers who have their students' socio-emotional wellbeing at heart. Such empathic attitudes shaped their goals for the students, the relationships they created with children and the disciplinary measures they implemented. Thus, this theme captures how teachers' empathic attitudes influenced their inclination to care for children's overall health and happiness.

Figure 3

Global Theme 1: Teachers' Empathic Stance Focuses on Children's Socio-Emotional Wellbeing



Teachers' Individual Backgrounds Influence Their Empathic Attitudes

Although the aim of this study was not to investigate the role of educators' backgrounds on their use of empathy with students, it is worth noting how their conceptualisation of what it means to be empathic was influenced by their personal experiences, which they also perceived as influencing their empathic focus on children's socio-emotional wellbeing.

These teachers' empathic attitudes may be related to the training they had attended. Whilst most teachers received vocational training related to childcare, only one participant received direct instruction on the use of empathy since she trained for a helping profession before becoming an educator. Such formal teaching was noted to increase her understanding of empathy:

In social work you need to understand the client... I see it as me putting myself in the child's shoes. I try to understand the situation from a child of that age, I see the world from those eyes. (Anna)

Teachers' beliefs and values also appeared to affect their empathic behaviour in class:

You cannot be empathic in class only, it's part of you... I believe that if you're arrogant, people will push you away, if you're genuine, people will like you... So, you need to see how to say certain words, you don't know how that person will take it. (Emma)

For most participants, empathy meant taking the other's perspective which supported them to act in the other's best interest. Olivia felt obliged to take care of the welfare of her students:

I believe that I need to do things so that when I go to sleep at night, I can sleep. I cannot change the children's situations outside of school. I can only do so much.

Daniela too felt bound to treat her students in the same good way her son was cared for by his teachers: “You’re not obliged to, but I’m not sending my son to school, and when his teachers send him schoolwork, I appreciate it... so I send parents everything I do.”

Nonetheless, regardless of their training, their personal beliefs or experiences, all teachers described how deeply they cared for their students. As Julia explained: “I go home, and I keep thinking about them because they become like my children. It’s not like you left school and you stop.”

Self-awareness Allows Teachers to Improve Their Teaching Practice and Resilience.

Since participants wished for their students to be happy, they described how they engaged in self-reflection to create better socio-emotional environments for them:

You reflect. You need to be honest with yourself, and you put yourself in their shoes, just as I tell them. “If my teacher did this to me; Would I be scared? Would I go happy to school?” You need to ask *a lot* of questions to yourself. (Emma)

Others highlighted how through this awareness, they adopt the child’s perspective to create practical positive changes in the classroom: “It looked empty, so we painted the walls so that they’re colourful. You need to do this because it would be too plain and for kids this age, that’s not nice.” (Daniela)

Furthermore, as much as some teachers used this insight to improve their teaching for their students’ benefit, others engaged in this self-awareness to simultaneously protect their well-being: “I’m empathic but then, I need to take care of myself so that I can be empathic with my family and the children themselves.” (Anna)

Others described how the presence of their students in their lives is a protective factor against personal stressors: “The fact that every morning they enter through that door with such big smiles, I forget all of my problems!” (Lisa)

Similarly, four participants mentioned how empathy adds to their resilience as although stress negatively influences their caring abilities, empathy allows them to bracket this to be emotionally present in the classroom:

When you’re going through personal issues, and you’re not in the mood...but I still try to keep my personal problems away. I manage most of the time...because I think it comes naturally. (Emma)

It is worthy to note how such an empathic focus on students’ happiness, seems to leave a significant positive influence on children’s lives, whilst building on to these teachers’ resilience. In fact, they delineated the satisfaction they get at seeing the impact of their teaching as years go by: “They keep giving me Christmas gifts. A child who was with me in kinder and he’s now in year four. Children remember and appreciate what you do with them.” (Olivia)

Teacher Experience of Stress Decreases Their Empathic Capacity Towards

Children. All educators stated that they were empathic in their classrooms and described various ways in which they care for their students’ socio-emotional wellbeing. However, some participants noted different limitations on their empathic behaviour in class.

Olivia highlighted that stress interfered with the development of positive teacher-child interactions: “I go in and I’m not in the mood, so I tell them: ‘Listen, today you keep on playing on your own because I’m not in the mood.’ But they’ll be influenced...”

Others explained how busy periods negatively influenced their emotional attunement with students: “It’s Christmas time and you find it difficult because you have deadlines. You hurry up and the priority does not remain the children, but the concerts, and rehearsals.” (Anna)

Empathic Teachers Prioritise the Happiness and Socio-emotional Wellbeing of Children

Based on their understanding of teacher empathy, all participants highlighted that their main goal is for their students to be happy, as they stressed the importance of children’s socio-emotional wellbeing rather than formal academic learning.

It is interesting to note that these teachers appeared to take personal responsibility for their students’ wellbeing and actively sought out ways to create a happy experience of school for children: “I keep on trying ... Once they are my students, I always say to myself, ‘Here they need to be happy, I don’t want to see them sad.’” (Lisa)

Julia clearly emphasised the importance of focusing on children’s holistic wellbeing as this sets the stage for learning for life: “I believe that we’re teachers of life, of life skills, of morality, what’s good and what isn’t, we create the basis of their lives.”

Similarly, Olivia explained the significance of a positive educational experience at this age on children’s later engagement in schooling:

I’m ready to forget the letters, everything. If that means they get used to the school routine. That when they go up on stage, they enjoy it, that when they go out in the yard, they socialise. I feel achieved. Because if at this age you hate school, this will stay with you your whole life.

Moreover, another reason for the importance of focusing on children’s socio-emotional wellbeing was mentioned by Daniela who emphasised that academic learning itself was dependent on children’s wellbeing:

If a child isn't comfortable at school, you could show him all the letters in the world, but if he's not happy, he's not going to learn anything. So, in class I want them to feel good. Then we can learn.

Emma explained how an empathic focus on their socio-emotional wellbeing is also important for students' developing self-concept:

If a child is naughty and everyone gets angry with them, they might think that no one loves them. But if they find someone who treats them with kindness, and talks to them nicely, they can say, "Ok, I must be good."

Through Empathy, Teachers Create Meaningful and Positive Relationships with Children

Participants' focus on students' overall wellbeing, led them to prioritise positive teacher-student relationships. Indeed, they all kept reiterating how much they value these relationships:

I think it's important to have a good relationship with my students. I treasure it. I think I'm their friend that they can speak to and have fun too. The relationship is too important, or else what? My job would be just to go, teach them and leave without having a bond with them? (Maria)

Anna highlighted the satisfaction that the teacher gets from these positive relationships:

You get to know them so much, you become a really big part of their lives, you cannot not be a part of their lives because they invite you to be a part in theirs. Seriously, it's really beautiful.

Understanding Supports Empathic Action to Foster Children's Wellbeing. The teachers explained how their relationships with students rest on a thorough understanding of children by observing their behaviour and trying to understand the reasons behind it:

You conduct a lot of observations, but then you can't just observe. You need to understand what is happening. You have to understand what's going on in their minds, in their lives...

(Julia)

It is interesting to note how participants' wish to create positive relationships with their students led them to seek parental involvement as they acknowledged that parents know their children best, and therefore, they are crucial in helping teachers understand their students: "I try to maintain communication with parents because they tell you what's really affecting the children. Perhaps some things that I haven't noticed yet at school." (Maria).

Thus, they desired to have positive relationships with children's caregivers. As shared by Lisa: "You work best when you have parents by your side."

To do so, teachers used various means to maintain open communication with parents: "I tell them that they can call me, or send me an email, we can meet to discuss." (Olivia)

Anna went on to explain how this communication with parents, not only adds to her own understanding for her students but it facilitates co-operation and establishes a home-school partnership:

Through a lot of love, care, and communication with the parents, you understand what the child is going through. You talk to them, and you try to work towards a common goal together.

Moreover, through empathy, teachers recognised that children benefit from an active link between home and school, and they involved caregivers in the students' daily activities at school:

I keep an open communication system of what their children have done. We have our Facebook page, I put up pictures. When you give parents information about what their children are doing in class, they feel like they're being involved. They'll enjoy it and will trust you more. (Julia)

Interestingly, after participants highlighted the importance of this empathic understanding and the various means they employ to obtain it, they stressed that this understanding then motivates them to take action to address their students' needs. The majority described how they adopt creative ways to let children know that they understand their presenting situation:

If I know that the father is in hospital, I look things up. Then if I see that the child is quiet, and not participating, I start tackling the issue through videos and stories. The child will say "How does she know what I'm going through?" (Daniela)

Some also illustrated how these observations coupled with affective empathy helps them to adapt their own interactions to cater for their students' wellbeing:

Sometimes they become really attached to us, they want that extra attention... Then I give them more time and attention, to create that safety net that they need...or else I'd feel bad if I kept on going about my life as if it's nothing, like it's business as usual when it's not. (Anna)

Empathic Interactions and Attitudes Extended Towards Children's Families. Most of the participants appeared to adopt a non-judgmental attitude towards the parents which helped them to take their perspective: "I try to understand rather than saying, "That parent is so difficult" ...I have a lot of understanding for the parents because it cannot be easy." (Julia)

Lisa demonstrated how adopting the parents' perspective helped her to foster empathic action towards them: "Those children who started now, after the first day, I sent them [their parents] an email with feedback to put their minds at rest."

Others explained how taking the parents' perspectives helped them to keep in mind their emotional state when they needed to break difficult news: "I told them what he did wrong, but I put glitter on it. This is someone's child, no one wants to hear negative things on their children." (Anna)

Olivia also described how difficult it was for her to explain to a child's parent that she was noticing behavioural difficulties. Nonetheless, her encounter with a parent shows how communicating without empathy and perspective taking may lead to a lack of understanding: "I told the mother I'm noticing this, and she told me: 'But he's intelligent!' She blocked me! She's letting me know that she doesn't want to listen to me."

Empathic Teachers Consider Students' Emotional Wellbeing in Their Use of Discipline

Since participants prioritised their students' overall happiness and were motivated to develop their students' self-esteem, they seemed to experience a dilemma when implementing discipline as they did not want to hurt children's feelings:

You try to keep it balanced, I don't want to keep shouting all the time, but there are times where I need to use discipline. If it's time to learn, it's time to learn; but then, for example, if it's someone's birthday, I create a happy atmosphere. (Maria)

Nonetheless, participants mentioned that they recognised the importance of discipline in their classroom, as they wished for their students to learn right from wrong. Most teachers described how they reached this balance by explaining to their students the reason for their class rules: “I try to give a reason why it cannot be done...and I’ll repeat it every time they do it, every time they need to hear it.” (Anna)

Others explained how they do this by displaying their care to their students even when using punishments:

You need to explain to them what they did wrong. So, I told them that I don’t want them to fall and get hurt because I love them. So that’s why I gave them a timeout so that they understand that the action is wrong; they shouldn’t do it. (Emma)

Teachers’ Attitudes Influence Their Class Management Style. It is interesting to note how teachers’ empathic attitudes influenced their beliefs around the root of children’s misbehaviour which then affected their class management style. Teachers who displayed empathy demonstrated a thorough understanding of children’s challenging behaviour and appeared to believe that children can regulate their own behaviour even at a young age. With this understanding, they resorted to punishment as a last resort:

I won’t do it the first time, but if the child does it ten times a day, then, I’ll use a loud voice. If it’s something quite bad, I remove the child from play. If the child is throwing blocks...it’s not fair on others who are getting hit. (Anna)

Furthermore, teachers differed in their opinions around giving children responsibility for their actions. Some displayed a strong belief that students although young, can recognise right from wrong:

I give him time to think so then he can tell me what he did wrong. He knows what he did.

If he tells me, “I don’t know”, then he waits some more until he tells me. (Daniela)

This belief led them to base their discipline on giving students choice and responsibility:

You give them a choice. You would be respecting them in this way: I didn’t just choose for them; they feel important because they chose for themselves and then, they know the consequences if they don’t do it. (Emma)

Contrastingly, Olivia’s classroom management appears to be characterised by less understanding, as she seemed to think that children need to be explicitly taught how to behave from an adult, by using punishments:

I put flashcards of cookies at the back of their chairs with ten cookies on every plate, then they start decreasing. For example, if it’s break time and you haven’t touched your lunch, there, I took a cookie.

Empathy Helps Teachers to Understand Children’s Behaviours. Participants’ use of discipline seems to be based on an understanding of how children’s contexts influence their behaviour. Such an awareness supported teachers to engage in a non-judgemental attitude:

Children show you that there are problems in their daily routine. They have aggressive behaviour when we go out in the yard, they bite or hit. So rather than speaking, children show us through their behaviour... (Julia)

Anna explained how being non-judgemental increased her ability to be emotionally present for children, as she stressed the importance of empathy in her daily interactions in class:

If you're going to keep saying: "This child is really making a fuss about nothing!" You're going to fill yourself up with frustration and the child will cry because you're not there for him. He's not feeling you as his safe space.

Maria shared how her empathic understanding allowed her to take responsibility for a child's misbehaviour:

You need to adapt to them; *you* need to understand. The child is not doing this on purpose, she doesn't have a choice, so you need to change how you interact with her, with what you offer her to help her.

Similarly, most participants demonstrated a thorough awareness of how challenging behaviour may be masking an unmet need. This awareness led to more caring behaviour from their end:

If I know that there is a child who has problems at home, I'll have more empathy towards them. I try to give them what they don't have at home. I show them that I love them, I show them that with me, they can feel safe. It doesn't mean that I'll let all sort of behaviour go...(Julia)

Contrastingly, Olivia appears to display less awareness and understanding as she perceived her students' misbehaviour as being attributable to intrinsic factors: "I had an adopted child and he used to do everything so that you don't love him..."

Teachers Use Discipline to Encourage Students to Reflect on Their Behaviour.

Fostering reflection and self-awareness is the cornerstone of the behaviour management used by these participants as this teaches children to regulate themselves in the future: "The first

thing I do, I ask them if they know what they did wrong, the difference between good and bad...” (Lisa)

Teachers explained how reflection is incorporated in the use of punishments as these are useless if children do not learn right from wrong: “I have a timeout chair. They sit and think about what they have done. So, “Do you know what you did wrong?” And eventually they learn.” (Julia)

It is interesting to note that participants considered discipline as an opportunity to develop a sense of altruism in their classroom:

I divided them into groups: the group that was behaving, they got a point but those that weren't, lost a point. But I did so as a group, so it's not just you. I want them to know that if you misbehave, others will be affected. (Maria)

Using Positive Reinforcement to Develop Children's Self-esteem. Being mindful of their students' feelings, most of the teachers highlighted the importance of praising children's good efforts to positively influence their self-perception. They explained how such reinforcement seems to create a positive cycle. As shared by Olivia:

Even if we're simply singing, and Peter is singing, I tell him “Well done!”. The others when they hear this, they follow in, they sing too. So, you don't say “You, why aren't you singing?!” You find Peter who's singing, and you praise him.

Participants mentioned how they complemented children as this contributes to the development of their self-worth. A good example is that set by Anna:

I praise a lot. You see their faces change! Their face brightens up. They feel special because they did something good, and I use certain words like “You’re so good at this!” They love these words!

Others explained how they used external rewards to ensure that students assimilate the experience of success:

I use a trophy system. At the end of each week, a child takes the trophy home. I tell the parents that when they do, make a big fuss! Let them know how good they are! (Julia)

Whilst all teachers explained how children are praised for doing positive deeds, they also stressed the fact that praise is not tied to talent, as they wished for every child to feel valued in their class:

If one does a nice drawing, I say “Well done, let’s all clap!”. Then another child comes, if it’s less nice, I still say “Well done! Let’s all clap again!” Everyone receives praise. (Emma)

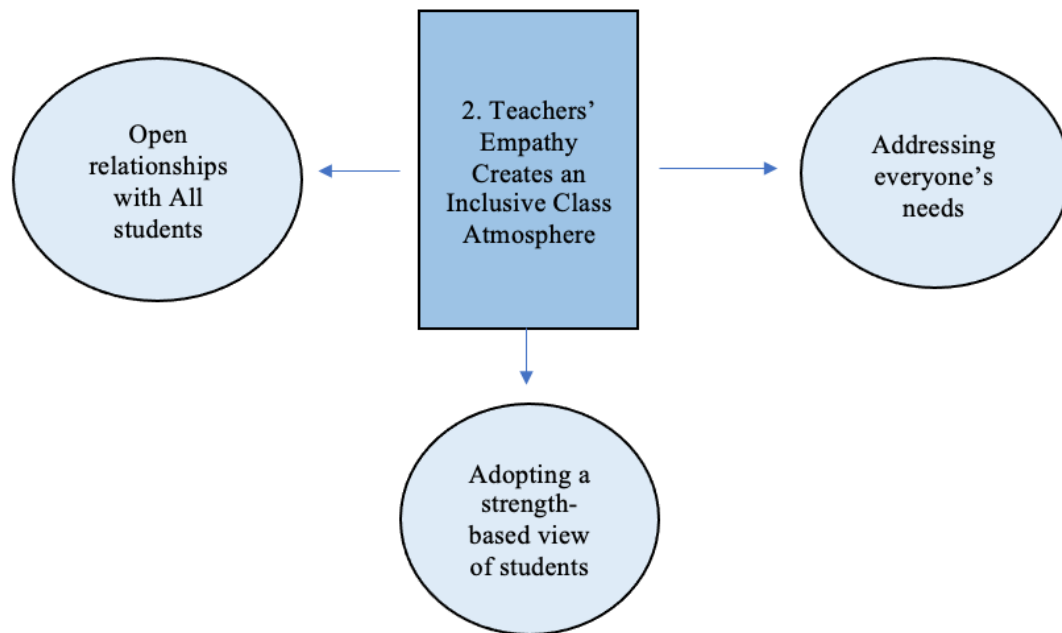
Global Theme 2: Teachers’ Empathy Creates an Inclusive Class Atmosphere

Influenced by their focus on students’ socio-emotional wellbeing, participants demonstrated a strong belief in having an inclusive classroom where every student feels seen and appreciated. These teachers described how they actively foster such an inclusive atmosphere through their use of empathy in their relationship with every student. These relationships were based on understanding which helped them to cater for everybody’s needs. Teachers’ inclusive approaches were grouped under three organising themes: Having open

relationships with all students, Adopting a strength-based approach and Addressing everyone's needs.

