

**EMPATHY - THE ABILITY TO ILLUMINATE INTERPERSONAL  
RELATIONSHIPS: A STUDY AMONG CHILDREN IN SÃO PAULO STATE  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

***A EMPATIA - A CAPACIDADE DE ILUMINAR AS RELAÇÕES INTERPESSOAIS: UM  
ESTUDO ENTRE CRIANÇAS DE ESCOLAS PÚBLICAS PAULISTAS***

***EMPATÍA - LA CAPACIDAD DE ILUMINAR LAS RELACIONES  
INTERPERSONALES: UN ESTUDIO ENTRE NIÑOS DE ESCUELAS PÚBLICAS DE  
SÃO PAULO***

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**ABSTRACT:** This article presents a descriptive research that included the participation of children, students from two directorates of the São Paulo state public education network: the DRE “Leste 3” in the metropolitan region of São Paulo, with 824 respondents, and the DRE of Taquaritinga, in São Paulo’s countryside, with 225 children who responded to the survey, totaling 1049 participants. The objective was to identify the levels of empathy pointed out by students in the initial years. For this, we used a questionnaire with closed questions, divided into two parts: in the first, containing 13 questions, we seek to identify the student's profile and, in the second, with eight questions, we aim to visualize the levels of empathy. The questionnaire was built by members of the GEPPEM - Group of Studies and Research in Moral Education from the current literature. The students responded online, through a Google Forms form. The results indicated how much children indicate that they are able to be sensitized to the feelings of their peers and show that self-control is still under construction at this stage of development among the children participating in the investigation.

**KEYWORDS:** Empathy. Children. Caring environment. Ethical school life.

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**RESUMO:** Este artigo apresenta uma pesquisa descritiva que contou com a participação de crianças, estudantes de duas diretorias da rede de ensino público estadual paulista: a DRE “Leste 3” na região metropolitana de São Paulo, com 824 respondentes, e a DRE de Taquaritinga, no interior paulista, com 225 crianças que responderam à pesquisa, totalizando 1049 participantes. O objetivo foi identificar os níveis de empatia apontados por estudantes dos anos iniciais. Para isso, utilizamos um questionário com perguntas fechadas, dividido em duas partes: na primeira, contendo 13 perguntas, buscamos identificar o perfil do estudante e, na segunda, com oito questões, objetivamos visualizar os níveis de empatia. O questionário foi construído por membros do GEPEN - Grupo de Estudos e Pesquisas em Educação Moral a partir da literatura atual. As alunas e os alunos responderam de maneira online, por meio de um formulário do Google Forms. Os resultados indicaram o quanto as crianças sinalizam conseguirem se sensibilizar com o sentimento dos colegas e mostra que o autocontrole ainda está em construção nesta etapa do desenvolvimento entre as crianças participantes da investigação.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Empatia. Crianças. Ambiente solidário. Convivência ética.

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo presenta una investigación descriptiva que contó con la participación de niños, estudiantes de dos juntas directivas de la red de educación pública del estado de São Paulo: la DRE "Leste 3" en la región metropolitana de São Paulo, con 824 encuestados, y la DRE de Taquaritinga, en el interior de São Paulo, con 225 niños que respondieron a la encuesta, totalizando 1049 participantes. El objetivo fue identificar los niveles de empatía señalados por los estudiantes desde los primeros años. Para ello, utilizamos un cuestionario con preguntas cerradas, dividido en dos partes: en la primera, que contiene 13 preguntas, se intentó identificar el perfil del alumno y, en la segunda, con ocho preguntas, se pretendió visualizar los niveles de empatía. El cuestionario fue construido por miembros del GEPEN - Grupo de Estudios e Investigación en Educación Moral a partir de la literatura actual. Los estudiantes respondieron en línea a través de un formulario de Google Forms. Los resultados indicaron cuánto señalan los niños para sensibilizarse con el sentimiento de sus colegas y muestran que el autocontrol aún está en construcción en esta etapa del desarrollo entre los niños que participan de la investigación.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Empatía. Niños. Ambiente solidario. Convivencia ética.

