

Chapter #28

STUDENTS' EMPATHY AND CLASSROOM CLIMATE AS PREDICTORS OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS IMMIGRANTS A case study in three EU countries

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ABSTRACT

The development of positive attitudes towards immigrants among students can be addressed at the individual level through their empathic abilities and at the school or classroom level, where the classroom climate plays an important role. In the present study, we have taken a closer look into the relationship between *attitudes towards immigrants*, two components of empathy (*perspective taking*, *empathic concern*), quality of student-teacher relations (both *positive* and *negative*) and *inclusive classroom climate* (presented as perceived intercultural sensitivity of teachers) in a sample of 814 8th-grade students in three EU countries (Slovenia, Croatia, and Sweden). The findings show only empathy (especially *perspective taking*) was associated with better *attitudes towards immigrants* in all three countries. Additionally, in two out of three countries, the importance of the relationship with teachers and inclusive classroom climate was important as well. The results are discussed in the light of guidelines for school practice.

Keywords: attitudes towards immigrants, empathy, classroom climate, students, teachers.

1. INTRODUCTION

As anti-immigrant attitudes are associated with discrimination, hostility, and exclusion (Brenick, Titzmann, Michel, & Silbereisen, 2012), it is of importance that we address them in schools and wider. As important socialization agents, schools can provide an open climate as a contextual framework for the development of tolerant attitudes (Gniewosz & Noack, 2008). Reducing prejudice and building positive attitudes towards outgroups, can be addressed on an individual and school level. On an individual level, empathy is negatively connected to the development of prejudice (Miklikowska, 2018) by enabling us to perceive similarities between ourselves and others (Davis, Conklin, Smith, & Luce, 1996). On the school and class level, classroom climate influences on students' attitudes towards immigrants (Gniewosz & Noack, 2008), where exposure to hate speech leads to desensitization and increasing outgroup prejudices (Soral, Bilewicz, & Winiewski, 2018). On the other hand, perceived equality, inclusion, and cultural pluralism are positively associated with a sense of school belonging (Schachner, Schwarzenthal, van de Vijver, & Noack, 2018) and students who perceive teachers as fair, report more tolerant views of immigrants (Gniewosz & Noack, 2008).

2. BACKGROUND

Classroom climate is a shared perception held by students and teachers concerning the quality of the classroom learning environment (Adelman & Taylor, 2005; Fraser, 1989) and is referred to as a combination of relationships, personal development and system maintenance and change (Moos, 1979). Relationship is understood as the quality of personal relationships between teachers and students, as well as between students, and the extent to which they are involved in the environment and support each other and treat each other with respect. Personal development is the extent to which an environment is in place that supports the personal growth and self-enhancement of everyone in this environment. Lastly, system maintenance and change are meant as the extent to which the environment is orderly, clear with respect to expectations, maintains control, and is responsive to change.

A positive classroom and school climate is associated with lower levels of externalization problems (e.g. aggression) as well as fewer internalization problems (e.g. anxiety) (McEvoy & Welker, 2000; Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & McKay, 2006) and higher learning achievement (Brown, Anfar, & Roney, 2004). A positive and inclusive classroom climate offers more opportunities for social and emotional learning and at the same time supports it more (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). One of the key ingredients of social, emotional, and intercultural competencies is empathy (Zorza, Marino, & Mesas, 2015).

The ability to empathize allows us to understand others and feel connected to people (Eisenberg et al., 1996). One of the most recent definitions says that empathy is a person's emotional response (the emotional component) that depends on the interaction between an individual's characteristics and the situation. Empathic processes are supposed to be triggered automatically, but at the same time, they can also be controlled (with the help of higher cognitive processes). The experienced emotion is similar to the perception (direct experience or imagination) and understanding (the cognitive component) of another person's emotions, by recognizing that the sources of emotion are not their own (Cuff, Brown, Taylor, & Howat, 2016). Due to the rapid and automatic connection with the emotional states of others, it plays an important role in social interactions (de Waal, 2008), moral development (Hoffman, 2000), intercultural competencies (Deardorff, 2006) and represents one of the key components of socio-emotional competence (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2012).

Beelmann and Heinemann (2014) discovered that training, aimed at preventing prejudice or improving intergroup relationships, is most effective when it includes empathy training. Stephan and Finlay (1999) state empathy as a possible mediator in the processes that lead to changing prejudices (e.g. through reducing perceptions of diversity). Batson et al. (1997) recommend promoting better relationships and changing prejudices towards stigmatized groups, by giving instructions that stimulate the emotional component of empathy. They also discovered that the empathic response to one individual from the stigmatized group improves the attitude towards the whole group. Furthermore, perceived teacher support is associated with less prejudice, therefore, authors state that teachers can counteract the development of prejudice (Miklikowska, Thijs, & Hjerm, 2019). Gniewosz and Noack (2008) encourage schools to promote an open climate for the development of tolerant attitudes among students. Nonetheless, school leaders can influence teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and practices, which are all important elements of inclusive education (Ainscow, 2005).