Figure 4

Global Theme 2: Teachers' Empathy Creates an Inclusive Class Atmosphere



An Open Relationship with All of Their Students

Participants recognised that children thrive in environments in which they feel cared for and supported. They all expressed their desire for *all* children in their class to feel comfortable with their teacher. This was reflected in how these teachers perceived themselves: “I’m there as someone you turn to if you need help, their point of reference.” (Emma)

Making an Effort to Connect with Every Child. Participants wished for every child to feel valued as they sought to develop relationships with all their students, be it the sociable extroverted students as well as the quieter, introverted ones. When these relationships did not

develop, participants demonstrated regret: “Sometimes even though I try and try, I say, “This child I haven’t managed to build a bond with him” and I feel bad.” (Julia)

When speaking about inclusion, these teachers alluded to the concept of fairness in their classrooms, as they actively ensured no one felt excluded:

Today I asked you, next time I will ask someone else. I also create sticks with names, and we pick one. Because then child X tells me: “Can I talk to you?” Because he knows that there’s another child who doesn’t stop talking. So, he starts thinking “When will I be able to talk?” (Lisa)

Teachers also described how the motivation to include everyone led to them using different mediums to connect with their students: “There are times where children aren’t fluent and that makes it hard to get to know them. So, through social stories...I try to use different methods, a small clip...” (Daniela).

Whilst Anna added: “You have to approach them, perhaps through play, you ask questions, you try and be smooth.”

Olivia even recruited the help of caregivers in her quest to get to know every child: “At the beginning of the year, I tell the parents to create a chart, I get to know who has pets, what they like...”

Furthermore, most participants acknowledged that young children communicate through play. They therefore used this medium to get to know students and to relate to them:

There were problems at home, but I used to play with her, I didn’t even ask her because I knew she wouldn’t tell me, I built a relationship with her through play. (Lisa)

Applying Strategies that Foster Nourishing Relationships with Every Child. Since these teachers wished to connect with every student in their classroom, they appeared to perceive themselves as being responsible for reaching out to them.

All participants highlighted their motivation to create meaningful student-teacher relationships based on a holistic understanding of each child: “They’re individuals and that’s why I want to get to know them. If you get to know them, you can address their needs.”

(Daniela)

It is also worth highlighting how some teachers went out of their ways to find common interests to facilitate connection with their students: “If I know that there’s something they like, then I’ll be interested too, so that I’ll have things to talk about with them.” (Maria).

They also ensured they had an opportunity to get to know each child:

They’re playing and I’m listening to everything they say. I also leave them to play on one table. That way, I’ll get to know all of them, if I put them on different tables, I’ll only get to know those closest to me. (Emma)

Most of the participants explained how they intentionally created the space for each of their students to share their experiences not only with their teacher but also with one another:

During circle time, I ask about their lives, “What did you do yesterday? What do you like eating?” And everyone has a go. I do this in circle time in the morning, I have half an hour, just listening to them. (Lisa)

Listening to Students Makes Them Feel Validated. Through empathy, participants perceived all their students as being important individuals worthy of empathic attention. This

created a positive emotional climate where students experienced being validated and understood:

I listen...even something unrelated and out of context. Perhaps they want to tell me something or show me something, I empathise with them, and I listen to them nonetheless, I tell them “Wow it’s lovely!” I praise them, nonetheless. (Daniela)

Anna stressed how she conveyed her care towards her students by demonstrating emotional presence:

They talk a lot about their lives like: “These shoes are new.” You have to go down to their level even though you’re busy. If it’s important to them, even though they’re talking about a shoe, you need to go with it, “Really it’s new? It’s really nice”. You keep on talking to them and asking them. You must stop whatever you’re doing and listen.

Empathic teachers were noted to address their students’ feelings as these can influence their learning and overall well-being:

I had times where parents sent me notes telling me that children are feeling anxious because of Covid. So, in class we speak about the fact that we need to do what we can control. We have a lot of rules, and I explain to them why, so that they stay safe and others too. (Maria)

Lisa added how she validated her students’ feelings by allowing them to express their emotions: “I don’t brush it off, I give them time, it’s not easy and I think through empathy I could do this.”

Recognising and Addressing the Individual Needs Found in the Classroom.

Participants understood that different children have unique socio-emotional and learning needs. They maintained how they find it important to ensure that these are addressed for children to have a successful educational experience.

Lisa explained how she not only respects the diversity present in her class, but she adjusts her own teaching style to make sure that every student succeeds: “I work differently with everyone. If I see that a child needs more attention then I’ll give it to her, every character is different. I try to adapt to them.”

Participants used children’s diagnoses to support them when implementing the right strategies for their students:

I had a child with Autism...I needed to create a daily routine. You need to base what you do on individual needs; someone needs this, and another one needs something else.

(Olivia)

Others highlighted the importance of addressing children’s holistic needs:

You must be whatever that child needs. So, if this child wants a hug, you have to give him a hug. My role isn’t that I’m the teacher and I teach them letters. My role is that I see to their needs. (Anna)

Similarly, since all participants strongly believed that children require affection to thrive and to learn, they described how they make themselves emotionally available to every student in their class for every child to feel cared for:

I have a child who needs extra hugs throughout the day, so I give her extra hugs. When I hug someone, I ask “Is there somebody who wants a hug?” You cannot give extra attention to some because you know they need it, and the rest you ignore. It could be because someone is shy to ask for a hug, so you need to ask...(Olivia)

An Inclusive Class Climate Fosters Belongingness. When they first enter kindergarten, children may experience a shift in their way of relating as they learn to become part of a group. Anna outlined how this process seemed to be facilitated by a supportive atmosphere:

At the beginning, they all care about themselves because that’s how it was at home, but after a few months, the idea of a group starts to form. I think that they do care about each other, and you see them protecting each other.

Teachers described their classrooms as being environments where all students can feel as though they belong, even though they are all unique beings: “They feel comfortable. I see them, they feel safe enough to be themselves, to express themselves.” (Daniela)

Furthermore, classrooms with positive climates seem to support the inclusion of children coming from diverse backgrounds:

Even foreign children I had in class, at the beginning it was hard to understand them, but at the end of the day, they become really close to me, they feel like they belong in the classroom. (Julia)

These teachers were also particularly attentive to welcome newcomers to the classroom: “Two new children joined us, and I prepared the others, I told them their names. When the new children came, they welcomed them, they started playing together at once!” (Lisa)

Empathy Supports Teachers to Adopt a Strength-based Perspective of Students

After recognising their students' different needs, participants appeared to take a step further by engaging in a strength-based view. Thus, teachers' focus on inclusion led them to acknowledge every child's positive qualities:

When you get a child who has special needs or perhaps a disability, why should you say all the bad things? Why shouldn't you tell parents "He's the sweetest boy!" If that's also the truth? (Emma)

Furthermore, teachers explained how they try their best to instil in *all* their students the idea that they are special beings worthy of love and attention: "My priority is that every child has learnt that he's important, he's unique and he's special, that someone cares about him and that he has a voice. That's how I see kindergarten." (Anna)

Empathic Teachers Aim to Address Everyone's Needs in Their Classroom

Participants were aware that their classroom is composed of children who are unique individuals. Nonetheless, to include everyone, teachers explained how they use different kinds of empathy to cater for the needs of their whole classroom, whilst meeting the individual needs of their students.

Using Empathy to Connect with the Classroom as a Group. Throughout their narratives, teachers often described their classroom as a whole group and spoke of the ways in which they related to all their students at once.

Daniela seemed to have a mental representation of her students' needs and she kept this in mind when talking about the class atmosphere:

I try to make it fun all the time, but it changes according to their needs. Sometimes it's energetic, then for example, at the end of the day, I keep it calmer.

Others outlined how they related to the whole class by ensuring that everyone is engaged in class activities:

If the activity is not making sense, you stop and you say, “I have to rethink this activity, they’re getting bored” You put some music on and you dance to keep the atmosphere happy. (Anna)

Global Theme 3: Empathic Teachers Prioritise a Warm Atmosphere in Their Classroom

When teachers adopted their young students’ point of view, they realised the importance of having classrooms in which children felt happy and cared for. With this awareness, participants prioritised a positive socio-emotional climate for their learners’ wellbeing:

Children remember how much fun they had, rather than letters or numbers. They remember how you made them feel, because at the end of the day, in kinder they’re not going to sit for any exams. They have their whole lives learning letters and numbers. (Julia)

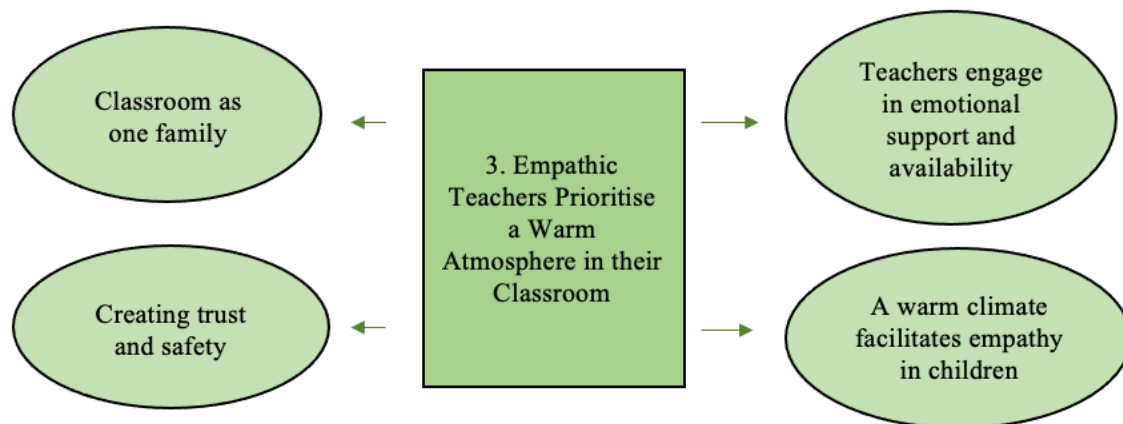
All participants described their class atmospheres as being characterised by warmth as they stressed the importance of having a classroom where everyone feels positively connected to each other. Teachers perceived themselves as directly influencing this climate through their behaviours in class:

The children will feel you from the start, they will disobey because they’ll sense you. There were times where I was unhappy at work, the children sensed me, and then I said,

“What can I organise to I change the class atmosphere?” So, I joked with them to change my mood because I think that’s the root of everything. (Julia)

Figure 5

Global Theme 3: Empathic Teachers Prioritise a Warm Atmosphere in their Classroom



Teachers View the Classroom as Being One Family

Participants aimed to have classrooms characterised by frequent positive interactions between children. Such an environment was perceived to facilitate a sense of belonging. As mentioned by Daniela, the very nature of the early years’ education system is distinguished by care and closeness: “Even the atmosphere in kinder...it’s easier to build those relationships, we’re like a community.”

Furthermore, these teachers acknowledged the importance of having an intimate classroom atmosphere where children learn to develop their socio-emotional skills: “It’s like a family where everyone needs to learn how to interact with each other. I think it’s really important...they learn to love each other, listen to each other” (Emma).

A Positive Class Climate Fosters School Enjoyment. Since participants’ aim was for their students to be happy, they were all enthusiastic about how their positive classroom climates seemed to be reflected in their student’s positive feelings regarding school. As stated

by Lisa: “The fact that I see them smiling every morning, then I know that my classroom atmosphere is a happy one.”

Anna added: “You hear parents saying their children are looking forward and excited to come to school, and they all say the same thing”

Moreover, participants perceived themselves as being an active influence on children’s perception of school:

They feel safe, confident... I’m sure about it, because when we started the year, I didn’t open the classroom myself and the teacher who did terrified the kids, because she screamed at them. I had a girl who would vomit every time she ate because she was so afraid. Nowadays she’s not afraid, I even give her some of my lunch! (Olivia)

It is worth noting how teachers highlighted how they treasured a happy class climate as this increases their own enjoyment at being at work: “I try to create a happy atmosphere, and I help myself that way, because it’s contagious.” (Julia)

Teachers Engage in Emotional Support and Availability

Participants were aware that to create a warm class atmosphere, they needed to foster an emotionally supportive climate through their way of being in the classroom. They shared various strategies to ensure that they are emotionally present for their students.

Demonstrating Respect for Student Voice. Teachers described their interactions with students as marked with respect even though they are young. When children are respected, they feel valued as individuals. Daniela’s respect for her students is reflected in how she speaks about them:

I try to go down, wait, not *go down* to their level, because for me, even if they're children, you need to respect them, because they are human beings. "Going down to their level" is not nice.

Julia explained how she respects children through her non-verbal behaviour in class:

You need to listen to them. If you're not going to listen to them, how are you expecting them to listen to you? I cannot expect them to listen to me when I don't even look at them whilst I'm speaking to them.

Whilst others mostly described how they respect children's wishes:

It's not that I'm the teacher and you must do as I say, sometimes I have things planned, and they tell me, "Can we play?" Now in the morning it's usually circle time, but why shouldn't I let them play? (Emma)

Showing Warmth and Affection. To create positive atmospheres where children feel loved, all participants mentioned how they use physical touch and other caring behaviour to show children that they genuinely care for them. As outlined by Emma: "You try to show them love, you talk to them softly...your voice makes a difference."

Teachers spoke about how showing care is an essential part of their interactions with students even during the current pandemic:

You need to be warm all the time, this year it's difficult, because if there's a student who hurt her leg, I can't go rub it for her, I can't give her that love and support in a physical way. This year you need to find a different way. So, we do air high fives for example.
(Maria)

Anna explained how young children seem to resonate greatly with the teacher's emotional support:

If you're warm and caring, they will enjoy it. Who wants a hug, who wants to hug you, who wants to talk to you. That's why you shouldn't worry about letters, numbers. Just focus on being there with them and for them.

Teachers Actively Strive to Create Emotional Safety

Throughout the interviews, participants highlighted that one of their goals is to have a climate in which students feel safe in an emotional way as they recognised that this is a basic psychological need. To facilitate such an atmosphere, teachers adopted different strategies.

Using Rules to Create Familiarity. Teachers explained how children require a sense of familiarity to feel safe and they therefore created class rules with this in mind:

I think that they're happy because they know what's expected from them. It's a safe place where they know that this is good and that isn't, it's not confusing. (Anna)

These rules are co-constructed with their students, to make them more meaningful: "I'm disciplined, rules are there to be followed, but it's not like I'm the teacher up here and you are down there, they tell me what they think." (Olivia)

Similarly, most of the participants mentioned how they devise rules not only for students to feel safe but with their future wellbeing at heart: "With rules they feel safe, and you also teach them that whenever they go, there are certain rules." (Lisa)

Fostering an Emotionally Secure Environment. It is interesting to note that teachers' ability to take their student's perspective, motivated them to create safe learning contexts:

I explain what we're doing during the day so that they feel safe, they know what's going to happen. I also give a lot of hugs so that they feel safe in class even though they're on their own. (Julia)

Lisa added how such empathic understanding helped her to facilitate a secure attachment with one of her students who was previously afraid to go to the bathroom on her own:

I used to think she was afraid because I wasn't with her. So, whilst she was in the toilet, I used to put my feet under the door, and I used to tell her: "Can you see my foot?" And then I moved from the door to the corridor, whilst telling her: "I'm here!". And then slowly, she started to go with a friend and now she's Ok.

All teachers gave significant importance to an emotionally safe classroom where all children feel free to engage in new learning experiences without feeling self-critical: "What's important is that everyone feels safe... I want them not to be ashamed in class if they made a mistake." (Daniela)

To do this, Olivia used modelling to normalise making mistakes: "I sit down with them, play with them, I make a lot of mistakes on purpose, so they laugh at me..."

A Warm Climate Facilitates the Development of Empathy in Children

Teachers' empathic stances were also noted to contribute to the development of empathy in their learners as throughout the interviews, participants described how they tried to encourage children to develop an understanding and compassion for each other.

Empathic Teachers Guide Their Students to Take Each Other's Perspective. Most of the participants appeared to engage in active efforts to assist their students to become

empathic towards one another. Maria did this by teaching them directly that others may have a different perspective: “I try to explain to them how others feel and think.”

Daniela encouraged her students to value diversity and to appreciate each other’s cultural backgrounds through the class activities she created:

I do activities related to the *Around the world* topic because I want them to understand others. In this school, there are a lot of foreigners so I wish to show them that although everyone comes from a different country, we can still be together, and have fun together.

Others explained how they directly teach their students to take each other’s point of view by asking them reflective questions:

You need to explain to them “Would you like it if someone did that to you?” You put them in the picture because if you don’t, they won’t get it, they’ll tell you, “It wasn’t me who got hurt.” (Emma)

Participants also described how they tried to create a class climate which is composed of support rather than shame. To do this, Lisa taught her students to become compassionate to other’s needs: “They used to tell me, ‘Look at her, she peed in class!’ And I explained to them, ‘She needs our help then, can someone take her to the toilet?’”

Julia outlined how she facilitates a warm climate by increasing children’s awareness of other’s feelings: “I include them too, I tell them look, ‘Student X today is feeling sad, let’s all be kind and take care of him’”.

Similarly, Maria encouraged her students to not only take each other’s perspective but to also support one another:

This year I had a child who was worried because her grandpa was sick. So, together with the other children, we said a prayer for him so that she feels supported, and let me tell you, we started seeing her morale going up and up.

Students Feel Connected to Their Teacher and Copy her Empathic Attitudes. All participants were aware of their highly significant role in their students' lives. They explained how they perceived themselves as children's role models since they witnessed their students copying their behaviour. As stated by Maria:

They see me as their role model, I think they take this empathy, and they absorb it for themselves and then, they use it with others. What the teacher does is like a Bible, so, they do the same with others.

This is echoed by Emma who recognised that the kindness she shows in class is internalised by her students, which then becomes a part of their daily interactions:

I'm kind with them, and then they're nice to each other, they help each other. Even parents tell me, "Do you say these words?" Because when the children play with their toys, if I say, "It's Ok sweetheart", they repeat it at home. So, it's even reflected in their play...

It seems that even hostile behaviour is transmitted to students. Anna described how in previous years, it was difficult for her to show empathy with her students, and this was reflected in their interactions with each other:

There were times where I had a difficult classroom and I used to hear my tone of voice in their interactions, because I used to be snappy. If I said, "Clean up!" [angry tone], I used to hear them shouting at each other "Clean up!" [angry tone]. I used to feel horrible!

Positive Climates are Composed of Harmonious Relationships Between Students.

Teachers' focus on every child's wellbeing led them to highly prioritise the development of positive relationships between their students. Such relationships enrich the class atmosphere, making it a safe and welcoming place to learn.

Anna explained that she prioritises caring relationships in her class because these tend to support co-operative behaviour:

They go really well together. They are building groups, but then within the groups they're still friends, they play together too. I hear them talking between themselves, and for example, instead of arguing, I see them managing to sort out the argument.

Julia outlined how through these relationships; children learn to care for one another: "If there's someone who leaves early, they ask me 'Where is he?' They care about each other, even if someone did not come to school, they ask me why."

Emma added: "If there is harmony, children accept each other. They share, there is love between them all, not just with the four children with whom they share the table".

Similarly, others highlighted how relationships in their class are marked with compassion and support as children start developing pro-social attitudes. Lisa appeared to make link between such behaviour and class climate:

Once that you have that comfortable atmosphere in class, even between themselves, you see them "Let me help you put your bag on". They care a lot because they get used to each other, they feel for each other. Even me, if I'm not happy, they sense it, and they help me.

