

Psycho-Spiritual Approach to Empathy - a New Paradigm for Teacher-Student Relationship

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Abstract— Empathy is a mental construct that is fundamental to teacher-student relationship. This article is an attempt to highlight that the psycho-spiritual approach of empathy can enhance the teacher-student relationship and produce conducive environment to needy students. This article assumes that this approach enhance both human and spiritual development of the students. The objective of this article are such as; to impart the due importance of empathy for teacher-student relationship, to bring out the psycho-spiritual writings of empathy from the writings of Sudhir Kakar, and interpret a new paradigm for teacher-student relationship with a view of holistic development of the students.

Key words— *Empathy, Psycho-spiritual Understanding of Empathy, Teacher-Student Relationship; Self-Psychology*

1. Introduction

The basic motivation of education is greatly challenged today. The elementary focus of education is tending toward only the intellectual formation of the students rather than the spiritual and emotional growth of the students. So, students are easily deviated and not able to face their ordinary life struggles. Gretchen McAllister and Jacqueline Jordan Irvine propose a challenge that ‘decades of research in neuroscience have revealed that poverty has a marked effect on students’ ability to learn [1].’ According to Bridget Cooper identifies certain challenges due to the changes that occur due to stress among students that ‘the brain triggers a surge in cortisol, a hormone that produces the “fight or flight” response and inhibits the ability to absorb new information and to connect emotionally with others. Stressed children are anxious, tuned-out, emotionally volatile, and have diminished energy, stamina, and memory. The result is a vicious cycle: Students experiencing trauma at home come to school unprepared to learn and unable to forge trusting relationships, leaving them more isolated and subject to failure, which further increases stress levels [2]. Based on these challenging background there is need for a new paradigm and approach to teachers through which they can help their students to face their challenges confidently. Therefore, this paper assumes that this new psycho-spiritual approach of

empathy in teacher-student relationship will enhance the holistic growth of the students. Holistic growth is a process of self-actualization and learning that combines an individual student’s mental, physical, social, emotional and spiritual growth.

Though there are number of researches suggest that the ability to have and display empathy is an important part in education such as, (a) positive interactions with students, (b) supportive classroom environments, and (c) student-centred classrooms. It can create such qualities like sensitivity, patience, respect, tolerance, acceptance, understanding, flexibility, openness, and humility among students [3]. However, all these studies of empathy in teaching mainly focused from psychological theoretical construction. Hence, this article is a new approach intended to explore based on psycho-spiritual understanding from the writings of Sudhir Kakar.

Sudhir Kakar is an Indian Psychoanalyst presently living in India. He emphasizes psycho-spiritual dimensions of healing where the healer works as guru and a healer at the same time. His books *Mad and Divine: Spirit and Psyche in the Modern World* [4] and *The Analyst and the Mystic: Psychoanalytic Reflections on religion and Mysticism* [5] are special contributions in this field. Hence, this article attempts to answer these question such as; can empathy be effective in teacher-student relationship for effective performance in the school? How do empathetic behavior influence and give meaning to students who come with identity crisis, low motivation and poverty? How does psycho-spiritual understanding of empathy can contribute to teacher-student relationship? This article highlights first the importance of empathy in teacher-student relationship, meaning of empathy, finally on the source of psycho-spiritual writings of Kakar this paper attempts to argue this new paradigm of empathetic teacher-student relationship.

2. Research Findings on Empathy in Teacher-Student Relationship

There are significant research findings which emphasis that empathy is related to academic achievement and personal growth. Gretchen McAllister and Jacqueline Jordan Irvine who refers the study done by Foster and Irvine quotes that empathetic behaviours, often associated as an attribute of caring, helping, promote a positive

relationship with students and a positive classroom climate. Moreover, the research literature confirms that empathy and caring are linked with high academic achievement, particularly for culturally diverse students (Foster, 1995; Irvine, 1990) [6].