## Introduction

We understand that empathy is a feeling that has been extensively studied in recent years in an attempt to seek answers to the increase in violence, as well as to address a concern of teachers and family members. It is a feeling that generates commotion with the emotional state of the other with whom one lives (LÓPES; ARÁN; RICHAUD, 2014).

In previous studies (LA TAILLE, 2006; 2009; TOGNETTA, 2009), we have noticed that the more we are able to recognize our feelings, the more we are able to recognize the feelings of other people, and the more we are able to recognize the feelings and moods in others,

the more we are able to recognize the feelings and moods in others. the closer we get to the moral actions we so desire.

Thus, the role of schools in promoting a favorable environment for the development of this feeling so important to interpersonal relationships is evident. For these reasons, the dimension of empathy present in the questionnaire applied in this investigation allows both teachers to think about actions that promote this feeling and for respondents to self-evaluate how much they have been empathetic in their relationship with others.

### **Why is empathy necessary in relationships?**

Empathy plays a relevant role in childhood and adolescence, because it has a factor that inhibits antisocial behavior, in addition to promoting personal and social adaptation (GÓMEZ-ORTIZ; ROMERA-FÉLIX; ORTEGA-RUIZ, 2017).

Some researchers discuss empathy from a multidimensional approach, which includes both the cognitive and affective dimensions (DECETY; JACKSON, 2004; MORENO; SEGATORE; TABULLO, 2019; RICHAUD; LEMOS; OROS, 2013).

Gutiérrez, Escartí and Pascual (2011) found in an investigation with 822 students aged between 8 and 15 years, belonging to 11 schools in the Valencian community, positive results on prosocial behavior, empathy and personal and social responsibility of students, while aggressiveness showed negative relationships. Thus, the implications for education show that positive psychological and emotional development facilitates interpersonal or group relationships (GUTIÉRREZ; ESCARTÍ; PASCUAL, 2011).

Children who show high levels of empathy have greater cooperative behavior (RUMBLE; VAN LANGE; PARKS, 2010). Therefore, developing empathy is one of the ways to enable the actions of human beings to be more supportive and respectful.

Empathy is an ability that allows us to perceive the needs and share the feelings of other people. As we have seen, this ability is proper of the human being, or, according to Krznaric (2015), of the "homo Empathicus". For the author, empathy is "the art of putting oneself in another's shoes through imagination, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using this understanding to guide one's own actions" (KRZARNIC, 2015, p. 10). For him, empathy is powerful for fostering social and political transformations, as well as for bringing about a revolution in human relations.

The development of empathy has different variables, for example, studies have suggested that girls have higher empathy scores in childhood when compared to boys, for example, with a sample consisting of 139 participants, aged ten to 12, highlighted significant differences between boys and girls, with higher scores in girls compared to boys (GARAIGORDOBIL; GALDEANO, 2006). Current research also shows that this extends into adulthood, when it presents that women appear to show greater empathy skills compared to men (GUTIÉRREZ *et al.*, 2021).

It is in this sense that we understand the importance of the school and of the interaction between genders, so that barriers of sexism can be overcome, which often stigmatizes the control of emotions and even the sensitivity to the state of the other as something that should only be of the feminine.

Falcone (1998) and other authors (FREY; HIRSCHSTEIN; GUZZO, 2000; STEPHAN; FINLAY, 1999), clarify that empathy is a communication skill that is strongly related to the formation of affective bonds and to an adequate quality of interpersonal relationships. This construction of positive bonds that is understood by the capacity to "feel the other inside" would be the translation that comes from the German term *Einführung*, which can be explained by an affective perception of another's feelings (RICARD, 2015). That said, "affective empathy" is correlated to the connection between the situation and the feelings between people. This aspect assumes an extremely important role, because besides mentally representing how the other may feel, it is necessary to be sensitized by this pain (LA TAILLE, 2002).

Therefore, Piaget (1932) called this possibility of looking at the pain of the other as a kind of sympathy, taken here as a synonym of empathy in its genesis (TOGNETTA, 2009). Thus, for Piaget, sympathy is a moral feeling already present in the first relations that children have with their peers, although in the awakening of the moral sense, it is not preserved in different situations. In agreement, La Taille (2009) alludes that this capacity is identified in children from an early age and explains how extraordinary it is, from the point of view that empathy, as an affective state, refers to the "ability to sympathize with the feelings of others" (definition from the Houaiss Dictionary). It is through this capacity of being moved, of beginning to "look" at the other, that children begin the sensitive process of paying attention to people's needs. However, not "exclusively" paying attention, but caring about what is important to the other (LA TAILLE, 2009).