Furthermore, participants outlined how in such a climate, students not only help each other when faced with difficulty but celebrate each other's achievements: "A lot of clapping from the other children in the class, everyone enjoys each other's successes..." (Julia)

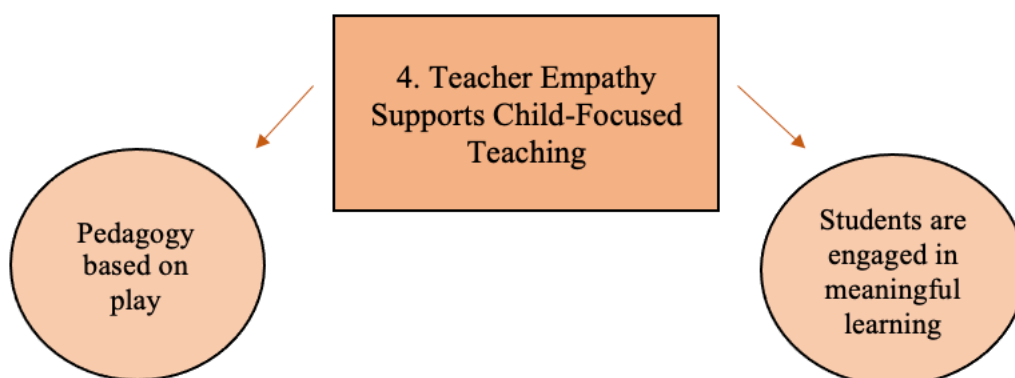
Contrastingly, Olivia's description of her classroom seems to portray fewer positive interactions as she highlighted how the children in her class do not interact and play with each other: "This year they're [relationships] bad because there are a lot of communication difficulties, the whole class goes to speech therapy."

Global theme 4: Teacher Empathy Supports Child Focused Teaching

Empathic teachers were aware that when children are engrossed in meaningful, child led learning, they are more likely to experience academic success which then supports a positive self-esteem. Thus, since these educators aimed to have happy students, they were noted to engage in cognitive empathy to employ the right strategies that support child focused learning. Teachers' empathic teaching strategies were classified under two subthemes: A pedagogy based on play and Motivating students to engage in meaningful learning.

Figure 6

Global Theme 4: Teacher Empathy Supports Child-Focused Teaching



A Pedagogy Based on Play to Engage Young Learners

All participants recognised that for students this age, play is crucial for their healthy development. Thus, in their classrooms, educators promoted play as this created the right environment for their students to learn and thrive. “I really believe in free play... they socialise, they learn from playing.” (Olivia)

Since teachers appreciated the importance of play, they dedicated time to teach their students how to do so: “I give them blocks, I sit with them, and I play with them. You cannot take it for granted that everyone knows how to play.” (Julia)

Others described how they intertwine play in their teaching as this facilitates academic learning: “You can teach them a lot of things through play, not just in the strict academic way” (Daniela).

Maria outlined how children learn different concepts indirectly through play: “I give them blocks. They learn a lot, colours, shapes, textures, they construct things too”

Teachers also mentioned how they adopt a playful approach to increase children’s enthusiasm in the learning process: “I try to create that sense of fun in class, even before we start an activity. I tell them, ‘Ready, steady, go!’ and when I forget, they tell me!” (Emma)

Teachers Aim to Motivate Students to Engage in Meaningful Learning

Participants shared how through cognitive empathy, they obtain an understanding of how their students are processing what is being taught to them, which then supports them to create content which ensures children’s enjoyment in learning: “If she’s not enjoying herself, what did I gain? I lost her. But if I did the activity when she’s interested, then I won her” (Lisa).

It is worth noting that teachers valued child-focused teaching as more beneficial rather than the traditional teacher-led teaching: “They learn from each other. If I’m going to stay telling them “Do this and this”, that’s not teaching because they will depend on me whatever they will do.” (Emma)

Adjusting Activities to Foster Students' Excitement. Most of the participants spoke about how they adopt a flexible teaching style based on students' level of engagement: "If you see that the activity is not working, they're not interested, then you have to change it, or stop what you're doing" (Anna)

These teachers adjusted their lesson plans to ensure children's understanding:

I use their feedback. I think this makes them more comfortable than if I were to tell them "You have to do numbers now!", they will do it because they're being forced, but they're not understanding. (Lisa)

Similarly, Daniela explained how she strives a balance between the concepts that children need to learn and their needs: "I see the guidelines, so they need to know the numbers, colours and the rest, but then I plan and be flexible at the same time. I go along the needs of the children."

Emma considered the focus on child needs rather than the curriculum as the best way to ensure they continue to engage in learning: "If you force them, what's going to happen is that they won't enjoy school anymore, they'll become frustrated. You need to follow their lead."

Teaching Based on Children's Interests for Success and Wellbeing. Participants not only wished to know their students to build meaningful relationships with them, but they also used this knowledge to build meaningful learning activities to harness their interests. As stated by Daniela: "The children's interests guide me on what to do in class."

When teachers adopted their student's perspective, they managed to incorporate every child's interest in their teaching, no matter how simple: "One topic was boxes, there was so much interest and excitement!" (Olivia)

Other teachers explained how they ensure that their teaching is based on every student's interests not just those who share them:

I let them play whilst I observe them, what they do with toys, some make a worm, others make a tower, and then you start thinking. It's like you help them to show you their interests, everybody's interests because those who are introverted, it's not easy for them to tell you...(Julia)

Conclusion

This chapter presented the results of this study. The global themes explored the relationship between the use of teacher empathy and the creation of positive interpersonal relationships, a positive and inclusive socio-emotional classroom climate, and a happy engagement with learning. In the following chapter, the results will be discussed using the relevant literature.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

This chapter discusses the relevant findings which have been outlined in the previous chapter. I start by discussing how teachers' empathic attitudes led to their empathic focus on students' happiness and holistic wellbeing, which then motivated them to meet children's needs through empathic action. This chapter then focuses on how empathic teachers valued the importance of positive classroom climates that support students' socio-emotional and academic functioning and created these atmospheres through warm relationships, sensitive class discipline and child-focused teaching. Teacher empathy also created an inclusive climate where every child belonged. Lastly, this chapter concludes by suggesting that teacher empathy is crucial for teachers' resilience and children's wellbeing.

Teachers' Empathic Attitudes Allows Them to Address Students' Needs

This study attempted to clarify the link between positive classroom climates and teacher empathy. Literature suggests that when teachers adopt their students' perspectives, and share their feelings, they are more likely to be in tune with children's needs (Meyer & Turner, 2007). When this process occurs, educators are more likely to create a warm classroom atmosphere (EADSNE, 2014). The research findings seem to indicate that these teachers' empathic attitudes influenced their priorities for their students and their approaches in the classroom, allowing them to address students' holistic needs to promote their wellbeing.

It appears that the very foundation of these teachers' practice was entering the students' world to address their needs. Notwithstanding the fact that participants all had different backgrounds, values, and life experiences, they all deeply cared for their students, and effectively managed to suspend their point of view to adopt the children's perspective, to be able to understand them. This conforms to the definitions of empathy delineated by Rogers

(1957) and White (1997). These authors indeed highlight the vicariousness of empathy, the ability of putting oneself in someone else's shoes.

The findings suggest that although all teachers demonstrated empathic attitudes, they engaged in the different types of empathy with varying intensities. Nonetheless, the three components of empathy - perspective taking, affective sharing and empathic action (Gerdes & Segal, 2009), were an essential part of their teaching experience. This process is illustrated by Anna who delineated how through cognitive empathy she understands her students' behaviour. Affective empathy then allows her to 'feel with' them, which then mobilises her to help her students.

Strikingly, teachers demonstrated different levels of these elements with different described impacts on their classroom processes. All participants except Olivia appeared to engage mostly in affective empathy as they kept alluding to how they share their students' feelings. Indeed, affective empathy is characterised by experiencing an emotional state similar to another person (Hoffman 2001; Rankin et al., 2005). This process influenced their ability to feel compassion towards the children, what Davis (1996) identifies as *empathic concern*.

It seems that since these teachers were able to share their students' affective states, they stressed the importance of children's emotional wellbeing and happiness. Perhaps also due to their students' tender age, teachers mostly highlighted the importance of meeting the socio-emotional needs present in the classroom, as they gave children's happiness the ultimate importance. As stressed by Daniela, teachers cannot ignore children's emotions as these greatly influence their learning. Thus, they all explained how they ensure that their students are content before focusing on the teaching of curricula.

Notwithstanding this, all participants relied on their cognitive empathy to be able to understand what their students were thinking and experiencing (Decety & Jackson, 2006).

Through perspective taking, teachers adopted the children's point of view which allowed them to recognise when their students required support. To facilitate this, participants sought to connect with all their students as they wished to develop a thorough understanding of every child. It seems that it was this search for empathic understanding and building of relationships that then resulted in caring support for their students; as after they got to know their students, their interests and their backgrounds, participants were better equipped to address their students' needs (Cuff et al., 2016).

What was striking was how these teachers after building an empathic understanding of their students, were also compassionate and offered practical as well as emotional support to their students. Thus, teacher empathy also needs to include the behavioural component (Gerdes & Segal, 2009). As Anna explained well, empathic action is the cornerstone of the role of an early years' educator. Therefore, through their empathic behaviour, teachers recognised and addressed their students' individualised needs, which then created a warm and supportive classroom climate (EADSNE, 2014). For example, some explained how they give extra individual attention during activities, whilst others provided reassurance to soothe students' anxieties. These findings therefore demonstrate that empathic action was crucial to address children's needs, as although teacher empathy on its own would allow educators to 'feel with' their students, and to take their perspective, it would not result in any concrete action for children's wellbeing (Davis, 2004; Lam et al., 2011).

Although most of these teachers were driven by empathy to improve children's situations and feelings, Olivia appeared to have been motivated by sympathy as she cared for children's welfare to settle her conscience (Smajdor et al., 2011). One can notice a contrast between her narrative and those of the others, as although she still provided care to her students, not sharing their emotions allowed her to maintain a sense of distance from their distress (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). Indeed, Olivia's narrative was laced with resignation as she

spoke about helping children up to a limit. Contrastingly, others shared how they employ various means to address their socio-emotional needs. Thus, it appears that empathy empowered the rest of these teachers to do their utmost for their students' wellbeing.

Importance of a Positive Socio-Emotional Climate in the Early Years' Classroom

This study was designed to answer the main research question: How is classroom climate influenced by teachers' use or lack of empathy?

Data provided by the participants highlights the perceived importance of a positive and inclusive early years' classroom climate for children's development and wellbeing (Brophy-Herb et al., 2007; Howes et al., 2011). As previously highlighted, a classroom's socio-emotional climate has been defined as the overall atmosphere found in that classroom, composed of the many interactions occurring in that setting, including teacher-student and student-student relationships (Gazelle, 2006). Additionally, it refers to the quality of these interactions whether positive or hostile, the levels of behavioural problems and whether the classroom operates smoothly or chaotically (Khalfaoui et al., 2020). Literature also established that classrooms with positive climates enjoy a sense of belongingness, respect, warmth, and enthusiasm (Reyes et al., 2012).

The classrooms described in this research were a good illustration of the characteristics of positive socio-emotional atmospheres outlined above, namely a lack of behavioural problems, the presence of harmonious relationships, warmth, and belongingness (Gazelle, 2006; Khalfaoui et al., 2020; Reyes et al., 2012). Notwithstanding this, although Olivia still stressed the importance of a positive class climate, and described these elements as present in her classroom, they were characterised by less intensity compared to other participants' classrooms.

Nevertheless, all participants' narratives contained descriptions of positive classroom climates. These teachers were aware that the classroom environment has a major influence on their students' development (Melhuish et al., 2015); hence, they continuously alluded to the importance of an enriching ECE for children's socio-emotional development and for their academic success (Garcia et al., 2016; Pianta et al., 2009). Consequently, they shared how they strived to create warm classroom atmospheres in which children can learn and interact with others, whilst developing their confidence and self-esteem (Sollars, 2010). For this to occur, participants first sought to create psychologically safe classrooms as empathy allowed them to recognise that young students require safety first and foremost (Maslow, 1970).

Moreover, teachers also placed great importance on the quality of their classroom atmospheres as they wished to have warm climates that facilitate school enjoyment for all students. Indeed, a positive school experience at this age, may contribute to children's later academic success, and overall wellbeing (Callus, 2007). It seems that all participants were successful in this endeavour as they outlined how their students appear happy to attend school. This was also confirmed by the students' caregivers who would share with these teachers that their children loved going to school.

Teacher Empathy Creates Positive Class Atmospheres through Warm Relationships

In their narratives, teachers constantly reiterated how they prioritised their students' happiness rather than their academic success. It seems that empathy enhanced their sensitivity to students' wellbeing which then led them to build nourishing relationships with children based on care and support (Wentzel, 2002). Participants described how these relationships are crucial in establishing a warm classroom climate. Studies have indeed identified positive teacher-student relationships as being an essential element for the creation of a climate

characterised by emotional security, in which young children can experience academic success and a positive socio-emotional development (Birch & Ladd, 1998).

Being aware of their students' young ages, teachers explained how they strive to create classrooms characterised by warmth, where children feel happy and safe. To create such an atmosphere, participants practiced being emotionally present with their students. They appeared to prioritise supporting the children in their class through listening and validating their feelings. These educators believed that students are important human beings, and thus, they gave importance to their input in class. For example, Maria and Daniela listened to their students even though, to an outsider, children were speaking about seemingly insignificant things. Others explained how they allowed children the space to experience their feelings rather than repress them. This non-verbal behaviour indicates that participants engaged in high emotional support in their classes (Buyse et al., 2008). Such support can then act as protective factor against future stressors, especially for at-risk children (Merritt et al., 2012). Emma appeared to be aware of this connection as she explained that she especially provides kindness and support to children who engage in challenging behaviour as this may help them to see themselves in a positive light.

It is interesting to note that although Olivia wished to have positive relationships with her students, sympathy appeared to prevent her from involving herself in frequent positive interactions with them, as she described how she often goes into class not being 'in the mood', leaving her students to play on their own. Contrastingly, it appears that when the other teachers exercised their empathy in their classrooms, they were keen on engaging in frequent caring interactions with their students.

Teachers Use Fundamental and Profound Empathy to Build Relationships with Students

Results indicate that these teachers used *fundamental* and *profound* empathy to develop relationships with the children in their class (Cooper, 2011). Participants highlighted how they adopted a non-judgemental attitude in their interactions with students as they described how they try to understand children rather than judge them. To do this, teachers went to great lengths, as some even explained that they recruit parents' help to better understand children. It is hardly surprising that these teachers described their students as feeling safe and confident in their classrooms. Findings therefore confirm that teacher empathy contributes to the presence of positive relationships in the classroom (Agius, 2017; Cooper, 2011).

Over time, the empathy demonstrated by teachers developed into a more profound type, which was characterised by a “deeper understanding and higher quality relationships where teachers demonstrate personal levels of care and concern” (Cooper, 2010, p. 86). This deeper understanding did not occur by chance as participants shared how they spend their time actively looking to get to know their students. All explained how they engage in continuous observation of the children during free play and class activities as this gives them valuable information. Others explained how they devised specific periods during the day, such as during Circle Time, to actively get to know their students. This adds to their understanding of the children, which supports them when addressing their needs. *Profound empathy* (Cooper, 2011) was also noted whenever these teachers described their use of physical affection in class. As Julia shared, this affection shows students that their teachers genuinely care for them. This suggests that these teachers showed great sensitivity towards their students' wellbeing, as they invested in personal involvement in children lives (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Pianta et al., 2003). Furthermore, when they adopted a profound empathic approach in their classrooms, these teachers engaged in a strength-based view of their students which supported them to appreciate the differences found in every child.

Teacher Empathy Facilitates Positive Student-Student Relationships

The other important factor in classroom climate raised both in the literature (Gazelle, 2006) and by the participants, were the positive relationships between the children themselves, identified by co-operation and harmony. In fact, most participants delineated that they observed their students engaging in pro-social behaviour with their peers. They outlined how students tend to look out for each other and treat each other with kindness. This seems to be in line with research that suggests that positive interactions with adults in the early years facilitates children's self-regulation, social skills as well as their empathic abilities (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Howes et al., 1994; Wentzel, 2002).

The research findings also indicate these classrooms experienced a higher ratio of positive to negative behavioural outcomes. Participants highlighted how although the children in their class do argue sometimes, interactions are mostly characterised by joint play and caring for each other. This confirms the research by Howes (2000) and Mashburn et al. (2008) which suggests that classrooms high in positive socio-emotional climates, also experience positive behavioural outcomes.

Nonetheless, it is interesting to highlight how Olivia's described student-student relationships at times acted as a contrast to those found in other narratives. For example, she explained how the children in her class did not interact with each other because of communication difficulties. From a bioecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the presence of positive teacher-student relationships may influence the existence of good student-student relationships. Thus, it might be the case that since Olivia's relationships with children were seemingly marked by a lack of interaction, her students' development of interpersonal skills was negatively influenced. Indeed, research has highlighted the connection between students' positive relationship with their teachers and children's development of social skills and their positive relationships with their classmates (Davis,

2001). As a result, these relationships may negatively influence Olivia's classroom climate and her students' engagement with schooling (Juvonen, 2006; Ladd et al., 2008).

Teacher Empathy Goes Beyond the Child

Research findings show that all participants wished to not only develop relationships with their students but to also build relationships with students' caregivers. In fact, they all spoke about how they try to encourage an open communication system through various mediums. These teachers acknowledged that young children benefit from successful parent involvement in their education (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; Ihmeideh & Oliemat, 2014). They therefore sought to keep the parents involved in their children's schooling to foster trust whilst establishing a home-school partnership. It seems that empathy supported participants to develop meaningful relationships with parents for the benefit of the children (Farstad-Peck, 2012). For example, Julia described how perspective taking helps her not to judge parents whenever there is a lack of co-operation. Others highlighted how they put themselves in parents' shoes whenever they need to break difficult news, which then supports them to show more sensitivity. Contrastingly, parent-teacher interactions were marked with miscommunication and lack of co-operation whenever teachers engaged in judgemental behaviour. As Olivia's experience shows, caregivers were less likely to work together with their children's educator when they experienced being blamed or judged.

Empathy Enables Teachers to Adopt Child Sensitive Discipline

Research suggests that discipline is closely connected to the classroom climate (Valente et al., 2020). This was confirmed by the participants' narratives since empathy appeared to shape their classroom management techniques with a resulting influence on the levels of harmony and warmth present in their classrooms (Khalifaoui et al., 2020).

Through empathy, participants were able to consider their students' emotional wellbeing in their class management style. They explained that when they understood the reasons behind children's misbehaviour, they often provided nurturance rather than punishment. They also emphasised that empathy allows them to take responsibility for addressing children's unmet emotional needs in the classroom. This led teachers to recognise the importance of supporting children's self-esteem at this stage in their development (Troshikhina & Manukyan, 2016). For this reason, they stressed the use of using positive reinforcement such as praise and rewards rather than punishments.