An another study on empathy in relation to diverse students Gretchen McAllister and Jacqueline Jordan Irvine mentions that fifty-six percent of the teachers in the study were concerned about their classroom environments and often reflected on how culturally diverse students might feel in their classrooms. They believed that empathy was an implicit part of being a caring, supportive, and responsive teacher with their culturally diverse students. In regard to their practice, teachers reported that an empathetic disposition led to more positive interactions with their students, supportive classroom climates, and student-centered pedagogy [7].

According to Noddings who has made research extensively on empathy and teachers effectiveness states that various attributes, such as listening, being patient, and being supportive, reflect a receptivity that leads to caring (Noddings, 1984). This type of caring can enhance classroom interactions between teachers and students and eventually create a better learning climate. Teachers in this study connected these various attributes of caring to empathy and believed that such behavior on their part fostered better relations with their students. Added to that refers fifty-nine percent of the teachers attributed that the changes in their classroom interactions with their students to the fact that they were using more empathetic behaviors [8]. The key findings of Bridget Cooper, in her thesis on *Empathy, Interaction and Caring: Teachers' Roles in a Constrained Environment* confirms that empathy expand the powerful effects on self-esteem, relationships and learning. Empathetic teachers are revealed as highly moral individuals who attach themselves mentally and emotionally to their students and generate similar responses in return [9]. Though all these findings focus vividly the importance of empathy in achievement and personal growth but ignore the spiritual dimensions of the students.

Having explained the need of empathy in teacher-student relationship this paper explores the broad meaning of empathy and psycho-spiritual understanding of empathy.

2.1 Empathy

The English word is derived from the Greek word ἐμπάθεια (*empathia*), which means "physical affection, passion." The term was adapted by Hermann Lotze and Robert Vischer to create the German word *Einfühlung* ("feeling into"), which was later translated by Edward B. Titchener into the English term empathy. Wan Abdul Rahman mentions that empathy is the ability to experience and relate to the thoughts, emotions, or experience of others. Empathy is defined as a skill of understanding others' feelings, predicaments, and

challenges better. He further quotes Goleman's idea that empathy also defined as the skill of sensing other people's emotions, allows for understanding beyond someone's apparent surface behavior by putting oneself in another's shoes and taking an active interest in their concerns (Goleman, 2000; Mencl & May, 2009) [10]. John Antony puts the meaning of empathy in the counselling context that "empathy is the mode of gathering subjective date about another self through vicarious introspection. It is the ability to enter into, and understand, the world (internal frame of reference) of another person, and communicate to her [11]." Snyder and others explain empathy as the ability to feel and share another person's emotions. Some believe that empathy involves the ability to match another's emotions, while others believe that empathy involves being tender hearted toward another person [12]. Though different scholars understand empathy in different context, but in simple terms empathy is understood as feeling into other person, getting into the shoes of other and ability to understand other's feelings and thoughts.

During my personal interview with Sudhir Kakar who explains deeply the meaning of empathy psycho-spiritually. 'It is able to feel what the other person is feeling. It is able to get into the other person. It is set to be your psyche process is at time. It is like 'You become blank in that state where you will be able to feel the person who is next to you. And the maximum understanding of another person can only come when you have empathy moments. It is exactly the moments he or she is feeling. The empathy is temporary states of unity with the other person. But the unity is of course there is no difference at all [13].' In which Kakar points out the deeper spiritual dimension of empathy as oneness and unity with other in which 'I' is lost and 'we' emerges.

2.2 Psycho-Spiritual Understanding of Empathy

Kakar explains empathy both psychologically and spiritually in three different dimensions Such as; empathy in healing, empathy an immanent quality to experience the divine, and empathy for connectedness.

