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Empathic Relationships: The Foundation for Student Success

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Some Background

- The client—therapist relationship received its first systematic examination within person-centred therapy approaches based on the premise that the client has an **inherent capacity** for growth and self-actualisation.
- The role of the therapist is to encourage and foster that capacity within a safe ‘therapeutic alliance’ (Rogers, 1969; 1977, 1995).



Some Background

- Three therapist characteristics form the foundation of the therapeutic alliance (Rogers, 1977).

Congruence	Ability to remain real, open, and authentic during interactions with the client.
Unconditional Positive Regard	Ability to feel deep, genuine concern for the client despite personal approve (or not) of their actions.
Accurate Empathic Understanding	Ability to sensitively and accurately detect and understand the client's feelings and experiences.

Quality of Interactions Matters

Disability-Focused Planning

Contextualised Medical Treatments*

Students in Schools

Cook (2023) found that the greatest influence on intervention outcomes delivered 'in context' was clinician-patient collaboration, positive regard, respect for patient preferences, and information-giving style.

Components of Educator Empathy

“When the teacher has the ability to understand the student’s reaction from the inside, has the sensitive awareness of the process of how education and learning seems to the student....the likelihood of learning is significantly increased” (Rogers, 1969, p. 157–158).

Cognitive Empathy

Emotive Empathy

Empathic Action

Cognitive Empathy

- Defined as the ability to **understand** the student's perspective, thinking, and feeling state.
- Consists of an **educated guess** based on the teacher's own knowledge and past experiences (own and students).
- Considered the first important precursor to engaging with an empathic response.

For autistic students, involves teachers in understanding issues such as

- Who the student is as a whole person.
- Student's views on their roles and place within groups.
- The ways information is detected, interpreted and acted upon.

Emotive Empathy

- Defined as feeling with the student. Standing **shoulder-to-shoulder** with the student and feeling with them.
- Involves an **actual firsthand experience** without actively thinking about the student's feelings. Whilst this is likely to happen automatically it also involves the teacher in making the choice to experience the student's feelings.

For autistic students, involves teachers in understanding issues such as

- Capturing the emotions underneath 'difficult' behaviour.
- Understanding specific emotion expression and modulation patterns.
- Creating an agreed-upon basis for communicating feelings and experiences.

Empathic Action

- Defined as the **methods of action** to be taken in assisting the student to respond to and resolve a demand that is causing some form of distress.
- The action should be matched to the level/type of demand plus the amount of cognitive, emotive, and sensory resources the student is able to activate.
- The action should aim to assist without undue removal of student control or self-determination.

For autistic students, involves teachers in understanding issues such as

- Consistently employing student support strategies.
- Actively working on the teacher—student alliance.
- Using ‘mending’ to aid student reconnection after distress.

Asking Autistic Students: What was helpful to you?

Research Issue	Research Question
Student-Teacher Alliance	What teacher attributes did you find (would have found) most helpful? e.g., Goldman & Preece (2023); Losh et al. (2022)
Teaching Approaches	What teacher skills and strategies were most helpful to you? e.g., Stack et al. (2021); Holmes (2024)
Foundational Knowledge	What understandings, about autism, helped your teacher in helping you? e.g., Stack et al. (2021); Hummerstone & Parsons (2020)
Self-Determination	What activities helped you in thinking about and planning for your future? e.g., Chandroo et al. (2020) Tomaszewski et al. (2020)

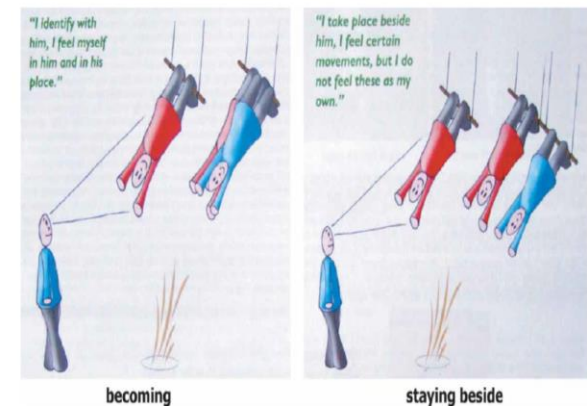
Asking Autistic Students: Teacher—Student Alliance

Valued characteristics:

- Kindness, support, helpfulness, listening, creating feelings of safety, and checking in with students.