The use of empathy in their discipline did not mean that participants adopted a *laissez-faire* approach in their classrooms, as they all stressed the need for their students to learn the difference between good and bad behaviour. This motivated them make class rules meaningful. In these classrooms, rules were co-constructed, and children were respected. For example, Emma stressed how she gives her students choices whenever they misbehave, whilst Olivia highlighted how her class rules are based on children's feedback.

Through their discipline practices, participants also offered scaffolding for the acquisition of socio-emotional skills (Cooper, 2002), as they provided their students with the right support to encourage them become more self-aware, and to take others' perspectives. For example, teachers actively modelled perspective taking by asking children reflective questions. As Lisa's narrative demonstrated, this helps to create a classroom characterised by compassion rather than shame. This can have a positive influence on students as it creates opportunities for their relationship skills (Sollars, 2010) and empathic abilities to develop (Simpson & Sacken, 2014).

The impact of empathy can be seen in the different approach to managing challenging behaviour adopted when empathy was low. For instance, Olivia appeared to exercise a lack of perspective taking and affective sharing as she ascribed challenging behaviour as

belonging to the child. This belief led her to adopt principles from the *desist approach* to behaviour management, which is characterised by punishments (Moore & Hansen, 2012). Nonetheless, she did seem to engage in cognitive empathy (Decety & Jackson, 2006) when dealing with students' positive behaviour as she offered praise to her students after adopting their perspectives. This seemed to create a cycle of positive behaviour in her classroom.

All of the above demonstrates that through empathy, teachers engaged in perspective taking to use discipline which facilitates children's developing interpersonal skills, self-confidence, and empathic abilities. In these classes, students felt supported and cared for, which created positive class interactions, as well as a positive socio-emotional climate. These climates were described as 'contagious' by teachers as they enjoyed themselves in their interactions with students. This is in line with Cornelius-White (2007) and Makoelle (2019) who argue that a positive socio-emotional climate supports teachers' classroom management abilities.

Teacher Empathy Supports Engagement with Learning in the Early Years

Empathy enables teachers to pick up the main interests of their students. Thus, throughout their interviews, participants acknowledged that their students mainly use play to communicate and to learn (Early Childhood Education and Care Working Group, 2006). This awareness led them to appropriately use play as the foundation for building caring teacher-student relationships, as well as to support children's engagement with learning. They all explained how their classrooms incorporated flexible pedagogies based on play, rather than formal academic teaching, as this supports school enjoyment and children's later educational success (Bartolo et al., 2019).

Participants sought to encourage children's school enjoyment and academic success through child-focused teaching. The research findings show that to do this, they used

cognitive (Decety & Jackson, 2006) and functional empathy (Cooper, 2011). For example, Lisa shared that she understands how her students are processing what is being taught to them by adopting their perspective. This allows her to plan the appropriate content to match children's readiness levels. Furthermore, as the interviews progressed, participants appeared to hold a mental image of their classroom as a group, as they spoke of how they change their class activities based on the class' feedback. This suggests that these teachers use *functional empathy* (Cooper, 2011) to facilitate learning opportunities that support children's academic success and development of positive self-esteem (Gage & Berliner, 1998; Simpson & Sacken, 2016). Participants then outlined how they engage in empathic action to address their students' learning needs on an individual level (Gerdes & Segal, 2009). Indeed, they realised that every student has different needs, and that they need to address these using various means to ensure that every child has a successful educational journey.

It appears that these teachers displayed sensitivity to their students' academic success. Through empathy and sensitivity, they demonstrated a great responsiveness and respect to children's interests and created learning opportunities which foster success and excitement. In line with the NCF (MEDE, 2012), participants shared how they adopt a flexible approach to teaching which is mostly based on children's interests. For instance, Emma and Daniela delineated that their students' interests guide them, as they wished to respect children's wishes. Thus, teachers first use their empathic abilities to create relationships with their students. Through these relationships, they get to know their backgrounds, existing knowledge, and interests. They then create learning experiences based on this knowledge which increases motivation towards learning (Odom & Wolery, 2003). It therefore appears that empathy helps these participants to implement the emergent curriculum currently being promoted in local early years settings (MEDE, 2018).

Teacher Empathy Entails an Inclusive Approach

Research findings show that through empathy, teachers created an inclusive atmosphere in their classrooms. This seems to be in line with the recent local research on how teachers use their empathy to facilitate the participation and academic success of every child (Agius, 2017).

These teachers were focused on creating a socially inclusive classroom where every child felt valued and included (Juvonen et al., 2019). Participants were aware that different children have different characters. Nonetheless, what was striking was how they wished to have positive relationships with all their students. Thus, it appears that their empathic attitudes led them to be highly motivated to include every child. Seeing that an inclusive climate was a priority for them, *fundamental empathy* (Cooper, 2011) allowed teachers to use various means to connect with all children.

Both the research literature and participants highlighted belongingness as an important element of positive socio-emotional classroom climates (Reyes et al., 2012). Teachers explained how even newcomers and foreigners feel as though they belong in the classroom, as all children play and learn together. Interestingly, participants appeared to believe that their students engage in such positive behaviour because of how they themselves relate to their students. Indeed, all explained how children see them as role models and copy their empathic attitudes towards each other. This confirms the research by Agius (2017) who suggested that empathic teachers facilitate the development of empathy in their students. In these classrooms, teachers actively modelled pro-social attitudes and compassion. For example, participants explained how they include the whole class to support a child who is feeling sad or worried. Such findings demonstrate that teacher empathy facilitates socially inclusive climates where every child feels a sense of belonging (Juvonen et al., 2019).

Additionally, teachers' descriptions depicted their classrooms as characterised by cooperative learning, where children engage in group play and group activities to learn together (Johnson et al., 2013). Teachers described how they facilitate such learning by putting all children on one table, allowing them to engage in free play as a group, as well as planning activities which allow for joint learning. As Emma highlighted, such a process creates harmony, acceptance, and increased friendships, which again, contributes to the presence of a positive and inclusive class climate (Juvonen et al., 2019).

All of this suggests that empathy facilitated a class atmosphere identified by positive relationships with every child, and where all children felt as though they belonged, no matter their nationality, behaviour, or personal characteristics. Contrastingly, when teachers did not employ empathic understanding, they seemed to perceive student differences as hurdles found in their classrooms. This then appeared to influence teacher-student relationships. For example, Olivia explained that a student seemingly engaged in challenging behaviour on purpose. This judgement then prevented her from being emotionally attuned to him, preventing the establishment of a positive relationship (Eisenberg, 2000). Thus, it seems that whilst empathy entails an inclusive approach, sympathy does not. When teachers engaged in cognitive and affective empathy, they felt compassion for the children, and understood the influence of children's contexts on their behaviours and took it upon themselves to offer support (Agius, 2017). On the contrary, sympathy seemed to have influenced Olivia's ability to stand in the children's shoes. This self-centred approach then led her to focus on her own difficulties in managing the child's behaviour rather than to focus on the child's struggles.

Empathy Supports Teacher Resilience

It was striking how some teachers highlighted the satisfaction that they experience from engaging with their students. Thus, it seems that when teachers used empathy to create warm

relationships with children, they too benefitted from that meaningful connection.

Participants' narratives appear to confirm the link between empathy and resilience (Fredrickson, 2001; Reivich & Shatte, 2002) as they highlighted how empathy enables them to bracket their own stressors to keep on having caring relationships with children (Sumsion, 2003). Furthermore, when teachers adopted their students' perspectives, they realised that teacher stress would also influence children's wellbeing (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Kokkinos et al., 2005). As Julia mentioned, students seem to 'sense' their teacher's emotions. Thus, they prioritised their own self-care for their wellbeing and children's benefit.

This link between empathy and teacher resilience emphasises the importance of direct instruction on empathy. Indeed, existing literature has established that empathy can be developed with direct training (Gerdes & Segal, 2009). This seems to be confirmed by Anna whose understanding of empathy appears to have been enhanced through the education she received. Such training may have supported her to show more sensitivity and responsivity to her students (Buyse et al., 2008; McAllister & Irvine, 2002) as she explained how she sees challenging behaviour as reflecting a child's unmet need. This suggests that empathy training allowed her to adopt a positive perception of children and their behaviour (Barr, 2011; Hen & Goroshit, 2016).

Teacher Empathy is Crucial for the Wellbeing of Students

These teachers saw themselves as being directly responsible for children's wellbeing, which then motivated them to engage in empathic understanding and action (Gerdes & Segal, 2009).

The effectiveness of their empathy was further enhanced through a reflective approach. Empathic action was supported through participants' self-awareness about their own teaching style. Through such a process, participants offered their students practical and emotional

support. For example, Emma explained how she takes a meta-position in her interactions with students, as she asks herself if she would be happy as a child in her own classroom. It is therefore evident that teachers' use of perspective taking as well as affective empathy supported them to consider their students' wellbeing in their every decision. When they took their students point of view, they acknowledged the importance of creating positive and warm atmospheres where their young students could feel safe, happy, and engage in meaningful learning.

The overall findings seem to confirm the research conducted by Agius (2017) who established that through empathy, teachers develop warm relationships, facilitate academic success, and nurture inclusive atmospheres in the primary classroom. What appears to be different in the present study findings is that these KGEs were more highly motivated for and focused to safeguarding children's socio-emotional wellbeing. Maybe this was more important to them because of the greater socio-emotional needs of younger children and the generally lower concerns about academic achievement (Troshikhina & Manukyan, 2016). Empathy therefore supported them to facilitate their students' self-confidence, self-esteem, as well as their compassion and understanding for others. Through empathy, they were also concerned on children's engagement with learning (Agius, 2017). All these classroom processes created a positive and inclusive socio-emotional climate through warm relationships and interactions, as well as child focused discipline and teaching.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that these teachers' empathic approaches to teaching clearly illustrate that empathy is a very important method for meeting the holistic needs of students in ECE. As discussed in this chapter, teacher use of empathy in the early years' classroom seems to influence the creation of a positive socio-emotional classroom atmosphere in which

all students feel cared for, appreciated, and included. Such findings were in line with the existing literature. The next chapter outlines the implications and the limitations of this study, while presenting recommendations for future research.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter concludes this study by presenting a summary of the major findings together with the implications for future teacher training. This is followed by the limitations of this study, as well as suggestions for future research.

Summary of Main Findings

This study focused on the ways KGEs exercise empathy with their students and how this influences the socio-emotional atmosphere, interactions and processes found in the classroom.

The findings highlighted how empathy supported teachers to meet their students' socio-emotional needs to facilitate their holistic wellbeing. To do this, they engaged in cognitive empathy, as they adopted their students' point of view to try to understand them. Participants also demonstrated affective empathy as they sensed children's feelings. This process then facilitated teachers' compassion as they supported their students through empathic action. They therefore provided the necessary emotional and practical help that the children required. This conforms to Gerdes and Segal's (2009) empathy framework.

A striking finding of this study was how teachers created warm classroom environments where children feel cared for through their positive relationships with students. These relationships enabled teachers to develop a thorough understanding of children which then allowed them to increase their responsiveness to their emotional and academic needs. To obtain a better understanding of students and their contexts, they also prioritised building relationships with children's families. Moreover, the empathic approach displayed by teachers seemed to facilitate warm relationships between students themselves. All of this facilitated a classroom environment characterised by positive interactions and closeness.

Findings show that teachers incorporated the use of empathy in their classroom management style as they appeared to model an empathic and reflective approach in their discipline practices which then supported children's development of socio-emotional skills. Through this process, students were encouraged to show understanding for their peers and appeared to engage in co-operative and pro-social behaviour, facilitating a positive class atmosphere.

Empathy also enabled these teachers to adopt a flexible teaching approach based on children's interests and readiness levels, which was heavily founded on play. Through empathy, teachers understood the individual needs of their students and strived to meet these through various mediums. This ensured that every child was engaged in a meaningful education. At the same time, participants targeted the whole group's needs to maintain a sense of enthusiasm and love for learning.

Furthermore, in line with previous research (Agius, 2017), teacher empathy was found to be inclusive as teachers reported a concern with understanding and building relationships with each one of their students, ensuring they left nobody out. This created an inclusive class climate where everyone felt welcome, understood and that they belonged.

Lastly, teacher empathy appeared to support these teachers' resilience as the meaningful connections they created with students appeared to support them to bracket their personal stressors.

These research findings are consistent with the established research on teacher empathy and thus, they can serve to support pre-existing theory; a concept Yin (2013) terms *analytic generalisability*. Indeed, this study demonstrated that teacher empathy seems to have facilitated classroom climates composed of harmonious interactions (Eisenberg, 2000), positive teacher-student and student-student relationships based on inclusive care and support

(Cooper, 2004; 2011), child-focused teaching (Gage & Berliner, 1998) and discipline (Moore & Hansen, 2012), as well as meaningful learning for all (Agius, 2017).

Implications for Teaching Practice and Training

Children's socio-emotional wellbeing in the early years is crucial for their overall development and later academic success (Domitrovich et al., 2017). The findings of this study suggest that these teachers' empathic attitudes influenced their inclination to prioritise their students' holistic wellbeing, and that empathy supported them to be responsive to children's needs. All of this served to facilitate a warm classroom climate in which all children felt as though they belonged and cared for as individuals. Moreover, in such classrooms, students learnt how to develop positive relationships with each other whilst they were happily engaging in their meaningful learning. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that positive classroom processes and interactions also contributed to teachers' resilience.

Thus, these results can offer teachers practical examples of how they can integrate empathy in their own practice for their students' and their own wellbeing. Indeed, literature has demonstrated that being empathic in stressful occupations may lead to compassion fatigue which may then create a sense of detachment and less altruistic behaviour towards others (Gleichgerricht & Decety, 2013). Nonetheless, these teachers were able to adopt an empathic stance and engage in empathic behaviour, by regulating their own emotions in their interactions with students (Decety & Meyer, 2008) which benefitted both themselves and the children.

These findings are in line with the literature which suggests that empathy can be further developed when it is taught (Buyse et al., 2008; McAllister & Irvine, 2002). Keeping this in mind, direct instruction on teacher empathy should be incorporated in teacher education courses, whether vocational or academic, as well as in continuous professional development

courses to support teachers to develop their sensitivity and understanding for their students' benefit.

Limitations of the Study

Although the research findings provided a thorough description of how early years' educators use empathy in their classrooms, these should be considered in the context of certain limitations.

Due to the low participation rate, convenience sampling was used together with purposive sampling to obtain an adequate sample size. This was aimed at gathering different descriptions of teacher empathy which allowed for a compare and contrast approach to the phenomenon being studied. The selection criteria depended on teachers' perception of their own empathic capabilities. Keeping in mind the high number of refusals during the recruitment process, teachers who were willing to participate are likely to have been influenced by the importance they give to empathy in their practice. Nonetheless, since observations were not possible to conduct, this study is based on teachers' perceptions of themselves. Classroom observations may have confirmed these perceptions or perhaps offered different data. Furthermore, the participants in this study cannot be considered as being representative of all Maltese kindergarten teachers and therefore, the results cannot be generalised to this teacher population.

Moreover, four of the participants were recruited from a school which was already familiar to me. This together with the negative connotations associated with a lack of empathy might have produced a *social desirability effect* in these teachers' narratives (Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2013). To ensure that participants did not perceive these interviews as an evaluation, I sought to make them comfortable by establishing rapport and by reassuring them about confidentiality whilst emphasising that there was no right or wrong

way to answer (Bergen & Labonte, 2019). Nonetheless, these biases may have still influenced their accounts.

Recommendations for Future Research

Considering the above-mentioned limitations, future research can add further depth to this study by extending it to a larger sample size and by incorporating triangulation using classroom observations in addition to the participant interviews (Given, 2008). This would provide a more thorough understanding of the use of teacher empathy in the classroom. Moreover, although two participants worked in a church and in an independent setting, it would be interesting to replicate this study with the participation of more participants belonging to each sector, to explore any possible differences in the use of empathy associated with different sectors.

This study also alluded to the influence of teacher stress on the classroom climate as some participants mentioned how this influences their empathic capabilities. Thus, future research could explore the role of teacher stress in the early years' classroom. Furthermore, incorporating multiple informants would also enhance any future studies. In this case, a study exploring parents' perceptions of their children's and teacher's use of empathy and its influence on their children's overall wellbeing would enhance understanding of this phenomenon.

Lastly, since this study has suggested that teacher empathy positively influences children's socio-emotional development and academic success, a longitudinal study can be conducted to monitor the influence of this empathy on students as they progress in their educational journeys.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the nature of teacher empathy in the early years' classroom. Previous literature demonstrated that teacher empathy contributes to the learning success of all students (Meyers et al., 2019), and that it is the key element that facilitates an inclusive classroom in the primary school years (Agius, 2017). This study has then highlighted that teacher empathy significantly and positively influences the socio-emotional atmosphere in the early years' classroom. Indeed, this study emphasised how KGEs used empathy as the main tool to create warm and positive climates where all students feel cared for and supported to interact with others and to engage in their learning. Considering these findings, teachers can be directly taught how to develop their empathic capabilities further, for them to be able to provide a holistic education to every child.

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Appendix A.1: Authorisation Letter – Ministry for Education and Employment

DIPARTIMENT GHALL-KURRIKULU, TAGHLIM
TUL IL-HAJJA U IMPJEGABILITA'
FLORIANA FRN 1810



DEPARTMENT FOR THE CURRICULUM, LIFELONG
LEARNING AND EMPLOYABILITY (DCLE)
FLORIANA FRN 1810

Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability

Tel: 25982743

researchandinnovation@ilearn.edu.mt

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH STUDY

Date: 8th August 2020

Ref: R08-2020 365

To: Head of School

From: Director

Title of Research Study: *Teacher Empathy for a Positive Socioemotional Classroom Climate.*

The Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability would like to inform that approval is granted to **Lara Portelli** to conduct the research in State Schools according to the official rules and regulations, subject to approval from the Ethics Committee of the respective Higher Educational Institution.

The researcher is committed to comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research. The researcher will be sending letters with clear information about the research, as well as consent forms to all data subjects and their parents/guardians when minors are involved. Consent forms should be signed in all cases particularly for the participation of minors in research.

For further details about our policy for research in schools, kindly visit www.research.gov.mt.

Thank you for your attention and cooperation.

Claire Mamo

MA Ed (Open)

Research Support Teacher

Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability

f/ Alex Farrugia

Director

Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability

Great Siege Road | Floriana | VLT 2000

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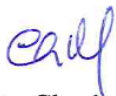
MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Appendix A.2: Authorisation Letter – Secretariat for Catholic Education

16th November 2020

Ms Lara Portelli, currently reading for a Masters Degree in Psychology Educational within the University of Malta, requests permission to conduct online audio-recorded interviews with Teachers. Furthermore, Ms Portelli will then carry out classroom observations in order to observe the interaction between teachers and their students at the above mentioned schools.