2.3 Empathetic Guru and Spiritual Healing

According to Kakar refers the quality of spiritual guide's empathy which can make a significant contribution to modern healing methods. He notes that the patient's feeling of being deeply understood by the guru, of the Swami being the 'indweller'-of the guru's empathy, is a primary feature of the healing discourse in Eastern, especially Hindu and Tantric Buddhist, spiritual traditions [14]. Kakar markedly points out the basic connecting factor between guru and disciple, healer and healed is through empathy. It is a journey and process of healing ends with spiritual attainment. The words of guru's are the least

important part of what is happening between him and his listeners. If you listen to what he is saying, it is mostly banal and repetitive. Words are only the medium through which people are receiving the feelings of being completely accepted by the guru, of being safe, and of the guru's indefinable essence, his charisma, if you will [15].” For instance Kakar quotes the words of Sai Baba who constantly reminds his devotees that they are not separate from him; ‘I am in you, outside you, in front of you, above you, below you. I am all the time around you, in your proximity,’ and ‘anything coming out of the depth of your heart reaches me. So never have any doubt on this account [16].’ He claims firmly that empathy is common to both spiritual healing and psychoanalytic cure; the concept itself turns towards its ‘mystical’ pole in the former case and towards its rational, intellectual pole in the latter. According to Kakar the empathetic nature of guru towards disciples is a profound dimension for spiritual healing and emotional development.

2.4 Empathy a Way to Experience the Divine

Kakar interestingly applies the quality of empathy with spiritual discipline. Spiritual discipline seems to open the doors to an empathic responsiveness that can extend to a high degree of identification with another person. A radical increase in empathy for another person, claimed by spiritual adepts, is a part of their heightened responsiveness- empathy in its widest sense-towards the animate and inanimate worlds. The empathy is also translated as a heightened metaphysical openness towards the Divine [17]. Hence, the guru's quality of empathy enhances the patients to experience the seeker-patient's interaction with the teacher have the aim of establishing him as a highly reliable, always available self-object for merging experiences. Kakar refers that, Hindu spiritual traditions give importance to empathy but however not the point of affective identification with another's experience. A complete empathic knowledge of another person, they claim, involves the activation of a normally dormant ‘higher’ faculty or consciousness.

2.5 Empathy Leads to Spiritual Connectedness

The spiritual attainment according to Kakar is a journey and continual progress. In which one has to pass through different base camps of tolerance, compassion, empathy and unity. Empathy makes people feel that we are not alone; I am connected to self and other like relief from pain of isolation. And the higher form is that I am not self-centered, and accepted and again connectedness. This connectedness between self, others, social and god lead into the process of spiritual attainment [18]. Kakar further explains the process of spiritual attainment that the awareness of psyche is the first process that understanding the distortions to why it is hurt? Why is it egoistic? Why is it narcissism? Why does it

need to rebel? Why is it so angry? Those can be controlled but it is not to be get rid of. If you know what makes you rage, what makes you feel hurt, what are the things, where they come from, and then you can modulate them. In which awareness is the first step then leads to compassion with oneself and others and grows further to empathy and finally unity, the oneness with God. So empathy is the process which helps the spiritual stream of tolerance, compassion, empathy and finally experiencing unity.

To summarize, with regard to Kakar empathy is a spiritual quality which is a process for connecting God, people, and self, healing and experiencing the divine. With this psycho-spiritual approach of Kakar this article highlights empathy in teacher-student relationship.

2.6 Psycho-Spiritual Approach of Empathy in Teacher-Student Relationship

Ability to have and display empathy is an important part of teacher's role. Teachers who exhibit empathy in their school enable the students to understand who they are. It is ‘feeling into’ the mind of students which is in fact an important foundation of teacher-student relationship. The capacity of empathy the teachers develop to partake in the inner experience of another through unconscious healing energy that covers over the underlying mystery of the process. It is understood that teachers have to adopt to surrender themselves to their own unconscious mental activity to the students unconsciousness with their own unconscious. Empathy, they assert, is not only an unconscious process in which the teachers share the students experience in a larger, more objective and complex understanding of the people and then responding with an appropriate interpretation. The teacher's unconscious resonance with the students oscillates with a more intellectual attitude, to produce what has been called ‘generative empathy’, ‘vicarious introspection’ or ‘emotional knowing’. This teachers' communication of empathy to the student's inner state is primarily conveyed through words, symbolic gestures, loving presence and other limited attention sources like aural, visual, tactile and olfactory senses.