Relationship-building strategies:

- Engaging with student interests.
- Using adaptable and tailored approaches for social inclusion.
- Getting to know the autistic student as an individual.
- Understanding the reasons for student behaviour.



Asking Autistic Students Teaching Approaches

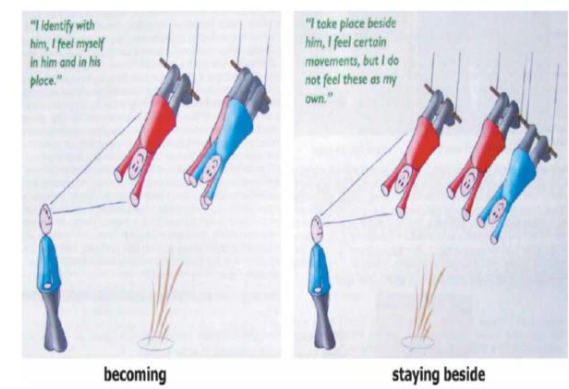


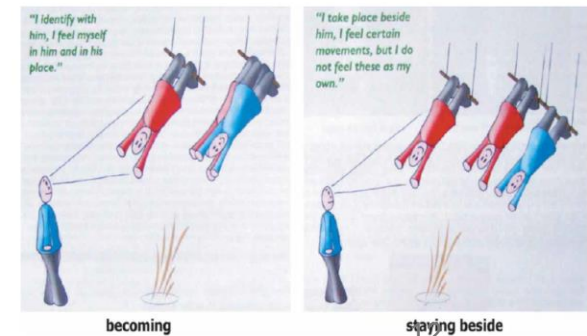
Figure 3. Left: according to Lipps, the viewer becomes the other. Right: Stein states that the viewer does not disappear, but takes a place beside the other.

Most valued approaches from the student's perspective:

- **Sensory:** balanced arousal, **escape spaces**, flexible structures.
- **Regulation:** adapting communication styles, **recognising the early stages of anxiety and stress, having a designated place/person to assist with this**, enabling visits to new areas of the school/activities.
- **Social:** understanding student activity/conversational preferences, **monitoring peer interactions** for possible deterioration, being vigilant about **bullying**.

Asking Autistic Students: Foundational Skills

- Generic knowledge of autism can be beneficial but is not always superior to (Bolourian et al, 2022; Devi, 2023, Homes, 2024):
 - Gaining a good understanding of the student's perspectives and life circumstances.
 - Remaining approachable (congruence, unconditional positive regard, empathic).
 - Access to lived experiences.



Asking Autistic Students: Self-Determination

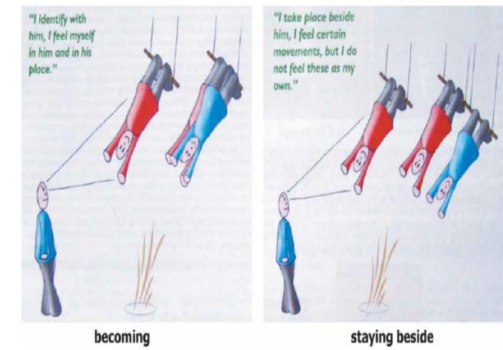


Figure 3. Left: according to Lipps, the viewer becomes the other. Right: Stein states that the viewer does not disappear, but takes a place beside the other.