The Secretariat for Catholic Education finds no objection for Ms Lara Portelli, to carry out the stated exercises subject to adhering to the policies and directives of the schools concerned.



Rev Dr. Charles Mallia
Delegate for Catholic Education

Appendix B.1: Information Sheet for Head of School in English

Information Sheet for Head of School

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Lara Portelli and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master in Psychology (Education). I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled “Teacher Empathy for a Positive Socio-Emotional Classroom Climate in the Early Years’ Classroom: Teachers’ Perspectives”. This is being supervised by Prof. Paul Bartolo. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about this research and about what your school’s involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study is to explore the influence of teacher-student interaction on the socioemotional classroom climate in the early years’ classroom. This is a chance for teachers to share their perspectives and experiences on teachers’ use of empathy. It is expected that findings will be useful for other educators to enhance the use of empathy for more effective education. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.

Should you wish for your school to participate, you will be asked to pass on an information sheet inviting all the kindergarten teachers to participate (see copy attached). Those kindergarten teachers that accept to participate will then be contacted and arrangements will be made with them to participate in one semi-structured interview about empathy in teaching of approximately an hour. Classroom observations will also be held in order to observe the interactions between teachers and their students. Since observations will involve the presence of students, information sheets and consent forms will be provided to their parents/guardians so that teachers can pass them on to the parents of the children in their class.

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. The school, teachers’ and children’s identities will be protected throughout the research process and no real names will be used. Recordings will be destroyed as soon as they have been transcribed and evaluated. Data collected will be used solely for the purpose of this study and only my research supervisor Prof. Paul Bartolo and I, will have access to the transcripts of the interviews and written notes about the observations.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse your school’s participation, without needing to give a reason. Teachers are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for them. Should they choose to withdraw, any data collected from their interview will be deleted.

Your school's participation entails the following risks: Since this study will explore teacher empathy in teachers, there might be a risk of labelling teachers as empathic or not empathic with possible consequences. To prevent this from happening, I will adopt an empathic, non-judgemental approach during observations and interviews. The research will not label teachers as empathic or not empathic but point out empathic and non-empathic behaviours and their observed impact on students. Moreover, children and teachers will also be anonymized during the data collection and analysis in order for their identities to be protected. Participants will also be informed of their right to refuse to participate or to withdraw consent without the need to offer an explanation.

Please note also that, teachers as participants, have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning them to be erased. All data collected will be stored in an anonymized form on a password protected files and equipment and all interview audio-recordings will be destroyed as soon as they have been transcribed and evaluated.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail lara.portelli.13@um.edu.mt; you can also contact my supervisor over the phone 23402927 or via email: paul.a.bartolo@um.edu.mt

Sincerely,

Lara Portelli.
Faculty for Social Wellbeing
University of Malta
Email
Phone

Prof. Paul A. Bartolo
Faculty for Social Wellbeing
University of Malta
Email
Phone

Appendix B.2: Information Sheet for Head of School in Maltese

Ittra ta' Informazzjoni Għall-Kap ta' L-Iskola.

Għażiż/a sinjur/a

Jiena, Lara Portelli, studenta fil-kors tal-Masters fil-Psikoloġija (Education) fl-Universita' ta' Malta, nixtieq nagħmillek stedina sabiex l-iskola tipparteċipa fir-riċerka tiegħi, bħala parti mill-istudju tal-kors, li ser tkun dwar kif l-għalliema tal-Kindergarten jużaw l-empatija fil-klassi.

L-għan ta' din ir-riċerka huwa li tesplora n-natura tar-relazzjoni bejn l-għalliema u l-istudenti tagħhom, u kif din tista' tinfluwenza l-atmosfera soċjo-emozzjonali tal-klassi tal-Kindergarten. Din ir-riċerka ser tagħti lill-għalliema ċ-ċans biex jaqsmu l-perspettivi u l-esperjenzi tagħhom dwar dan is-sugġett. Il-kontribuzzjoni tal-iskola tkun importanti sabiex edukaturi oħrajn jużaw l-empatija għal tagħlim iktar effettiv. Kull informazzjoni li tiġi miġbura ser tintuża biss għall-finijiet ta' din ir-riċerka

Jekk tagħzel li l-iskola tiegħek tipparteċipa, ser tiġi mitlub tqassam ittra ta' informazzjoni lill-għalliema kollha tal-kindergarten sabiex jipparteċipaw (kopja meħmuża). Dawk l-għalliema li jaċċettaw li jieħdu sehem, jiġu kkuntattjati iktar tard sabiex jiġu mistiedna jieħdu sehem f'intervista rekordjata ta' madwar siegħa fuq l-użu tal-empatija fil-klassi. Ha jsiru wkoll osservazzjonijiet fil-klassi biex ir-riċerkatriċi tkun tista' tosserva l-interazzjonijiet li jsiru fil-klassi bejn l-għalliema u l-istudenti. Peress li l-istudenti se jiġu osservati, il-ġenituri/kustodji legali se tingħatalhom ittra ta' informazzjoni u formola ta' kunsens u għalhekk ikun hemm bżonn li din tingħata mill-għalliem/a.

L-intervista ser tiġi rrekordjata. Huwa garantit li dak kollu li jintqal ser jinżamm kunfidenzjali. L-identita' tal-għalliema, tal-istudenti tal-iskola m'hijiex ser tiġi żvelata tul il-proċess kollu tar-riċerka. Jien u s-supervizur, Prof. Paul A. Bartolo, biss se jkollna aċċess għall-intervista u għan-noti li jittieħdu fil-klassi. Ir-rekordjar ser jiġi mħassar wara li l-proċess tal-istudju jkun lest.

Il-parteeipazzjoni f'dan l-istudju hija kompletament volontarja, u għalliema u ġenituri/kustodji legali għandhom kull dritt li jirrifjutaw li ma jieħdux sehem, mingħajr ma jiġu mistennija jagħtu spjegazzjoni għal din id-deċiżjoni. Għandhom ukoll id-dritt li jirtiraw il-kunsens tagħhom f'kull stadju tar-riċerka. Jekk jagħzlu li jirtiraw mir-riċerka, kull informazzjoni li jkun provdew tiġi mħassra.

Il-parteeipazzjoni tal-iskola fiha dawn ir-riskji: minhabba li din ir-riċerka ser tesplora l-użu tal-empatija fl-għalliema, hemm ir-riskju li għalliema jistgħu ikunu mmarkati empatiċi jew mhux empatiċi. Biex dan jiġi evitat, ir-riċerkatriċi ser tkun empatika waqt l-intervista. Barra

minn hekk, ir-riċerka ser tiffoka fuq l-imġieba tal-ġhalliema u l-effett ta' dan fuq l-istudenti u għalhekk, mhux ser tkun qed tagħti tikketta lill-ġhalliema. L-identita' tal-iskola, tal-istudenti u tal-ġhalliema m'hijiex ser tiġi żvelata tul il-proċess kollu tar-riċerka. Il-parteciċipanti ser ikunu nfurmati bid-dritt tagħhom li jirrifjutaw milli jipparteċipaw jew li jirtiraw il-kunsens tagħhom mingħajr ma jipprovdu spjegazzjoni.

Il-parteciċipanti għandhom ukoll id-dritt taħt il-liġi tal-*General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR) u tal-leġiżlazzjoni nazzjonali, li jaċċessaw, ibiddu kif ukoll isaqsu għal informazzjoni li tikkonċerna lilhom biex tiġi mħassra fejn hu applikabbli. L-informazzjoni kollha miġbura ser tkun maħzuna b'mod anonimu fuq kompjuters aċċessibbli biss permezz ta' password u l-awdjo-registrazzjonijiet ser jiġu mħassra wara li l-intervisti jiġu transkritti u evalwati. Kopja ta' din l-ittra ta' informazzjoni ser tiġi provduta lilek biex tinżamm għandek għal referenza fil-futur.

F'każ li għandek xi mistoqsijiet dwar dan l-istudju, tiddejjaqx tikkuntattjani permezz ta' telefonata jew e-mail li jidru hawn taħt. Tista' tikkuntattja wkoll lis-superviżur tiegħi, Prof. Paul A. Bartolo, Faculty of Social Wellbeing, Università ta' Malta, fuq 23402927 jew b'e-mail paul.a.bartolo@um.edu.mt.

Nirringrazzjak mill-quddiem,

Lara Portelli, Studenta tal-MPsy (Ed.)
Faculty for Social Wellbeing,
University of Malta,
Phone
Email

Prof. Paul A. Bartolo (Superviżur)
Faculty for Social Wellbeing,
University of Malta
Phone
Email

Appendix C.1: Information Sheet for Teachers in English

Information Sheet for Teachers

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Lara Portelli and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master in Psychology (Education). I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled “Teacher Empathy for a Positive Socio-Emotional Classroom Climate in the Early Years’ Classroom: Teachers’ Perspectives”. This is being supervised by Prof. Paul Bartolo. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your school’s involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study is to explore the influence of teacher-student interaction on the socioemotional classroom climate in the early years’ classroom. This is a chance for you to share your perspectives and experiences on teachers’ use of empathy. It is expected that findings will be useful for other educators to enhance the use of empathy for more effective education. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be invited to respond to one semi-structured audio-recorded interview about empathy in teaching of approximately an hour. Classroom observations will also be held in order to observe the interactions between teachers and their students. Since observations will involve the presence of students, you will be kindly required to pass out information sheets and consent forms to the students’ parents/legal guardians.

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. The school, teachers’ and children’s identities will be protected throughout the research process and no real names will be used. Data collected will be used solely for the purpose of this study and only my research supervisor Prof. Paul Bartolo and I, will have access to the transcripts of the interviews and written notes about the observations.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be deleted.

Your participation entails the following risks: Since this study will explore teacher empathy in teachers, there might be a risk of labelling teachers. To prevent this from happening, the research will not label teachers as empathic or not empathic but point out different teacher behaviours and their observed impact on students. Moreover, children and teachers will also

be anonymized during the data collection and analysis in order for their identities to be protected.

Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased. All data collected will be stored in an anonymized form on a password protected files and equipment and all interview audio-recordings will be destroyed as soon as they have been transcribed and evaluated.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail lara.portelli.13@um.edu.mt; you can also contact my supervisor over the phone 23402927 or via email: paul.a.bartolo@um.edu.mt

Sincerely,

Lara Portelli.
Faculty for Social Wellbeing
University of Malta
Email
Phone

Prof. Paul A. Bartolo
Faculty for Social Wellbeing
University of Malta
Email
Phone

Appendix C.2: Information Sheet for Teachers in Maltese

Għażiż/a għalliem/a,

Jiena, Lara Portelli, studenta fil-kors tal-Masters fil-Psikoloġija (Education) fl-Universita' ta' Malta, nixtieq nagħmillek stedina sabiex tipparteċipa fir-riċerka tiegħi, bħala parti mill-istudji tal-kors, li ser tkun dwar kif l-għalliema tal-Kindergarten jużaw l-empatija fil-klassi.

L-għan ta' din ir-riċerka huwa li jesplora n-natura tar-relazzjoni ta' bejn l-għalliema u l-istudenti tagħhom, u kif din tista' tinfluwenza l-atmosfera soċjo-emozzjonali tal-klassi tal-Kindergarten. Din ir-riċerka ser tagħtik iċ-ċans biex taqsam il-perspettivi u l-esperjenzi tiegħek dwar dan is-suġġett. Għalhekk, il-kontribuzzjoni tiegħek tkun importanti sabiex edukaturi oħrajn jużaw l-empatija għal tagħlim iktar effettiv. Kull informazzjoni li tiġi miġbura ser tintuża biss għall-finijiet ta' din ir-riċerka.

Jekk tagħzel li tiegħu sehem f'dan l-istudju, ser tiġi mistieden/mistiedna biex tiegħu sehem f'intervista rekordjata madwar siegħa fuq l-użu tal-empatija fil-klassi. Ha jsiru wkoll osservazzjonijiet fil-klassi biex inkun nista' nosserva l-interazzjonijiet li jsiru fil-klassi bejn l-għalliema u l-istudenti. Peress li l-istudenti se jiġu osservati, il-ġenituri/kustodji legali se tingħatalhom ittra ta' informazzjoni u formola ta' kunsens. Għalhekk ikun hemm bżonn li din tgħaddihom.

L-intervista ser tiġi rrekordjata. Huwa garantit li dak kollu li jintqal ser jinżamm kunfidenzjali. L-identita' tal-għalliema, tal-istudenti u tal-iskola m'hijiex ser tiġi żvelata tul il-process kollu tar-riċerka. Jien u s-superviżur, Prof. Paul A. Bartolo, biss se jkollna aċċess għall-intervista u għan-noti li jittieħdu fil-klassi. Ir-rekordjar ser jiġi mħassar wara li l-process tal-istudju jkun lest.

Il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek f'dan l-istudju hija kompletament volontarja, u għandek kull dritt li tirrifjuta li tiegħu sehem, mingħajr ma tiġi mistenni/mistennija tagħti spjegazzjoni għal din id-deċiżjoni. Tista' wkoll tagħzel li ma tirrispondix xi mistoqsija waqt l-intervista. Barra minn hekk, għandek ukoll id-dritt li tirtira l-kunsens tiegħek f'kull stadju tar-riċerka. Jekk tagħzel dan, kull informazzjoni li tkun provdejt, tiġi mħassra.

Il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek fiha dawn ir-riskji: minhabba li din ir-riċerka ser tesplora l-użu tal-empatija fl-għalliema, hemm ir-riskju li għalliema jistgħu ikunu mmarkati empatici jew mhux empatici. Biex dan jiġi evitat, ir-riċerkatriċi ser tkun empatika waqt l-intervista. Barra minn hekk, ir-riċerka ser tiffoka fuq l-għaġir tal-għalliema u l-effett ta' dan fuq l-istudenti u mhux ser tkun qed tagħti tikketta lill-għalliema. L-identita' tal-iskola, tal-istudenti u tal-għalliema m'hijiex ser tiġi żvelata tul il-process kollu tar-riċerka. Il-parteċipanti ser ikunu nfurmati bid-dritt tagħhom li jirrifjutaw milli jipparteċipaw jew li jirtiraw il-kunsens tagħhom mingħajr ma jipprovdu spjegazzjoni.

Bħala partecipant/a għandek ukoll id-dritt taħt il-liġi tal-*General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR) u tal-leġislazzjoni nazzjonali, li taċċessa, tbiddel kif ukoll issaqsi għal informazzjoni li tikkonċerna lilek biex tiġi mħassra fejn hu applikabbli. L-informazzjoni kollha miġbura ser tkun maħżuna b'mod anonimu fuq kompjuters aċċessibbli biss permezz ta' password u l-awdjo-registrazzjonijiet ser jiġu mħassra wara li l-intervisti jiġu transkritti u evalwati.

Kopja ta' din l-ittra ta' informazzjoni ser tiġi provduta lilek biex tinzamm għandek għal referenza fil-futur.

F'każ li għandek xi mistoqsijiet dwar dan l-istudju, tiddejjaqx tikkuntattjani permezz ta' telefonata jew e-mail li jidhru hawn taħt. Tista tikkuntattja wkoll lis-supervizur tiegħi, Prof. Paul A. Bartolo, Faculty of Social Wellbeing, Università' ta' Malta, fuq 23402927 jew b'e-mail paul.a.bartolo@um.edu.mt.

Nirringrazzjak mill-quddiem,

Lara Portelli, Studenta tal-MPsy (Ed.)
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University of Malta,
Phone
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Prof. Paul A. Bartolo (Supervizur)
Faculty for Social Wellbeing,
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Email

Appendix D.1: Consent Form for Teachers in English

Teacher Empathy for a Positive Socio-Emotional Classroom Climate in the Early Years' Classroom: Teachers' Perspectives

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Lara Portelli. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased.
3. I understand that the researcher will conduct two classroom observations and an interview to explore teacher empathy and its influence on the socio emotional classroom climate. I am aware that the interview will be audio-recorded and take approximately an hour whilst the class observations will be held over separate days. I understand that the interview is to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.
4. I am aware that, if I give my consent, extracts from my interview may be reproduced in these outputs, either in anonymous form, or using a pseudonym [a made-up name or code – e.g., respondent A].
5. I am aware that my data will be pseudonymised, i.e., my identity will not be noted on transcripts or notes from my interview, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes that link my data to my identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer, and only the researcher will have access to this information. Any hard-copy materials will be placed in a locked cupboard. Any material that identifies me as a participant in this study will be stored securely *for the duration of the study* and will then be destroyed.
6. I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.
7. I am aware that I may ask to be given the opportunity to review relevant extracts of the transcript of my interview, before the results of the study are published. I am also aware that I may ask for changes be made, if I consider this to be necessary.
8. I understand that my participation *entails the following risks*: There might be a risk of labelling teachers. However, for this to be prevented, the research will not label teachers as empathic or not empathic but point out empathic and non-empathic behaviours and their observed impact on students. Moreover, children and teachers will also be anonymized during the data collection and analysis in order for their

identities to be protected. I have also been informed of my right to refuse to participate or to withdraw consent without the need to offer an explanation.

9. I understand that *there are the following direct benefits to me*: I will get the opportunity to share my perspectives and experiences on teachers' use of empathy I also understand that this research may benefit others by yielding useful implications for the training of teachers for socioemotional learning.
10. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
11. I understand that all data collected will be *erased on completion of the study and following publication of results*.
12. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Lara Portelli.
Faculty for Social Wellbeing
University of Malta
Email
Phone

Prof. Paul A. Bartolo
Faculty for Social Wellbeing
University of Malta
Email
Phone

Appendix D.2: Consent Form for Teachers in Maltese

Jien, is-sottoskritt, naċċetta li nipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju li ser isir minn Lara Portelli. Din il-formola ta' kunsens tispeċifika t-termini tal-parteeċipazzjoni tiegħi f'dan l-istudju.