Furthermore, it should be noted that empathy is not related to the act of being a nice person, but to a sensitivity to the emotional state of others (TOGNETTA, 2009). Furthermore,

it is possible to understand that empathy, as a moral feeling, is an investment for moral actions. Those who are able to put themselves in the other's place, perceive him, and become sensitive to his pain will be much more likely to engage in moral conduct such as helping and listening to those who suffer. And certainly, as different research has indicated, these pro-social conducts such as helping, listening, welcoming, can favor the improvement of interpersonal relationships (MORENO; SEGATORE; TABULLO, 2019). Otherwise, the absence of this feeling seems to indicate indifference (RICARD, 2015).

### **The importance of empathy for peer relationships and overcoming bullying situations**

Empathy is an element associated with reduced aggression (BATANOVA; LOUKAS, 2015). Menesini, Camodeca and Nocentini (2010) state that young people who engage in bullying situations have been found to have lower empathy, that is, being involved in bullying situations is related to low levels of empathy.

On the other hand, in a research with 125 children in first, third, and fifth grades showed that there is a relationship between empathy and peer group acceptance, indicating that children with a high level of acceptance by their peers are more empathetic, showing a sensitivity to the suffering of others (DEKOVIC; GERRIS, 1994).

Interestingly, a survey of 172 participants, based on multidimensional self-report dimensions, identified the relevance of the empathic function to contribute to forgiveness and recommend investing in this capacity as a favorable means to overcome hurt (PINHO; FALCONE; SARDINHA, 2016).

One of the world's programs for developing empathy is called Roots of Empathy, developed in Canada in 1995 by Mary Gordon. The program consists of taking babies, who are used as teachers, into classrooms made up of students between the ages of five and 13. The students have the opportunity to do activities that consist in showing emotions, reproducing facial expressions that human beings make when they are angry, happy, or ashamed. The children develop drama based on empathy and use this situation as a starting point for role-plays and other activities around issues such as when a child or teenager is bullied on the playground, so that empathy can be promoted based on this experience. This enables the ability to understand how others feel and, as a result, become more tolerant and empathetic individuals. The goal is for students to build a society in which they have opportunities for caring and peaceful actions. Through this experience, they experience the art of putting themselves in the

other's shoes and improve their emotional capacities. This process leads to reflection and to the construction of emotional and moral reasoning (GORDON, 2001).

Having said such considerations about such a powerful feeling, how do early elementary school students aim to demonstrate empathy among their peers? This is what we will now present.

## **Methodology**

This investigation is part of a larger research conducted with children and adolescents from São Paulo state public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic (TOGNETTA, 2022), as well as the master's research entitled "The relationship between bullying, empathy and pro-sociality of students belonging to public schools of the São Paulo state network" conducted by Larissa Di Genova Boni.

This is a descriptive research that counted on the participation of children, students from two directorates of the São Paulo state public school system: the DRE "Leste 3" in the metropolitan region of São Paulo, with 824 respondents, and the DRE of Taquaritinga, in the countryside of São Paulo, with 225 children who answered the survey, totaling 1049 responses.