The present study aimed to analyse the associations between students' attitudes towards immigrants with their empathic abilities, perceived classroom climate (relations with teachers and teachers' attitudes towards different cultural groups) in three EU countries (Slovenia, Croatia, and Sweden). Based on the theoretical background, we presume that higher empathy, positive relations with teachers and an inclusive classroom climate will be positively connected to positive attitudes towards immigrants. Furthermore, we presume the pattern will be similar in all participating countries.

3. METHODS

3.1. Participants

The randomized sample included 814 8th-grade students from 36 primary schools, living in three EU countries (Croatia, Slovenia, and Sweden; 12 schools per country). The Croatian sample consisted of 268 students ($M = 13,60$ years, $SD = 0,54$; 47,4% female), the Slovenian sample of 271 students ($M = 12,91$ years, $SD = 0,44$; 56,3% female), and the Sweden sample of 275 students ($M = 13,88$ years, $SD = 0,45$; 48,0% female).

3.2. Instruments

Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980) was used as a measure of empathy. It consists of four scales: *empathic concern*, *personal distress*, *perspective taking*, and *fantasy*. In our study, two scales (*empathic concern* and *perspective taking*) were included, where students assessed how well the (7) items described them (1 – “Not at all like me”, 4 – “Very much like me”). The *empathic concern* scale assesses the tendency to have sympathy or consideration for other people's negative experiences. The *perspective taking* scale assesses the ability to take the perspectives of other people and see things from their point of view. Cronbach's α 's ranged from .61 to .63 for *empathic concern* and from .63 to .74 for *perspective taking*.

Perceived quality of student-teacher relations (positive relations; Fischer, Decristan, Theis, Sauerwein, & Wolgast, 2017; *negative relations*; OECD, 2018a) was used as a measure of classroom climate. In the *positive relations*, students assessed the number of teachers the (8) statements apply to (1 – “To none or almost none of them”, 4 – “To all or almost all of them”). The *negative relations* were assessed by the frequency of the negative experience between the teachers and students, with 7 items (1 – “Never or almost never”, 4 – “Every day or almost every day”). Cronbach's α 's ranged from .87 to .93 for *positive relations* with teachers and from .77 to .90 for *negative relations* with teachers.

Inclusive classroom climate (OECD, 2018b) measures student's perceived quality of student-teacher relations, with a focus on teacher's sensitivity towards cultural and ethnic groups. Students assessed the number of teachers the (6) statements apply to (1 – “To none or almost none of them”, 4 – “To all or almost all of them”). Cronbach's α 's ranged from .81 to .86.

Attitudes Towards Immigrants (Schleicher & Ramos, 2016) was used to evaluate students' attitudes towards people from a different cultural background. Students assessed their agreement with the (6) statements (1 – “Strongly disagree”, 4 – “Strongly agree”). Cronbach's α 's ranged from .71 to .82.

3.3. Procedure

The study is a part of an Erasmus + project: HAND in HAND: Social and Emotional Skills for Tolerant and Non-discriminative Societies (A Whole School Approach) (Kozina, 2020). Out of a list of eligible schools in each country (the criteria of the target group was "schools with a high percentage of students at risk"), 12 schools were randomly sampled, including one 8th-grade class within each school. In September 2018, after providing informed consent, signed by their parents, students completed a battery of questionnaires tapping socio-emotional and intercultural (SEI) competencies, classroom climate, and demographic variables, either in the paper version (Slovenia and Croatia) or online (Sweden). For this study, we only present data for the selected measures. Reliability tests, descriptive statistics, correlations, and hierarchical multiple regression analysis (method: Enter) were calculated with IBM SPSS Statistics 21.

4. RESULTS

We present the descriptive statistics and correlations between scales, followed by hierarchical regression models for each participating country. Means, standard deviations, and correlations for the scales in all three countries are presented in Table 1. In Slovenia, we can see all the correlations between the scales are significant. *Attitudes towards immigrants* have the largest positive correlation with *inclusive classroom climate*, where students assessed their teacher's sensitivity towards cultural and ethnic groups, followed by the *perspective taking* scale and *empathic concern*, while a significant negative correlation is found with the frequency of *negative relations* with teachers and a positive with the amount of teachers they have *positive relations* with. In Croatia, 9 out of 15 (60%) correlations between scales are statistically significant. *Empathic concern* and *perspective taking* have the largest correlation with *attitudes towards immigrants*, followed by the perceived teacher's sensitivity towards different groups (*inclusive classroom climate*). Although *positive* and *negative relations* with teachers do not correlate significantly with *attitudes towards immigrants*, they follow the same expected pattern. In Sweden, only the correlation between *perspective taking* and the perceived teacher's sensitivity towards different groups (*inclusive classroom climate*) is not significant, still, it is correlated in the expected direction. The largest positive correlation with *attitudes towards immigrants* is found with the amount of *positive relations* between student and teachers, followed by both empathy scales. A significant negative correlation can be found with the frequency of *negative relations* with teachers the students have.

Table 1.
Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients between the scales in Slovenia, Croatia, and Sweden.