1. Inghatajt informazzjoni fuq l-għan ta' din ir-riċerka, kelli l-opportunita' li nsaqsi l-mistoqsijiet tiegħi u ngħatajt risposti sodisfaċenti.
2. Jiena nifhem li l-parteeċipazzjoni tiegħi f'din ir-riċerka hija volontarja u għandi dritt li ma nipparteċipax u li nista' wkoll nirtira l-kunsens tiegħi f'kull hin mingħajr ma għandi għalfejn nagħti raġuni. Nifhem ukoll li għandi d-dritt nirrifjuta milli nwieġeb xi mistoqsijiet. Jekk jien nirtira l-kunsens tiegħi, informazzjoni li għandha x'taqsam miegħi ser tiġi mħassra.
3. Jiena nifhem li r-riċerkatriċi ser tagħmel żewġ osservazzjonijiet fil-klassi kif ukoll intervista biex tesplora kif l-użu tal-empatija tinfluwenza l-atmosfera soċjo-emozzjonali tal-klassi tal-Kindergarten. Nifhem li l-intervista ser tiġi rrekordjata, li ser iddum madwar siegħa u li l-osservazzjonijiet ser jsiru fi għranet differenti. Nifhem ukoll li l-intervista ser issir f'post u hin li hu komdu għalija.
4. Nifhem li jekk nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi, biċċiet mill-intervista tiegħi jistgħu jiġu riprodotti fir-riċerka b'mod anonimu jew jintuża psewdonimu biex tiġi mħarsa l-identita' tiegħi.
5. Nifhem li kull materjal li jista' jidentifikani bħala parteċipant/a f'din ir-riċerka ser jiġi maħzun b'mod sigur sakemm titlesta r-riċerka imbagħad jiġi mħassar. Nifhem ukoll li dan il-materjal li jista' jidentifikani ser ikun maħzun fuq kompjuter aċċessibbli biss mir-riċerkatriċi permezz ta' password. Informazzjoni *hard copy* ser tiġi maħzuna f'post imsakkar.
6. Nifhem li l-identita' tiegħi ser tkun dejjem protetta u qatt mhu ser tkun żvelata fuq pubblikazzjonijiet, rapporti jew preżentazzjonijiet li għandhom x'jaqsmu ma din ir-riċerka.
7. Nifhem li nista' nsaqsi biex isiru xi bidliet fit-transkrizzjoni tal-intervista li tkun saret miegħi jekk inhoss li neċessarju.
8. Nifhem li l-parteeċipazzjoni tiegħi f'din ir-riċerka għandha dawn ir-riskji: minhabba li din ir-riċerka ser tesplora l-użu tal-empatija fl-għalliema, hemm ir-riskju li għalliema jistgħu ikunu mmarkati empatiċi jew mhux empatiċi. Biex dan jiġi evitat, ir-riċerkatriċi ser tkun empatika waqt l-intervista. Barra minn hekk, ir-riċerka ser tiffoka fuq l-għagir tal-għalliema u l-effett ta' dan fuq l-istudenti u mhux ser tkun qed tagħti tikketta lill-għalliema. L-identita' tal-iskola, tal-istudenti u l-għalliema m'hijiex ser tiġi żvelata tul il-proċess kollu tar-riċerka. Ġejt ukoll infurmat/a bid-dritt tiegħi li nirrifjuta milli nipparteċipa u li nista' nirtira l-kunsens tiegħi mingħajr ma noffri spjegazzjoni.
9. Nifhem li jekk nipparteċipa għandi dawn il-benefiċċji: ser ikolli ċ-ċans biex naqsam il-perspettivi u l-esperjenzi tiegħi dwar dan is-sugġett. Nifhem ukoll li l-kontribuzzjoni tiegħi tkun importanti sabiex edukaturi oħra jużaw l-empatija għal taġlim iktar effettiv.

10. Nifhem li taħt il-liġi tal-*General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR) u tal-leġiżlazzjoni nazzjonali, għandi d-dritt li naċċessa, nbiddel kif ukoll insaqsi għal informazzjoni li tikkonċerna lili biex tiġi mħassra fejn hu applikabbli.
11. Nifhem li kull informazzjoni miġbura ser tiġi mħassra meta r-riċerka titlesta u tkun ippubblikata.
12. Ġejt provdut/a kopja tal-ittra ta' informazzjoni kif ukoll kopja ta' din il-formola ta' kunsens.

Qrajt u fhimt din il-formola u naqbel li nipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju.

Isem tal-parteeipant/a: _____

Firma: _____

Data: _____

Lara Portelli, Studenta tal-MPsy (Ed.)
Faculty for Social Wellbeing
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Prof. Paul A. Bartolo (Supervizur)
Faculty for Social Wellbeing
University of Malta
Phone
Email

Appendix E.1: Information Sheet for Parent/Legal Guardian in English

Information Sheet for Parents/Legal Guardians

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Lara Portelli and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master in Psychology (Education). I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled “Teacher Empathy for a Positive Socio-Emotional Classroom Climate in the Early Years’ Classroom: Teachers’ Perspectives”. This is being supervised by Prof. Paul Bartolo. Your child is being invited to participate in this study. Below you will find information about this research and about what your child’s involvement would entail, should you decide to allow him/her to take part.

This study aims to explore the influence of teacher-student interaction on the socioemotional classroom climate in the kindergarten classroom. Your child’s participation in this study would allow for the study of teacher effectiveness and will therefore have important implications for the training of teachers for socioemotional learning which is seen as important especially in early years education. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.

Your child’s teacher has been invited to participate in this research. As part of this study, I will spend some time in your child’s classroom observing the teacher’s interactions with the children. Should you choose to allow your child to participate in this research, your child would be included in these observations. Although the focus of the study is on the teacher, the children’s interaction including that of your child with the teacher will be part of the observations undertaken for the study. However, no names of any children will be recorded, and no names will be used in the dissertation. Moreover, I will not be interacting with the children, and I will not be asking them any questions.

The school, teachers’ and children’s identities will be protected throughout the research process and no real names will be used as the data collected will be anonymized. Data collected will be used solely for the purpose of this study and only my research supervisor Prof. Paul Bartolo and I, will have access to the transcripts of the interviews and written notes about the observations.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse that your child is included, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw your child’s participation from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any student observations involving your child will not be included in the study.

The participation of your child does not entail any change from the usual classroom activities. No consequences are envisaged in the study whether your child participates or not.

Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning your child to be erased. All data collected will be stored in an anonymized form on password protected files and equipment and all interview audio-recordings will be destroyed as soon as they have been transcribed and evaluated.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail lara.portelli.13@um.edu.mt; you can also contact my supervisor by phone on 23402927 or via email: paul.a.bartolo@um.edu.mt

Sincerely,

Lara Portelli.
Faculty for Social Wellbeing
University of Malta
Email
Phone

Prof. Paul A. Bartolo
Faculty for Social Wellbeing
University of Malta
Email
Phone

Appendix E.2: Information Sheet for Parents/Legal Guardians in Maltese

Ittra ta' Informazzjoni Għall-Ġenituri/Kustodji Legali

Għażiż/a sinjur/a

Jiena, Lara Portelli, studenta fil-kors tal-Masters fil- Psikoloġija (Education) fl-Universita' ta' Malta, nixtieq nagħmillek stedina sabiex l-iskola tipparteċipa fir-riċerka tiegħi, bħala parti mill-istudju tal-kors, li ser tkun dwar kif l-għalliema tal-Kindergarten jużaw l-empatija fil-klassi.

Din ir-riċerka tixtieq tesplora n-natura tar-relazzjoni ta' bejn l-għalliema u l-istudenti tagħhom, u kif din tista' tinfluwenza l-atmosfera soċjo-emozzjonali tal-klassi tal-Kindergarten. Il-parteeċipazzjoni tat-tifel/tifla tiegħek se tagħti opportunita' għal studju ferm importanti għall-iżvilupp tat-tagħlim soċjo-emozzjonali fil-kindergarten.

L-għalliem/a tat-tifel/tifla tiegħek ġie/ġiet invitat/a biex jipparteċipa/tipparteċipa f'din ir-riċerka. Jiena, bħala r-riċerkatriċi ser inkun qed inqatta' f'tit hin fil-klassi biex nosserva l-interazzjonijiet li jsiru bejn l-għalliema u l-istudenti. Jekk tagħżel li t-tifel/tifla tiegħek jieħu/tieħu sehem f'dan l-istudju, jista' jkun li dawn l-osservazzjonijiet jinkludu lit-tifel/tifla tiegħek. Għalkemm din ir-riċerka ser tkun qed tiffoka fuq l-għalliem/a, l-interazzjonijiet tat-tfal, inkluż tat-tifel/tifla tiegħek, ser ikunu parti mill-osservazzjonijiet. Madankollu, jien mhux ser inkun qed inkellem jew nistaqsi mistoqsijiet lit-tfal.

L-identita' tal-għalliema, tal-istudenti u tal-iskola m'hijiex ser tiġi żvelata tul il-proċess kollu tar-riċerka. L-ismijiet tat-tfal mhux se jiġu rekordjati u mhux se jintużaw f'dan l-istudju. L-informazzjoni kollha miġbura se tiġi użata għall-finijiet ta' dan l-istudju. Jien u s-superviżur tiegħi, Prof. Paul A. Bartolo, biss se jkollna aċċess għal din l-informazzjoni.

Il-kontribut tat-tifel/tifla tiegħek f'dan l-istudju huwa kompletament volontarju, u għandek kull dritt li tagħżel li ma jieħux/tieħux sehem, minghajr ma tiġi mistenni/mistennija li tagħti spjegazzjoni għal din id-deċiżjoni. Għandek ukoll id-dritt li tirtira l-kunsens tiegħek f'kull stadju tar-riċerka. Jekk tagħżel dan, osservazzjonijiet li jkunu jinkludu lit-tifel/tifla tiegħek jiġu mhassra.

Jekk tixtieq li t-tifel/tifla tiegħek jieħu/tieħu sehem fl-osservazzjonijiet, jekk jogħġbok iffirma l-formola meħmuża u ibgħatha lill-għalliem/a.

Għandek ukoll id-dritt taħt il-liġi tal-*General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR) u tal-leġiżlazzjoni nazzjonali, li taċċessa, tbiddel kif ukoll issaqsi għal informazzjoni li tikkonċerna lit-tifel/tifla tiegħek biex tiġi mhassra fejn hu applikabbli. L-informazzjoni kollha miġbura ser tkun maħżuna b'mod anonimu fuq kompjuters aċċessibbli biss permezz ta' password u l-awdjo-registrazzjonijiet ser jiġu mhassra wara li l-intervisti jiġu transkritti u evalwati.

Kopja ta' din l-ittra ta' informazzjoni ser tigi provduta lilek biex tinżamm għandek għal referenza fil-futur.

F'każ li għandek xi mistoqsijiet dwar dan l-istudju, tiddejjaqx tikkuntattjani permezz ta' telefonata jew e-mail li jidhru hawn taht. Tista tikkuntattja wkoll lis-supervizur tiegħi, Prof. Paul A. Bartolo, Faculty of Social Wellbeing, Universita' ta' Malta, fuq 23402927 jew b'e-mail paul.a.bartolo@um.edu.mt.

Nirringrazzjak mill-quddiem,

Lara Portelli, Studenta tal-MPsy (Ed.)
Faculty for Social Wellbeing,
University of Malta,
Email
Phone

Prof Paul A. Bartolo (Supervizur)
Faculty for Social Wellbeing,
University of Malta
Email
Phone

Appendix F.1: Consent Form for Parents/Legal Guardians in English

Consent Form for Parents/Legal Guardians

Teacher Empathy for a Positive Socio-Emotional Classroom Climate in the Early Years' Classroom: Teachers' Perspectives

I, the undersigned, give my consent for my son/daughter take part in the study conducted by Lara Portelli. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept that child participate, or to refuse or stop my child's participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. In the event that I choose to withdraw my son/daughter's participation from the study, any observations involving my child will not be included in the study.
3. I understand that the researcher will conduct two classroom observations to explore teacher empathy and its influence on the socio emotional classroom climate. I am aware that the class observations will be held over separate days. . I am aware that the focus is on the teacher's behaviour but that this includes observation of the teacher's interaction with children including my child. However, no names of any children will be recorded, and no names will be used in the dissertation. Moreover, the researcher will not be interacting with the children, and will not be asking them any questions.
4. I am aware that data will be pseudonymised; i.e., my child's identity will not be noted during written observations taken during the class visit, but instead, a code will be assigned to indicate the child the teacher was interacting with. The codes that link data to my child's identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer, and only the researcher will have access to this information. Any hard-copy materials will be placed in a locked cupboard.
5. I am aware that my child's identity and personal information will not be revealed in any data, publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.
6. I understand that my child's participation does not any risk as there will be no change in classroom activities for the purpose of the study. Moreover, children and teachers will also be anonymized during the data collection and analysis in order for their identities to be protected. I have also been informed of my right to refuse to participate or to withdraw consent without the need to offer an explanation.
7. I understand that this research may benefit others by yielding useful implications for the training of teachers for socioemotional learning which is seen as especially important in early years classrooms.

8. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning my child to be erased.
9. I understand that all data collected will be erased on completion of the study and following publication of results.
10. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of Parent/Legal Guardian: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Lara Portelli.
Faculty for Social Wellbeing
University of Malta
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Phone

Prof. Paul A. Bartolo
Faculty for Social Wellbeing
University of Malta
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Appendix F.2: Consent Form for Parents/Legal Guardians in Maltese

Formola ta' Kunsens għall-Genituri/Kustodji Legali

Jien, is-sottoskritt, naċċetta li t-tifel/tifla tiegħi tipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju li ser isir minn Lara Portelli. Din il-formola ta' kunsens tispesifika t-termini tal-parteeipazzjoni tat-tifel/tifla f'dan l-istudju.

1. Inghatajt informazzjoni fuq l-għan ta' din ir-riċerka, kelli l-opportunita' li nsaqsi l-mistoqsijiet tiegħi u ngħatajt risposti sodisfaċenti.
2. Jiena nifhem li l-parteeipazzjoni tat-tifel/tifla tiegħi f'din ir-riċerka hija volontarja u għandi dritt nirrifjuta li jipparteċipa/tipparteċipa u li nista' wkoll nirtira l-kunsens tiegħi f'kull hin mingħajr ma għandi għalfejn nagħti raġuni. Jekk jien nirtira l-kunsens tiegħi, informazzjoni li għandha x'taqsam mat-tifel/tifla tiegħi ser tiġi mħassra.
3. Jiena nifhem li r-riċerkatriċi ser tagħmel żewġ osservazzjonijiet fil-klassi biex tesplora kif l-użu tal-empatija tinfluwenza l-atmosfera soċjo-emozzjonali tal-klassi tal-Kindergarten. Nifhem li l-osservazzjonijiet ser isiru f'granet differenti. Nifhem ukoll li r-riċerka ser tiffoka fuq l-imġieba tal-għalliema u li din tinkludi wkoll l-interazzjonijiet tal-għalliema mal-istudenti, inkluż it-tifel/tifla tiegħi. Madankollu, l-ismijiet tat-tfal mhux ser ikunu qegħdin jintużaw u r-riċerkatriċi mhux ser tkun qed tkellem jew tistaqsi mistoqsijiet lit-tfal.
4. Nifhem li l-informazzjoni miġbura ser tkun anonimizzata permezz ta' psewdonimi. Kodiċi ser jiġu użati (eż. student/a A) biex jirreferu għall-istudent/a li l-għalliema tkun qed tkellem jew tirreferi. Dawn il-kodiċi li jistgħu jidentifikaw lit-tifel/tifla tiegħi bħala parteeipant/a f'din ir-riċerka ser jiġu maħżuna b'mod sigur sakemm titlesta r-riċerka mbagħad jiġu mħassrin. Nifhem ukoll li dan il-materjal li jista' jidentifika lit-tifel/tifla tiegħi ser ikun maħżun fuq kompjuter aċċessibbli biss mir-riċerkatriċi permezz ta' password. Informazzjoni *hard copy* ser tkun qed tiġi maħżuna f'post imsakkar.
5. Nifhem li l-identita' tat-tifel/tifla tiegħi ser tkun dejjem protetta u qatt mhu ser tkun żvelata fuq pubblikazzjonijiet, rapporti jew preżentazzjonijiet li għandhom x'jaqsmu ma' din ir-riċerka.
6. Nifhem li l-parteeipazzjoni tat-tifel/tifla tiegħi f'din ir-riċerka ma fihex riskji għax mhux ser ikun hemm bidliet fl-attivitajiet tal-klassi għall-fini ta' din ir-riċerka. Barra minn hekk, l-identita' tal-iskola, tal-istudenti u l-għalliema m'hijiex ser tiġi żvelata tul il-proċess kollu tar-riċerka. Ġejt ukoll infurmat/a bid-dritt tiegħi li nirrifjuta li t-tifel/tifla tiegħi tipparteċipa u li nista' nirtira l-kunsens tiegħi mingħajr ma noffri spjegazzjoni.
7. Nifhem li din ir-riċerka tista' tkun importanti sabiex edukaturi oħra jużaw l-empatija għal tagħlim iktar effettiv.

8. Nifhem li taħt il-liġi tal-*General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR) u tal-leġiżlazzjoni nazzjonali, għandi d-dritt li naċċessa, nbiddel kif ukoll nistaqsi għal informazzjoni li tikkonċerna lit-tifel/tifla tiegħi biex tigi mhassra fejn hu applikabbli
9. Nifhem li kull informazzjoni miġbura ser tigi mhassra meta r-riċerka titlesta u tkun ippubblikata.
10. Ġejt provdut/a kopja tal-ittra ta' informazzjoni kif ukoll kopja ta' din il-formola ta' kunsens.

Qrajt u fhimt din il-formola u naqbel li t-tifel/tifla tiegħi jipparteċipa/tipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju.

Isem tal-ġenitur /kustodju legali: _____

Firma: _____

Data: _____

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 Faculty for Social Wellbeing
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 Email
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Prof. Paul A. Bartolo (Superviżur)
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Appendix G.1: Interview Schedule in English

Interview Schedule

Title: Teacher Empathy for a Positive Socio-Emotional Classroom Climate in the Early Years' Classroom: Teachers' Perspectives

Main Research Question: How is classroom climate influenced by teachers' use or lack of empathy?

Background

1. Is your class kindergarten one or two?
2. How long have you been teaching?
3. What training have you had for teaching early years?

Interactions in the classroom

Teacher-Student

- How would you describe your relationships with your students?
- How do you relate/connect with your students?
- Are there any students you know better than others?
- How do you find out if a student has any personal issues?
- How do you know what their interests are?
- How do students let you know that they need to talk with you?
- How do your children let you know what they want/ they need help?
- How would you describe your role in students' lives?

Peer Relationships

- How would you describe the relationships between your students?

Classroom climate

- Was classroom climate mentioned during your training?
- What does it mean to you? (If shows understanding of the term then: How important do you see it in your daily teaching practice?)
- What kind of a classroom environment do you try to create? How do you create it? Why?
- What kind of atmosphere in the classroom do you think is the best for student learning and wellbeing?
- How would you describe the actual atmosphere of your classroom?
- How do you think the children feel in your classroom? (Probes – secure? Anxious? Aggressive?)
- Are children aggressive or helpful towards each other?
- How do they react when someone breaks the rules?

- How do you let students know that something they are doing is inappropriate, or not meeting your standards?
- How do you manage negative and positive behaviour? How do approach discipline in your classroom?
- Do the children in your classroom care about each other? Why yes? Why not?

Empathy

- Was empathy ever mentioned in your training?
- What does empathy mean for you? How important do you see it in your teaching?
- Do you make use of empathy in relation to others outside the classroom?
- Do you think you are using empathy in your teaching? Why yes/ why not? How?
- Can you mention an example of when you felt you were very empathic?
- Do you think the way you relate to the children has any influence on how the children then relate to each other? On their interest in learning activities?
- How do you identify/approach and manage those children who struggle socially/emotionally?
- Do you ever find yourself saddened because of a child's difficulties or happy to see a child striving and succeeding?
- Do you find you have to struggle to be empathic with the children? Why yes? Why not?
- Is there anything that keeps you from being as empathic with the children as you might otherwise be?