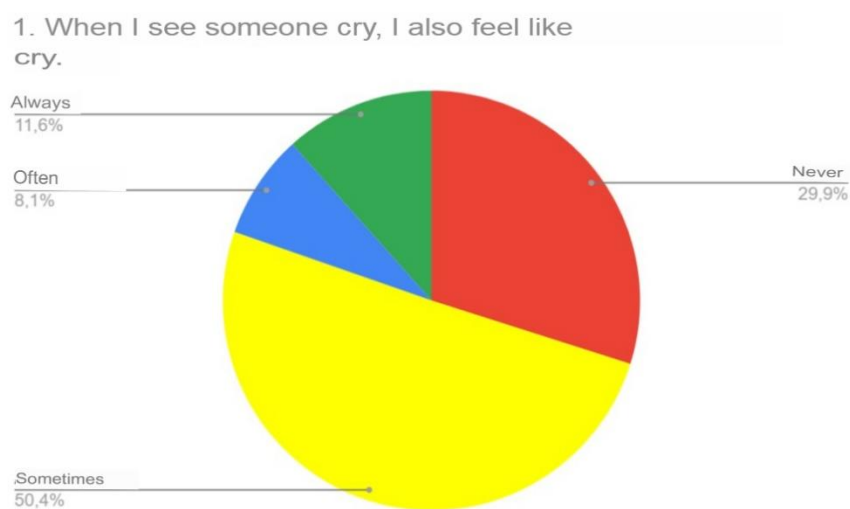
The objective was to identify the levels of empathy pointed out by students in the early years. For this, we used a questionnaire with closed questions, divided into two parts: in the first, containing 13 questions, we sought to identify the profile of the student, and in the second, with eight questions, we aimed to visualize the levels of empathy. The questionnaire was designed by members of GEPEM - Study and Research Group on Moral Education, based on the literature. The students answered online, through a Google Forms form. An informed consent form (ICF) was sent to the parents and/or guardians and, after returning the signed form, the student was released for completion. This research was registered with the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculdade de Ciências e Letras da UNESP de Araraquara/SP under the registration number CAAE: 42330421.6.0000.5400.

## Results found

Among the study participants, 51.8% were female, 48.3% were male. Most of them, 42.1%, reported being white, followed by 37.5% brown, 9.6% black, 0.4% of eastern origin (yellow), 0.8% indigenous, and 9.8% of them could not answer about their race/ethnicity. An important piece of data refers to the fact that 9.4% of family members were affected by unemployment, revealing that the COVID-19 pandemic affected the lives of several people. It is also noted from the data that 79.8% of the children have their mothers as the main caregivers.

About the possibility of being sensitive to the emotional state of others, present in the item "When I see someone crying I also feel like crying", we can observe that, among the students, most of the answers (50.4%) reported that sometimes they feel like crying when they see someone crying, although a minority, not reaching 20%, do it all the time or most of the time they face this situation.

**Chart 1** – Children's answers about feeling like crying



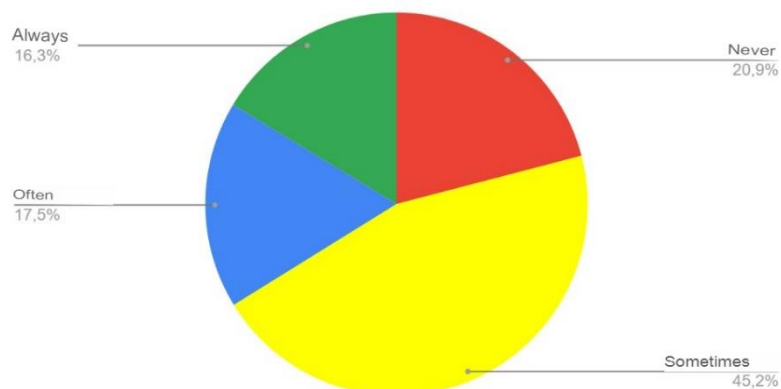
Source: Devised by the authors

Similarly, we can see that the answers of the item “When I am with someone who is sad, I am sad,” show that 45.2% of children sometimes have the ability to feel sad in this situation.