2.7 Empathetic Teachers are Emotional Healers

It is the immanence of the healing moment in the teacher-student relationship which inevitably pushes the teachers' image towards that of a divine parent and of the disciple towards that of a small child. In which Kakar explains the dynamism of healing with Kohutian psychology of the self, what he calls a self-object. Self-objects, strictly speaking, are not persons but the subjective aspect of a function performed by a relationship. These self-object experiences are more of intrapsychic rather than interpersonal, which evoke, maintain, and give cohesion to the self [19]. The very emergence and maintenance of the

self as a psychological structure, than, depends on the continued presence of an evoking sustaining-responding matrix of self-object experiences. Kakar argues that this self-object experience is always needed, from birth to death, the absence of these experiences leads to a sense of fragmentation of the self, including in extreme states of narcissistic starvation, the terrors of self-dissolution. Interestingly, a teacher who is very empathetic can offer this self-object experience to the students in rendering healthy environment in the school.

Kakar elaborately explains the self-object experience that how in the family a child requires self-object experience occurs primarily, though not exclusively by mother's touch and affirmative voice. In the adult, symbolic self-object experiences supplied by his culture, such and religious, aesthetic, and group experiences, may replace some of the more concrete modes of infancy and childhood. In the language of self-psychology, the teacher is the primary cultural, institutional self-object experience for students in classroom. According to the Allen M. Seigal with satisfaction of self-object needs, a person's feelings of healthy grandiosity, idealization, and connectedness are strengthened, and he or she gradually acquires self-regulatory capacities [20]. Thus, the empathetic teacher-student relationship is an important way an extension of the parent-child relationship, constituting a developmental second chance for obtaining the required nutrients for the cohesion, integration, and vigorousness of the self.

2.8 Implications of Empathy in Teacher-Student Relationship

Empathetic teachers are the greatest asserts to the school as they are able to inspire effectively and maintain relationships with students, colleagues and administration in their school environment. The relevance and implications of empathy in teachers-student relationship are Such as;

- It enhances relationships in school environment and gives the ability to understand the pain of the students.
- It enables students to have the nearness of divine experience through the person of empathetic teachers.
- It greatly diminishes the narcissistic tendency of 'I' rather it helps to develop 'we'.
- It heals the wounds of the students as one feels that I am understood by the teacher.
- It empowers teachers to respond appropriately to look after deviated students, low motivated students, poor students and aggressive students in the classroom.

- It facilitates pro-social motivation among students in the classroom and to handle the rough students easily.
- It gives the ability to respond student's problem constructively and motivating them towards the goal.
- It provides a flexible and smooth way of social interaction and affective empathy to produce a self-sacrificing, altruistic behavior in their school environment.
- It recognizes the potential strengths of students and influence students to become empathetic in their classroom.
- Empathetic teacher is seen less as person of authority who leads and controls but rather is seen as "a friend, a mentor, a facilitator, or an experienced traveling companion."
- It gives the ability to understand verbal and nonverbal cues, and learn to understand, and appreciate the differences among students.

Consequently, empathetic teachers effectively make impact in their relationship style and connectedness within self and students, and creating healing atmosphere in the school. Thus, it paves a way to experience the divine closer and nearer.

3. Conclusion

Empathetic teachers involve connecting and building relationships, listening and caring in students. It is trait and skill it can be learned and developed through constant practice and awareness. It is divine quality of a teacher who can connect lovingly to the deserving students in the school environment. Nevertheless, this psycho-spiritual approach is a new paradigm to teachers it invokes scientific experimental research for further expansion of knowledge.

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