Conclusion

Is there anything else about teacher empathy or classroom climate that you would like to tell me about?

Appendix G.2: Interview Schedule in Maltese

Skeda ta' l-intervista

Titlu: *Esplorazzjoni dwar l-użu ta' l-empatija mill-ġhalliema biex tinholq atmosfera soċjo-emozzjonali pozittiva fil-klassi tal-kindergarten.*

Il-mistoqsija tar-ricerka: *Kif l-ġhalliema, jużaw l-empatija ma' l-istudenti tagħhom? U kif din l-empatija tinfluwenza l-atmosfera soċjo-emozzjonali fil-klassi?*

1. *F liema sena tal-kindergarten tgħallem?*
2. *Kemm ilek tgħallem?*
3. *X' taħrig kellek biex tgħallem klassi tal-kindergarten?*

Interazzjonijiet fil-klassi

Bejn l-ġhalliema u l-istudenti

- Kif tiddeskrivi ir-relazzjonijiet mal-istudenti tiegħek?
- Kif tirrelata magħhom?
- Hemm xi studenti li forsi tafhom ftit iktar mil-oħrajn?
- Kif issir taf jekk student għandux xi problemi personali?
- Kif issir taf l-interessi tal-istudenti tiegħek?
- L-istudenti tiegħek kif juruk li għandhom bżonn ikellmuk?
- Kif juruk li għandhom bżonn l-għajnuna tiegħek?
- Kif tiddeskrivi ir-rwol tiegħek fil-ħajja tal-istudenti tal-klassi tiegħek?

Relazzjonijiet bejn l-istudenti nfushom

- Kif tiddeskrivi ir-relazzjonijiet li għandhom it-tfal bejniethom?

L-atmosfera tal-klassi

- It-terminu 'atmosfera tal-klassi' (classroom climate) kien nkluż fit-taħrig biex sirt għalliem/a?
- Xi jfisser għalik? (Kemm tarah importanti fit-tagħlim tiegħek ta kuljum?)
- X'tip t'atmosfera tipprova toħloq fil-klassi tiegħek? Kif toħloqha? Għalfejn?
- Liema tip t'atmosfera taħseb li hija l-aħjar biex it-tfal jitgħallmu u jhossuhom kuntenti?
- Kif tiddeskrivi l-atmosfera tal-klassi tiegħek?
- Kif taħseb li jhossuhom l-istudenti fil-klassi tiegħek? (Probes – kalmi/kuntenti/anzjużi etc?)
- Kif jirrelataw bejniethom it-tfal, jkunu aggressivi flimkien jew jippruvaw jgħinu lil xulxin?
- Kif tireaġixxi inti meta it-tfal jiksru ir-regoli tal-klassi?
- Kif turihom li qegħdin jgħamlu xi ħaġa li mhux suppost? Jew mhux ta livell tiegħek?
- Kif timmaniġġja mġieba tajba u dik inqas tajba? Kif tirregola l-imġieba fil-klassi?

- Taħseb lit-tfal tal-klassi tiegħek jieħdu ħsieb ta xulxin? Għalfejn iva/le?

Empatija

- It-terminu 'empatija' ġieli kien jissemma fit-taħriġ tiegħek?
- X'taħseb dwar l-kunċett ta' l-empatija? Fi rwol ta' għalliem/a, kemm taħseb li hija importanti li tkun empatiku/empatika?
- Tuża empatija fil-ħajja tiegħek ta kuljum, barra mil-klassi?
- Taħseb li inti qed tagħmel użu ta' l-empatija fl-interazzjonijiet tiegħek ma' l-istudenti? Meta u kif?
- Tista ittini eżempju ta' meta hassejtek li kont empatika/u hafna?
- Taħseb li l-mod ta kif inti tirrelata mal-istudenti jhalli impatt fuq ir-relazzjoni bejn l-istudenti? Fuq l-interess tagħhom li jitgħallmu?
- Kif tidentifika u tavviċina dawk l-istudenti li għandhom xi diffikulta emozzjonali/soċjali?
- Ġieli thossok mdejjaq/mdejjaq minħabba xi diffikultajiet li jkun għaddej minnhom xi student/a minn tiegħek? Jew thossok kuntent/a għax tara xi student/a li qed jirnexxi/tirnexxi?
- Taħseb li issibha diffiċli biex tuża l-empatija mat-tfal? Għalfejn iva/Għalfejn le?
- Hemm xi ħaġa li żżommok milli tkun empatiku/a iktar milli tixtieq fil-fklassi?

Konkluzjoni

Qed naslu għat-tmiem ta' din l-intervista, tixtieq iżżid xihaga oħra?

Appendix H: Participants' Quotations in Maltese

Global Theme 1

A: Fis-social work trid tifhem lill-klijent ... emm, jien naraha bħala *you put yourself in the child's shoes*. Nipprova tifhima mis-sitwazzjoni li għaddej minnha t-tifel dik l-età...nara d-dinja minn dawk l-għajnejn.

E: Mhux empatika biss fil-klassi, parti minnek dik...Jiena nemmen li iktar kemm tkun arroganti man-nies iktar huma ha jwarrbuk. Iktar kemm tkun sinċiera u onesta iktar ser iħobbuk...trid tara kif tgħidha kelma. Mhux imbilli tgħidha, trid tkun sensitiva għax dak li jkun ma tafx kif ha johodha.

O: Jien nemmen li trid tagħmel affarijiet li meta wasalt id-dar tfajt rasek fuq l-imhadda u stajt torqod. Sfortunatament, mill-bieb 'il barra tal-iskola ma nista' nagħmel xejn. Nagħmel li nista'.

D: Tista' tagħmilha u tista' le, jien personali, it-tifel tiegħi għalissa mhux qed nibagħtu l-iskola, u għallura jien meta t-teachers tiegħu jibagħtulu x-xogħol niehu pjaċir. Għallura crafts, songs, kulma nagħmel, nibgħatulhom.

J: Immur id-dar u nibqa' newden qishom isiru tiegħi, mhux għax tlaqt mill-iskola waqft, qas tista' taqta' line.

E: Tipprova tirrifletti. Trid tkun onesta miegħek innifsek u trid tpoġġi lilek innifsek minflokhom għax bħal ma ngħid lilhom..."Kieku jien it-teacher tiegħi tagħmilli hekk, kieku jien nibża? Immur happy l-iskola kieku?" Trid issaqsi *ħafna* affarijiet lilek innifsek

D: Kienet vojta, allura żbajna l-hajt biex ikun colourful. Trid tagħmilha u għax biex tkun plain għal tfal ta' din l-età mhux sabiha.

A: *I am empathic* imma *I need to take care of myself* biex inkun nista' nkun *empathic* għal tal-familja u mat-tfal stess.

L: Il-fatt li jidhlu filgħodu fil-klassi b'dik id-daħka! Mhux ninsa l-problemi li jkolli 'l barra mill-iskola jiena!

E: Meta tkun għaddejja minn xi haġa personali u ma tantx ikollok aptit...imma xorta jien nipprova tad-dar nzommu id-dar. Jirnexxieli ta...nahseb għax tiġini naturali.

O: Jibqgħu ituni rigali fil-Christmas. Tifel kien miegħi kinder issa year 4. It-tfal jibqgħu jafuhulek ta' kemm tkun għamilt magħhom.

O: Dħalt u m'għandi aptit xejn u ngħidilhom "Isma' illum ha tilagħbu biss għax m'għandix aptit". Imma heqq ha jiġu affetwati huma.

A: Qegħdin żmien il-Milied u issibha diffiċli għax heqq ikollok deadlines u trid tgħagġel u meta tibda tgħagġel u l-priorità ma tibqax it-tfal imma l-crafts u l-concert u rehearsals.

L: Dejjem ha nipprova ghax once li huma tiegħi, tiegħi, għallura ehe. Moħħi dejjem jgħid, “Hawnhekk miegħi iridu jkunu kuntenti, ma rridx narahom imdejqqin”.

J: Jiena nemmen li ahna teachers tal-ħajja, tal-*lifeskills*, ta’ affarijiet morali, ta’ *what’s good and what isn’t*, noholqu l-baži ta’ ħajjithom.

O: Jien lesta li ninsa l-ittri, kollox. Jekk jidraw biżżejjed ir-rutina tal-iskola. Jekk telgħu fuq il-palk u ħadu pjaċir, jekk meta ħrigna fil-bitha qed jieħdu pjaċir jithalltu. Għaliya nhossni achieved ghax jekk inti ta’ din l-età ha tobghod l-iskola ha tibqa’ miegħek *all your life*.

D: Jekk mhux qed iħossu komdu l-iskola, tista’ turih kemm trid letters, imma jekk mhux komdu fil-klassi, jekk mhux happy, mhu ha jieħu xejn. Għallura fil-klassi rrid li *they feel settled*, mela imbagħad okay, nistgħu nitgħallmu

E: Jekk dan, tifel jew tifla jkunu mqarbin hafna u kulma jsib min jgħajjat miegħu, jista jaħseb li hadd ma jhobbu, hadd ma jridu. Imma jekk issib min ikellmek sew, kif għandu jkellmek, jgħid “Ule, mela jien mhux tifel ħażin.”

M: Naħseb li importanti hafna li jkollok relazzjoni tajba mat-tfal tal-klassi. Ngħożżha hafna. Jien inhossni l-ħabiba tagħhom mhux l-għalliema tagħhom biss imma ħabiba wkoll, li jistgħu jtkellmu miegħi u jieħdu gost miegħi... Nemmen li relazzjoni hi importanti wisq, inkella xiex? Ix-xogħol tiegħi immur ngħallimhom u nitlaq l’hemm mingħajr ma hemm bond?

A: Tant tqatta’ ħin magħhom, u tant issir tafhom, u tant kemm issir parti minn ħajjithom li qas itik li ma tkunx parti minn ħajjithom! Ghax tant jistiednuk biex issir parti minn ħajjithom huma li qas tista’ le! Bis-serjeta’ ta’, it’s beautiful hafna.

J: Tagħmel hafna *observations* imma trid mhux tosserva biss imma tifhem dak li qed jigri. Igifieri trid tifhem x’inhu għaddej minn moħħhom, minn ħajjithom...

M: Jien nipprova nżomm komunikazzjoni mal-ġenituri kollha ghax huma juruk x’vera qed jigri min- naħa tad-dar... x’qed jaffetwahom, forsi affarijiet li jien ma nindunax bihom l-iskola huma jgħiduli.

L: Inti taħdem għal qalbek u komda jekk il-parents jaħdmu miegħek.

O: Għallura ngħidilhom “Isma’, ibgħatuli email, ċempluli, niltaqgħu, nitkellmu.”

A: *Through a lot of love, care, communication* mal-ġenituri hafna biex tipprowa tifhem lilu minn xiex inhu għaddej. Titkellem mal-ġenituri u tipprowa taħdem *towards a common goal* flimkien.

J: Inżomm hafna communication magħhom, ta’ x’għamlu t-tfal matul il-gurnata. Hemm l-Facebook page, ntella’ r-ritratti. Eventually meta lill-parents ittihom hafna informazzjoni fuq uliedhom, fuq x’qed jagħmlu fil-klassi, huma jhossuhom involuti. Meta jhossuhom hekk ha jieħdu pjaċir u ha jafdawkt iktar.

D: Jekk inkun naf li l-missier qiegħed l-isptar, infittex hekk. Imbagħad il-biċċa l-kbira, jekk ikun qiegħed hosbieni fuq xi haġa t-tifel u għalhekk ma jkunx qed jitkellem jew jipparteċipa, nibda mbagħad nittekkilja dik il-biċċa b’xi video jew xi storja, it-tifel jgħid “Ara din kif taf?”

A: *Xi kultant they become really attached to us, qisu they want that extra attention... Imbagħad I give that particular child more time and more attention, qisu to create that that safety net li forsi hu għandu bżonn... nkella nhossni hażin jekk nibqa' għaddejja qisu business as usual when it's not u.*

J: Nipprova nifhem milli noqghod ngħid “Dik kemm hi diffiċli” ... ikolli hafna understanding li għall-parents mhux faċli...

L: Dawn it-tfal li daħlu issa, wara l-ewwel ġurnata xhin eżatt spiċċajna bghattilhom email ta' kif marro u hekk biex nserhillohom rashom.

A: Għidtilhom li għamel hażin imma tfajt il-glitter fuqu. Dan it-tifel ta' xi hadd, hadd ma jrid jisma' negattiv fuq uliedu, *it's not easy*.

O: Jekk jien ha nigi ngħid lil omm “Isma' qed ninnota hekk u hekk” u tgħidli “Imma taf kemm hu bravu!”. Mela hemm *you blocked me!* Qed turini li taf li hemm xi haġa u ma tridx qisek tisma'.

M: Tipprova kemm jista' jkun iżzommu bilanċjat ovvjament, ma rridx noqghod il-hin kollu ngħajjat, imma jkun hemm drabi fejn ikolli nżomm id-dixxiplina. Jekk hu hin li nitgħallmu hin li nitgħallmu, imma mbagħad eżempju meta xi hadd ikollu l-birthday nohloq atmosfera ta' ferħ u aqta' kemm nagħmlu storbu u naqbzu.

A: Nipprova nispjega, nipprova l-ewwel nagħti raġuni għaliex le, u *I will repeat it* kull darba li tigri, kull darba li hemm bżonn.

E: Trid tfiehmhom xi jkunu għamlu hażin. Għidtilhom li jiena ma rridx li jaqgħu u jweggħu għax jiena nhobbhom, għallura nagħtihom timeout biex huma jkunu jafu li dik hija hażina u ma jagħmluhiex.

A: Mhux ha nagħmilha mall-ewwel imma ehe *I will*, jekk qed jagħmilha għaxar darbiet kuljum, imbagħad *by that time I will be use a loud voice*. Jekk tkun xi haġa naqra gravi, *I remove the child from play*, jekk dat-tifel qed iwaddab blocks, *it's not fair on others* illi dawn qed jaqilgħu d-daqqiet.

D: Nwaqqfu mil-logħob, u ikollu hin jistenna u jaħseb biex imbagħad jgħidli hu x'għamel hażin. Hu jkun jaf x'għamel hażin ta', jekk jgħidli “Ma nafx”, jerga jistenna sakemm jgħidli.

E: Inti ttihom *choice*. Tkun qed tirrispettahom. Ma qbadtx u ghazilt għalihom, iħossuhom importanti għax għamlu l-għażla tagħhom u mbagħad jafu li hemm il-konsegwenzi jekk ma tagħmilhiex.

O: Kont għamilt ilhom platt mas-siġġu bil-flash cards u kont għamilt *ten cookies* u mbagħad kienu jibdew jonqsu. Skond eżempju jekk *it's break time* u inti qas ftaħt lunch box, hemm haġt wahda, fhimt?

J: It-tfal juru li hemm problem *in their daily routine*. Noħorġu barra u l-behaviour tiegħu ikun *aggressive*, fil-yard, jigdem jew isawwat. Igifieri iktar milli jitkellmu, it-tfal iktar jesprimu ruħhom hekk bil-behaviour...

A: Mhux ha tasal jekk ha toqgħod sejra “Illallu kemm ha jagħmel għaġeb, kemm ha jibki”. Ha timtela b’hafna frustrazzjoni inti għax ha jibqa’ jibki, *because you’re not there for him*, u ha jibqa’ jibki għax mhux iħossok li inti *a safe place for him*.

M: Trid tadatta *inti*. Jekk għandhom diffikultà, *inti* trid tifhem. Isma din m’għandhiex għażla oħra, din mhux tagħmel apposta mela trid tinbidel inti kif tkun magħha, b’dak li toffri inti trid tgħinha.

J: Jekk inkun naf li hemm xi tifel jew tifla partikolari li għandhom problem id-dar, ha jkolli naqra iktar empathy magħhom. Nipprova nagħtihom jiehdu dak li mhux jiehdu mid-dar. Se nurik li nħobbok, nurik li tista’ thossok safe miegħi. Ma jfissirx li ha nċedi kollox...

O: Kelli tifel adopted fil-klassi u kien jagħmel minn kollox biex ma thobbux.

L: l-ewwel insaqsi tipo, insaqsi lilu jaf x’għamel hażin, id-differenza bejn tajjeb u hażin.

J: Hemm *timeout chair*, siġġu fil-klassi jpoġġu bilqiegħda fuqu, iġġieghlhom jaħsbu x’għamlu hażin, “Inti taf x’għamilt hażin?” u eventually okay jitgħallmu.

M: Qsamthom fi *groups*, u ntihom il-*points*. *The groups that were behaving* ha jiehdu point, imma dawk li le ha nnaqqas il-point imma nneħhi bħala group, mhux tiegħek biss. Irridhom jitgħallmu li jekk tbat i inti, anke haddiehor ha jbat i miegħek, l-azzjoni tiegħek għandha konsegwenza.

O: Sempliciment anke jekk qed inkantaw, u Peter kanta ngħidlu “Bravu Peter!”. L-oħrajn xħin jisimġu hekk, *they follow in*, ikantaw ukoll. Iġifieri inti ma taqbadx u tgħidlu “Inti għax mhux tgħid xejn” Issib lil Peter li qed ikanta u tgħid lilu bravu.

A: *I praise* hafna. Tara wiċċhom jinbidel iġifieri! Wiċċhom *it brightens up* u jitbissmu. Għalihom *they felt special* u nuża ċertu kliem bħal “Wow kemm inti bravu fiha l-ħaġa!” ċertu kliem jiehdu pjaċir jisimawhom!

J: Nuża trophy system. At the end of each week joħodha tifel differenti. Lill-parents fil-bidu navżahom jekk jiġu d-dar bit-trophy ngħidilhom għamlu hafna għaġeb, uruhom kemm huma bravi!

E: Jekk per eżempju qed ipiġu, jekk għamilha sabiħa “Ara proset ċapċpulu waħda!”. Imbagħad jiġi ieħor per eżempju forsi *a little bit less nice* “Ara proset, ejja nċapċpulu waħda wkoll”. Kulhadd jieħu l-proset.

Global Theme 2

E: Jiena *I’m there* bħala xi ħaġa li jekk ikollhom bżonni...qiegħda hemm biex jiena ngħinhom, il-*point of reference* tagħhom.

J: Xi kultant nipprova kemm nipprova, anke fl-aħħar tas-sena ngħid ‘istra dat-tifel ma rnexxilix nibni bond miegħu’, tiġrili u nħossni hażin.

L: Eżempju illum għidt lilek mela għada l’ haddiehor. Nagħmlu l-isticks, nagħmlu l-isem u skond min jitla’ jitkellem għax dik li jiġri. Eżempju tifel jgħidli “Nista nkellmek jiena?”