**Chart 2 – Children's responses on the feeling of sadness**

5. When I'm with someone who's sad, I'm sad too.

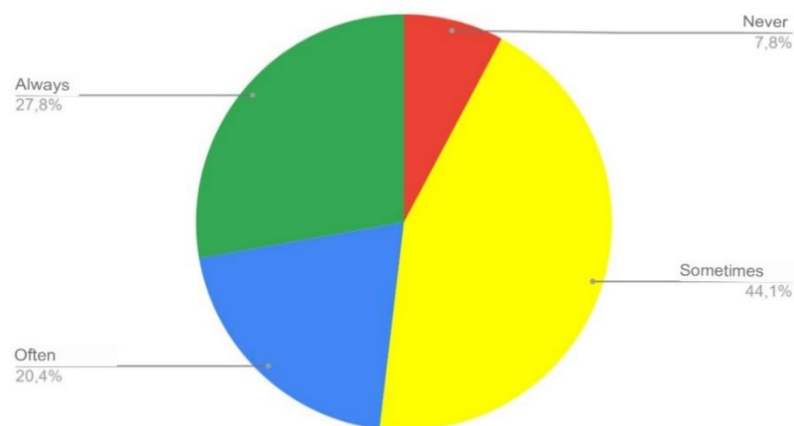


Source: Devised by the authors

When observing another item of the empathy questionnaire, “I notice when someone is upset”, the answers show that the tendency of the students is to perceive, again, the state of mind of the other colleagues (27.8% always and 20.4% usually).

**Chart 3 – Children's responses about noticing the other upset**

2. I can tell when someone's upset.



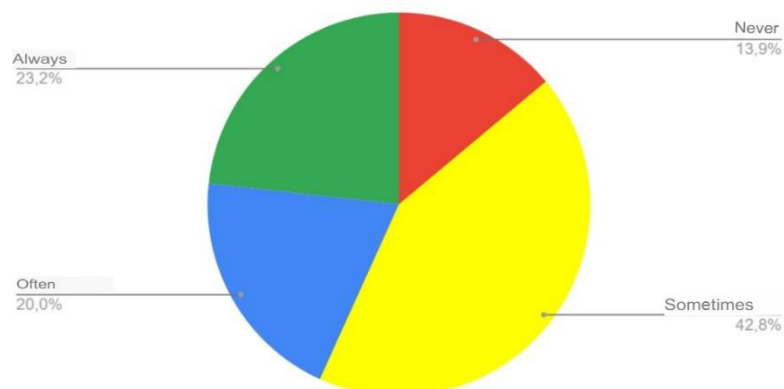
Source: Devised by the authors

Likewise, regarding the item: “Even if someone else thinks differently from me, I can understand them”, again, most of the participants' answers were presented with a very high frequency.



### Chart 4 – Children's answers about understanding each other

3. Even if someone else thinks differently from me I I can understand her.

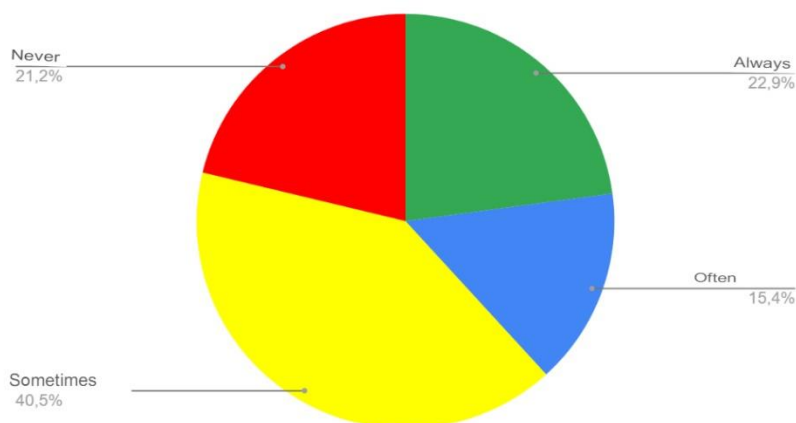


Source: Devisde by the authors

And when do they need to self-regulate? How are our children's responses presented?

### Chart 5 – Children's answers about self-regulation

4. When I get angry, it's hard to calm down.

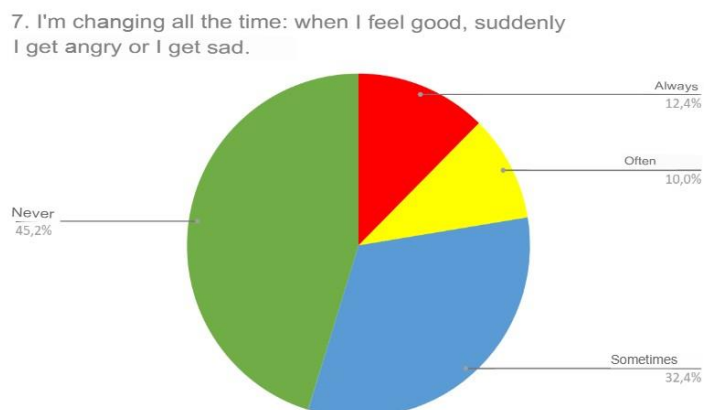


Source: Devised by the authors

We can notice that in this item “When I get angry, it is hard to calm myself down”, that the answers are inverted and show the difficulty of regulating emotions, which is natural for children, and also, the frequencies of answers always or many times (22.9 % and 15.4% respectively) point in that direction.