- Autistic students explained what might help them to have greater involvement in planning for their post-school future:

“Setting some goals and having dreams and things to aspire to in your life would assist in these meetings”

“Bringing somebody around that I can trust and that I’m familiar with like my parents or just a teacher I’m familiar with”

Asking Autistic Students: Self-Determination

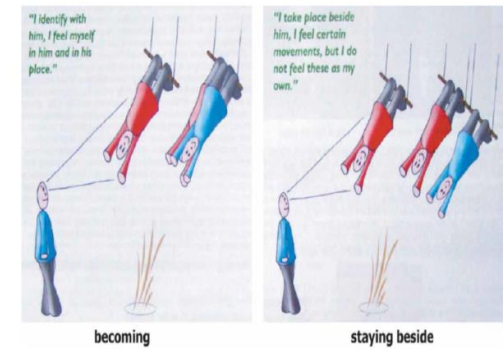


Figure 3. Left: according to Lipps, the viewer becomes the other. Right: Stein states that the viewer does not disappear, but takes a place beside the other.

- Regular planning of goals, with the autistic student being well-informed and supported in their involvement in decision-making.
- Self-determination skills such as self-observation, self-evaluation and deciding on 'what is wanted' can be promoted through informal and contextualised conversation.

Is Empathy Important to Student Outcomes?

- Studies generally agree that the teacher-student relationship and empathic teacher responses are important to students' personal development plus academic and social success at school (Brownlow et al., 2021; Guthridge & Giummarra, 2021; Wink et al., 2021).
- Empathy appears to have effects that extend beyond specific student
 - Enhancing peer—peer positive relationships.
 - Creating a positive class environment that enhances inclusion.
 - Build social connectedness and understanding from peers.

Is Empathy Important to Student Outcomes

- Instead of being a 'soft' skill, empathy can effectively be used to determine the student's needs and make decisions on the instructional/support strategies that must be employed to help them achieve their personal goals and plus experience success (Meyers et al., 2019).

Is Empathy Important to Student Outcomes?

- More recently, Aldrup et al. (2022) conducted a review of 41 articles to explore the question of whether empathy is **key to effective teaching**.
- Reported an inconsistent association between teacher empathy, quality of the teacher-student alliance, and student outcomes.

Is Empathy Important to Student Outcomes

- Other explanations for this finding.
 - Teacher use of mindfulness practices focused on nonjudgmental awareness and acceptance of teacher's own experiences and not teacher empathy *per se* have been linked to higher levels of emotional support for students (Jennings et al., 2017).

Is Empathy Important to Student Outcomes

- Other explanations for this finding.
 - Teacher well-being (e.g., burnout) impacts on their capacity to engage in empathy and highlights the importance of self-care and collegial support practices (Keller et al., 2016).
 - The research studies do not always employ strong methodologies (problems with empathy measurement, teacher-focused empathy definitions, limited sample sizes).

Teacher Empathy and Autistic Students

- Brief checklist for self-reflection, best guessing, and application
 1. Explore, refine, and expand on your attitudes, perceptions, and knowledge to do with the autistic student using student feedback, your observations, and the evidence.
 2. Avoid making assumptions about the student's actions, feelings, and interpretations—especially using 'label driven' approaches.

Student—Teacher Relationship

Teacher Empathy and Autistic Students

- Brief checklist for self-reflection, best guessing, and application
 3. Build a mutually-understood ‘vocabulary’ that you can both use to communicate about the student’s experiences, goals/hopes, and any difficulties. Explain the ‘underlying rationale’ and ‘why’ of activities.
 4. Work to provide the student with opportunities for control and decision-making.

Student—Teacher Relationship

Teacher Empathy and Autistic Students

- Brief checklist for self-reflection, best guessing, and application
 5. Foster positive interactions with peers, find opportunities for strength-based exchanges, build a comprehensible social environment that encourages safety and participation.
 6. Building strong student—teacher relationships **is not** a ‘one off process’. Be prepared to dedicate time to checking in, asking questions, re-connection, and learn.

Student—Teacher Relationship

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Empathic Relationships: Questions

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