Għax jaf li hemm haddieħor jgħid, jgħid, jgħid. U hu jibda jgħid “U jien fi xhin ha nitkellem?”.

D: heqq ġieli jekk ma jkunux fluent tkun diffiċli issir tafhom. Allura jew through social stories, nara nipprova, nkompli nipprova nuża affarijiet differenti, xi clip żgħira...

A: Inti trid imbagħad tapprowċja *through play*. Issaqsi affarijiet bil-mod il-mod per eżempju, biex qisek inti ma tkunx direct, tipprowċja, tkun fina.

O: Jien fil-bidu tas-sena nitlobhom jagħmluli chart, nsir naf min għandu pets id-dar, xi jhobbu...

L: Kien hemm problemi id-dar, bil-logħob bdejt nilgħab magħha, qas insaqsiha għax kont naf li mhux ha tgħidli. Qatt ma qaltli tipo d-dar x'inhu jiġri. Bil-logħob irnexxieli nibni relazzjoni magħha.

D: Huma individwi u nixtieq nkun irrid insir nafom iktar. Jekk issir tafom iktar, tkun tista' tittekkilja n-needs tagħhom.

M: Jekk naf li hemm xi haġa li toġġgobhom mela ha nidhol fiha jien ukoll halli jkolli fuq xiex inkellimhom.

E: Ikunu jilagħbu waħedhom u nkun fuq il-mejda tiegħi u nkun qiegħda nisma'. Inhobb ukoll inhallihom fuq mejda waħda biex ikunu flimkien. Għax jien ha nsir naf lilom kollha. Jekk tagħmilhom fuq mejda differenti ha nkun taf lil daww l-erba' ta' hdejja.

L: F'circle time insaqsi fuqhom. “X'għamilt ilbierah? Xi thobb tiekol? Biex thobb tilgħab?” U kulhadd jgħid tiegħu. Insaqs, waqt circle time filgħodu. Għandi dik in-nofs siegħa, just nismagħhom, ha jgħiduli huma.

D: Nisma...anke jiġi tifel u jgħidlek xi haġa li għal dak il-hin ma jkollhiex x'taqsam, kif taqbad tgħid, ma tkunx kruċjali, tkun *out of context*. Forsi ikun irid jgħidli mall-ewwel jew jurini xi haġa. *I empathise with him* u nisimgħu xorta, ngħidlu “wow eżempju kemm hi sabiha”, xorta I praise him.

A: Huma jitekllmu hafna fuq il-ħajja tagħhom, eżempju “Daż-żarbun ġdid”. Inti you go down to their level avolja jkollok hafna x'tagħmel. *if it's important to them* anke jekk qed jitekllmu xi haġa vera sempliċi, inti *you need to go with it*, “Ara kemm hu sabiħ iż-żarbun, ehe ġdid?” U tkompli titkellem u ssaqsihom...*if it's important to them* mela you have to stop whatever you're doing u tisma' għal dak il-hin.

M: Din is-sena ġieli kelli drabi fejn il-parents bagħtuli nota biex jgħiduli li t-tfal qed iħossuhom anzjużi, minħabba l-virus. Allura fil-klassi nitkellmu fuq li rridu nagħmlu dak li nistgħu nikkontrollaw aħna, l-parti tagħna...hemm hafna rules imma nfiehmhom għalfejn, biex jibqgħu safe huma u haddieħor.

L: *I don't brush it off, I give them their time* illi mhux faċli, u nahseb through empathy stajt nagħmilha dil-ħaġa.

L: Ma kulhadd ha naħdem differenti. Activity ha nagħmilha imma jekk nara li tifla għandha bżonn iktar attenzjoni mela ha nersaq iktar lejha imma ehe kull karattru differenti. Jien nipprova nadatta għalihom.

O: Kelli tifel bl-Autism darba, kuljum kont nagħmel id-*daily routine*...Trid timxi fuq *individual needs*, mhux li għandu bżonn dan, għandu bżonnu haddieħor.

A: Li hemm bżonn speċi, *you have to be whatever that child needs, requires*...igifieri jekk dan irid hug, *you have to give him a hug*. Għaliya, *my role* mhux li nkun it-teacher u ngħallimhom il-letters. Primarjament, *it is a role ta' I have to see to their needs*.

O: Għandi tifla *she needs extra hugs throughout the day* mela *I give her extra hugs*. Meta ngħannaq waħda nsaqsi “Hawn min irid hug?” Għax inti ma tistax tagħti attenzjoni lil waħda għax taf li għandha bżonnha u l-oħrajn tinjorahom...jaf xi hadd għax jistħi joqgħod lura milli *they ask for a hug*, you need to ask...

A: Fil-bidu jidhlu kollha “Jiena l-ewwel” għax jekk dejjem id-dar heqq ovvja hekk ha jkunu. Imma mbagħad *after a few months*, tiskanta tibda tidhol f’*moħħhom the idea of a group*. *They do care about each other*. Tarahom jaqbzu għal xulxin eżempju.

D: Jhossuhom komdi gifieri, narahom joħorġu l-karattru tagħhom iħossuhom *safe enough* li jesprimu rwieħom

J: Per eżempju anke foreigners kelli. Għall-bidu diffiċli anke għaliya biex nifhimhom u hekk imma mbagħad at the end of the day veru jiġu close miegħi, iħossuhom *they belong* fil-klassi

L: Issa dahlu tnejn ġodda, l-oħrajn preparajthom minn qabel “Isma”, issa ha niżdiedu, u tajthom l-ismijiet tagħhom...xhin dahlu laqgħuhom ħafna u mill-ewwel bdew jilagħbu magħhom!

E: Għax meta jkollok xi tifel b’xi needs jew disability għalfejn għandi ngħidilhom dak il-ħażin kollu? Għalxiex m’għandekx tgħidilhom “Taf kemm hu ħelu hux?” U vera tkun!

A: Il-priorità tiegħi hi li dan eżempju jitgħalliem li *he’s important, he’s unique and he’s special, that he is*...mhux li hadd ma jimpurtah, li *he has a voice*. Igifieri l-kinder hekk narah jien.

D: Jien nipprova li dejjem tkun fun imma skond il-bżonn, ġieli tkun energetic, eżempju lejn l-aħħar tal-ġurnata nżommha iktar kalma.

A: Jekk tara li l-activity mhux tagħmel sens, tieqaf u ngħid “okay *I have to rethink this activity* għax mhux taħdem, *they’re getting bored*”. *You put some music on, and you dance* biex tipprova żżommha positive.

Global Theme 3

J: Jibqgħu jiftakru t-tfal kemm ħadna pjaċir, iktar minn kemm tgħallimna letters u numbers. Iktar inti kif ġgħelthom iħossuhom għax fil-kinder at the end of the day m’hu sejrin għal ebda eżami. Għandhom ħajjithom jitgħallmu letters u numbers.

J: It-tfal ha jhossuk mall-ewwel u ghid li ha jagħmlu gurnata ha jagħmlu l-kuntrarju għax ihossuk. Jien ġieli kelli drabi fejn iddejjaqt fix-xogħol tiegħi, u it-tfal ihossuk, u mbagħad inti trid tghid “ha nara x’ha nagħmillhom, halli nbiddu naqra l-atmosfera tal-klassi” Allura niċċajta magħhom, iġifieri nbiddel l-umur tiegħi għax naħseb minn hemm irid jibda kollox...

D: Anke għax kinder differenti ta’ atmosfera differenti, hemm iktar fejn tibni relationship, qisha kommunita’.

E: Qisu l-klassi hija familja li qisu kulhadd irid jitgħallem imur ma’ xulxin. Naħseb hija importanti ħafna...jitgħallmu jhobbu lil xulxin, jisimghu lil-xulxin.

L: L-fatt li qed nara dik id-dahka kull filgħodu mela naf li l-atmosfera tal-klassi tiegħi hija kuntenta, jiġu ferħanin.

A: Tisma’ mill-parents li jgħidu li t-tfal *are looking forward and excited to come to school*, kollha jgħidu l-istess haġa.

O: Ihossuhom *safe, confident*... iva żgur fuqha għax meta bdejna dis-sena ma ftaħtiex jien il-klassi u min fetaħha werwer it-tfal, tghidx kemm għajtet dit-teacher. Kelli tifla kif tmiss xi haġa ma’ ħalqha tirremetti! Bil-biża u illum iġifieri tiekol, m’għadhiex tibza anzi ntiha l-ikel minn tiegħi!

J: Ehe niprova nikkrea atmosfera ta’ *happiness*...u hekk ngħin lili nnifsi wkoll, nittiehed.

D: Niprova ninzel, le stenna *mhux ninzel*, inkun għal-livell tagħhom, għax jien għaliġa, it-tfal ma narahomx bħal li *tghid tinzel* għalihom, xorta trid tirrispettahom, għax huma human beings. Tinzel għal-livell tagħhom qisha mhux sabiha u..

J: *You need to listen to them, if you’re not going to listen to them, how are you expecting them to listen to you*, meta inti tghid xi haġa? Trid tkun *both ways*, ma nistax nippretendi li dawn ha jieqfu jisimghuni meta jiena qas biss qed inħares lejhom u nkellimhom...

E: Mhux għax jiena t-teacher bilfors iridu jagħmlu kif irrid jiena. Jiena ġieli per eżempju jkolli affarijiet pjanati u jgħiduli “Miss ha nilagħbu naqra dalgħodu please”. Issa filgħodu taf inti l-biċċa l-kbira tibda b’circle imma għaliex m’għandix intihelhom?

E: Tipprova turihom iktar mħabba, nkun iktar soft anke kif nkellimhom...*your voice makes a difference*.

M: Trid tkun dejjem *warm*. Din is-sena diffiċli ħafna biex nesprimu din il-*warmth*. Jekk hemm studenta li wegġgħet saqajha jien ma nistax immur u nogħrokielha, jien ma nistax intiha dik il-*love and support* b’mod fiżiku imma din is-sena trid issib modi differenti... qed nagħmlu l-air high fives!

A: *If you’re warm and caring*, ha jieħdu pjaċir. Min għax irid hug, min irid jgħannqek hu, min irid jkellmek. Għalhekk trid tipprova ma toqgħodx tinkwieta fuq letters, numbers u hekk imma fuq *just being there with them and for them*.

A: Naħseb li *they are happy because they know what is expected minnhom. It is a safe place* fejn jafu li dik tajba u dik le eżempju, *it’s not confusing*.

O: Inzomm dixxiplina, *rules are there to be followed*. Imma mhux jiena it-teacher u intom hemm taht, jghiduli x'jahsbu.

L: Bir-rules ihossu hom safe. Tghallimhom li isma', kull fejn tmur hemm certu regoli.

J: Jien nispjegalthom, nispjegalthom ahna x'ser naghmli fil-gurnata biex huma jhossu hom safe. Nafu x'ha jigri...u naghti hafna hugs u hafna affection biex ihossu hom safe fil-klassi avolja qeghdin wahedhom.

L: Kont ngħid din it-tifla tibza' mit-toilet ghax mhux qiegħda magħha. Kont ta hi qiegħda fit-toilet u jien ndaħħal saqajja taht il-bieb u ngħidilha "Tarani? Hawn qiegħda ara saqajja tičcaqlaq!" u mbagħad mxejna mill-bieb tat-toilet sal-kuritur u l-hin kollu nkellimha, nkellimha "Jien hawn, jien hawn". Bdejna pass pass u mbagħad bdiet tmur ma' habiba tagħha, u issa okay ġejna....

D: L-importanti li kulhadd ihossu safe...jien irrid li fil-klassi jekk jaghmli żball mhux ha joqogħdu jistħu.

O: *I sit down with them, I play with them*, nagħmel żbalji apposta biex jidhku bija.

M: Nipprova nfiehmhom kif jahsbha haddiehor, kif ihossu haddiehor.

D: Ngħamel it-topic *Around the world* ghax nixtieq li jifhmu lil haddiehor. F'din l-iskola hawn hafna barranin, u għallura nkun nixtieq li naghmli dan it-topic biex nuri li avolja kulhadd ġej minn post differenti u kultura differenti, xorta nistghu inkunu flimkien u niehdu gost flimkien.

E: Trid tfiehmhom "Tiehu pjačir jekk jagħmlulek hekk?". Igifieri tpoġġi lilhom *in the picture* ghax jekk ma tpoġġix lilhom *in the picture*, ma jifmhux, jghidulek "Mhux jien wegġajt".

L: Fil-bidu kienu jghiduli "Ara dik għamlet pipi taħtha". Kont nispjegalthom: "Okay mela għandha bzonn l-għajjnuna, jista' xi hadd joħodha toilet?"

J: Nipprova ndaħħal lilhom ukoll, ngħidilhom ara "So and so qed ihossu naqra sick illum, ejjew niehdu hsiebu, ejjew inziegħlu bih iktar"

M: Din is-sena kelli tifla li vera kienet inkwetata ghax in-nannu tagħha kien sick. Flimkien mat-tfal l-oħra tal-klassi għidna talba għalih biex hi thossha *supported*, u qed ngħidlek bdejna naraw il-moral tagħha dejjem tiela' iktar....

M: Lili jarawni bhala role model, naħseb jiehdu din l-empathy u jassorbuha għalihom infushom imbagħad jużawha huma ma' haddiehor. Dak li tagħmel it-teacher Vangelu igifieri sinjal li tajjeb, mela huma jaghmli hekk ma' haddiehor.

E: *I'm kind with them u huma they're nice with each other*, jghinu lil xulxin. Anke l-parents jghidulek, eżempju "Tghid hekk u hekk hux?". Ghax meta jilagħbu mal-pupi jisimghu hom, jekk jien ngħid "Ejja sabiha ma gara xejn ta", jirrepetu kollox id-dar. Anke fil-logħob tagħhom jiġi rifless kif jien immur magħhom

A: Emm ġieli eżempju kelli sena diffiċli u *my tone of voice* kont nisimgħu fihom, kont nkun *snappy*. Jekk jien ngħid “Clean up! [ton ta’ rabja]” kont nisma’ lilhom jgħajtu ma’ xulxin “Clean up!”. Kont inħossni ħazin!

A: Qegħdin jaqblu ħafna ħafna veru qed jaqblu. Qed jibnu l-groups bejniethom, imma mbagħad bejn il-groups qed jaqblu wkoll, jilagħbu flimkien ukoll. Nismagħhom jtkellmu bejniethom fuq xi ħaġa flok jiġġieldu, *they manage to sort out l-argument*.

J: Jkun hemm xi hadd li kien l-iskola u telaq kmieni, kif immur lura fil-klassi jsaqsuni. Jgħiduli “Fejn hu dak?”. Iġifieri *they care for each other*, anke jekk xi hadd ma ġiex, isaqsuni għaliex.

E: Jkun hemm armonija fil-klassi, li t-tfal ikunu jaċċettaw lil xulxin. Jixxerjaw ma’ xulxin. Ikun hemm imħabba hekk bejniethom, mhux just l-erba’ tal-mejda tiegħi.

L: Once li jkollok atmosfera komda fil-klassi huma bejniethom ukoll, bla ma trid tarahom huma “Ejja ħa ngħinek fil basket”. *They care* ħafna għax huma draw lil xulxin. Huma jhossu għal xulxin. Anke lili ta iħossu lili eżempju li illum mhux kuntenta, u ssibha l-għajnuna minn għandhom.

J: Mela ħafna clapping fil-klassi mit-tfal l-oħra, kulhadd jieħu pjaċir b’xulxin.

O: Dis-sena mhux tajbin [ir-relazzjonijiet] hemm *communication difficulties* kbar. Klassi shiħa tmur speech.

Global Theme 4:

O: Iġifieri free play jien nemmen bih...jitgħallmu jissoċjalizzaw, jitgħallmu mil-logħob.

J: Tajthom il-blocks ħa npoġġi bilqiegħda hdejhom u ħa nilgħab magħhom bil-blocks. Ma tistax teħodha *for granted* li kulhadd jaf jilgħab bil-blocks.

D: Tista’ tgħidilhom ħafna affarijiet, tgħallimhom ħafna affarijiet through logħob, through games, mhux just academic speċi...

M: Mill-blocks jitgħallmu ħafna. Ħa jitgħallmu colours, ħa jitgħallmu shape, ħa jitgħallmu texture, emm, u ħa jitgħallmu jibnul-affarijiet.

E: Anke eżempju meta jkunu se jibdew ipingu ngħidilhom “Ready, steady, go!”. U meta ninsa ngħidilhom jgħiduli huma! Iġifieri eħe, iġifieri huma joħduha bħala game hekk speċi u fl-istess ħin għaliya mhi xejn speċjali.

L: Jekk l-activity mhux toġġobha, x’hadit jiena? Tliftha e. Imma jekk għamiltha meta għandi l-interest tagħha, hekk irbaħtha.

E: Issa jekk ħa noqgħod ngħidilhom “Aghmlu hekk u għamlu hekk”, it’s not teaching għax ħa jiddependu minni.

A: Jekk tara li l-activity mhux taħdem, mhux juru nteress, *it’s not working*, mela *you have to change it* jew tieqaf.

L: Noqghod fuq il-feedback tagħhom, iktar inħosshom komdi jekk milli jekk eżempju ngħidilha “Trid tagħmilli bilfors in-numbers issa!” ħa tagħmiluli ta’ bilfors, imma mhux qed tifhem x’inhu jiġri.

D: Nara il-guidelines, mela iridu jkunu jafu numbers, colours uekk, imbagħad nippjana imma xorta nkun flessibli, in-needs tagħhom jigwidawni.

E: Jekk tgħidiilhom li jridu jagħmlu hekk bilfors, li ħa jiġri hu, li ħa jiddejqu l-iskola, ħa jitnervžu, mill-ghada ħa jiġu jibku. Trid timxi livell magħhom.

D: L-interessi tat-tfal jigwidawni x’nagħmel u x’ma nagħmilx fil-klassi.

O: Topic minnhom għamilt kaxxi tant u inħoloq interess u eċitament!

J: Nħallihom jilagħbu u nosserva sew x’ħa jagħmlu bihom. Ikun hemm min jibni dudu jew jibni torri, iġifieri mbagħad tibda tara...qisek inti tgħin lit-tfal joħorġu l-interessi tagħhom, l-interessi ta’ kulhadd, għax daww easy ħa jgħidulek “Miss jien inħobb hekk” imma min hu iktar introvert, I mean mhux daqsekk faċli li jkellmek.

Appendix I: FREC Research Proposal Acceptance

After being reviewed by FREC, this research proposal has been:			
Approved	x	Provisionally Approved	Conditionally Approved
Refused			
Upon being <u>approved</u> , this research proposal needs to go to UREC (x indicates <u>YES</u>)			

Date
11 06 2020

Appendix J: Turnitin Digital Receipt



Digital Receipt

This receipt acknowledges that Turnitin received your paper. Below you will find the receipt information regarding your submission.

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