In this same perspective, the results regarding the item “I am changing all the time”, point to the difficulty of self-regulation among children when compared with the other frequencies of responses that have been presented so far when the items refer to the emotional states of others. We shall take a look at it now:

**Chart 6** – Children's responses to being changing all the time



Source: Devised by the authors

We saw that more than 20% (12.4% always and 10.05% often) of students' responses point to changes in their emotional states. This result corresponds to what was also found, with the same respondents, about mood changes present in situations of emotional distress, presented in another investigation parallel to this one. Thus, the results show that self-control is still under construction at this stage of development among the children participating in the investigation (TOGNETTA, 2022).

On the other hand, considering the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, this result is consistent with others in which emotional instability was also observed. A survey carried out with Argentine children and adolescents explored emotional aspects during confinement and reported problems in the emotional states of respondents, such as difficulty sleeping, anxiety, anguish and emotional instability (MORENO, 2021).

Thus, the results indicate that children tend, due to the characteristics of their age, to pay more attention to the feelings of others, however, not in a conserved way. Likewise, our study on empathy points out that those who cannot control themselves also have difficulty in knowing themselves (22.9% of children always report having difficulty calming down when they are angry), indicating the need to remember how much experiences to put children's feelings into words is a necessity in schools.

When analyzing the data that portray the frequency of situations in which there is empathy in children, we realize how much school institutions are privileged places for this feeling to be developed. In other items, the results show that children, even considering themselves sad or upset, are often sensitive to the feelings of the other. From the point of view of Piaget's Genetic Psychology (PIAGET, 1932/1994) empathy (or, as considered by Piaget —

sympathy) is one of the first moral feelings present in the awakening of the moral sense. It is she who, even without the necessary conservation that can establish a hierarchy of values in a child's identity, can move the steps of those who are still learning to live together (LA TAILLE, 2006, 2009; TOGNETTA, 2009). Giving children opportunities to exercise this feeling will be a condition in schools so that, progressively, their emotional responses are engaged in increasingly constant actions of looking, welcoming and caring for others. Virtue of generosity that is so sorely lacking in current times.

### **Final remarks**

This investigation indicates the relevance of teachers thinking about actions that promote the feeling of empathy, and for students to self-evaluate how empathic they have been in their relationships with others. The results indicated how much children signal that they are able to be sensitive to the feelings of their peers, and show that self-control is still under construction at this stage of development among the children participating in the investigation.

Thus, we tried to show that the affective development and, consequently, the morality of girls and boys is very necessary, because, as Piaget (1932/1994) said, this human dimension can only be fully developed in situations of cooperation in which students regularly experience situations of mutual respect, collective discussions of rules, and the experience of values such as empathy, solidarity, and democratic coexistence.

It is important to establish relationships of trust and mutual respect present in the school, cooperation among peers and the application of sanctions for reciprocity and forms of conflict resolution that allow reparation and awareness on the part of those who act badly. In a word, it is recommended that the school become a welcoming, listening, and sharing space where children have opportunities for choices and to speak their minds.

We agree with Zimmermann and Gontijo (2021), who indicate the importance of empathy within a society, especially in the realm of Human Rights.

Empathy can be a way to transform lives and promote social change. Thus, we consider the school an important environment for its development, which can promote opportunities for students to reflect on their own feelings and on the problems of their peers, thus exercising the shift of point of view, helping them to decenter themselves, feeling and showing empathy for other people.

We continue, finally, with the desire that the promotion of ethical coexistence and empathy is a commitment of schools and that it consolidates and guarantees our students, children and adolescents the preparation to live together respectfully at school and in society.

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