Scale	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Slovenia							
1. Empathic concern	3,57	0,54					
2. Perspective taking	3,09	0,57	,48**				
3. S-T relations (+)	2,94	0,65	,27**	,31**			
4. S-T relations (-)	1,55	0,52	-,13*	-,18**	-,36**		
5. Inclusive classroom climate	3,46	0,52	,18**	,13*	,25**	-,46**	
6. Attitudes towards immigrants	2,90	0,48	,26**	,28**	,20**	-,26**	,33**
Croatia							
1. Empathic concern	3,55	0,65					
2. Perspective taking	3,23	0,61	,36**				
3. S-T relations (+)	2,81	0,69	,22**	,11			
4. S-T relations (-)	1,59	0,53	-,14*	-,12	-,48**		
5. Inclusive classroom climate	3,62	0,53	,10	,10	,17**	-,43**	
6. Attitudes towards immigrants	3,00	0,52	,33**	,28**	,11	-,07	,19**
Sweden							
1. Empathic concern	3,49	0,61					
2. Perspective taking	3,03	0,63	,45**				
3. S-T relations (+)	3,05	0,74	,17*	,14*			
4. S-T relations (-)	1,45	0,64	-,22**	-,17*	-,45**		
5. Inclusive classroom climate	3,74	0,44	,20**	,09	,36**	-,57**	
6. Attitudes towards immigrants	3,03	0,59	,31**	,32**	,34**	-,21**	,16*

Notes: ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$. M = mean, SD = standard deviation, S-T=student-teacher, (+) = positive, (-) = negative.

In Table 2, 3 and 4, hierarchical multiple linear regressions are presented for each participating country, Slovenia, Croatia, and Sweden, respectively. We aimed to predict *attitudes towards immigrants* with two empathy components (*empathic concern* and *perspective taking*) (Step 1), quality of student-teacher relations (*positive* and *negative*; Step 2) and *inclusive classroom climate* (in form of intercultural attitudes of teachers; Step 3).

Table 2.
Hierarchical multiple regression analysis of variables that predict Attitudes towards immigrants in the sample of students from Slovenia.

	Attitudes towards immigrants					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β
Step 1:						
Empathic concern	0,15	0,17*	0,14	0,15*	0,11	0,13
Perspective taking	0,16	0,19**	0,13	0,15*	0,13	0,16*
<i>R</i> ²	0,097***					
Step 2:						
S-T relations (+)			0,04	0,05	0,023	0,03
S-T relations (-)			-0,19	-0,20**	-0,09	-0,10
ΔR^2			0,046**			
Step 3:						
ICC					0,21	0,23**
ΔR^2					0,039**	
<i>R</i> ²	0,097***		0,143**		0,182**	
<i>F</i> for ΔR^2	14,141***		6,937**		12,188**	

Notes. *** $p \leq 0.001$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$ (significant β 's in bold); *B* = estimated value of raw regression coefficient; β = estimated standardized value of regression coefficient; *R*² = percentage of explained variance; ΔR^2 =change in the percentage of explained variance; S-T=student-teacher; ICC=Inclusive classroom climate.

In Slovenia, empathy scales are important predictors of *attitudes towards immigrants*, they alone explain almost 10% of the variance. They also stay important positive predictors when adding student-teacher relations into the regression model, whereas only the frequency of *negative relations* with teachers (and not the amount of teachers they perceive their relations as positive) significantly predicts more negative attitudes of students. Model 2 explains 14% of the variance in attitudes towards immigrants. In the last step, when we add the students' perceived intercultural attitudes of their teachers, as one of the inclusive classroom climate components, the frequency of the negative experiences loses its predictive significance. In Model 3, where all constructs are included, out of empathy subscales, only *perspective taking* is an important predictor, while the teachers' intercultural attitudes add 4% to the explained variance of students' attitudes. When we only include these two into a regression, they alone explain 15,4% of the variance. Overall, the last model explains more than 18% of the variance in *attitudes towards immigrants* in Slovenian students.

Table 3.
Hierarchical multiple regression analysis of variables that predict Attitudes towards immigrants in the sample of students from Croatia.

	Attitudes towards immigrants					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β
Step 1:						
Empathic concern	0,21	0,26***	0,2	0,25***	0,2	0,25***
Perspective taking	0,16	0,19**	0,16	0,18**	0,15	0,18**
R^2	0,138***					
Step 2:						
S-T relations (+)			0,03	0,05	0,04	0,05
S-T relations (-)			0,00	0,00	0,08	0,08
ΔR^2				0,002		
Step 3:						
ICC					0,17	0,18**
ΔR^2						0,026**
R^2	0,138***		0,139		0,165**	
F for ΔR^2	19,540***		0,258		7,481**	

Notes. *** $p \leq 0.001$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$ (significant β 's in bold); *B* = estimated value of raw regression coefficient; β = estimated standardized value of regression coefficient; R^2 = percentage of explained variance; ΔR^2 =change in the percentage of explained variance; S-T=student-teacher; ICC=Inclusive classroom climate.

In Croatia, empathy scales are important predictors of *attitudes towards immigrants*, they alone explain almost 14% of the variance. They also stay important positive predictors when adding student-teacher relations into the regression model, as none of them (not positive, not negative) adds significantly to explaining the variance in attitudes of students towards immigrants. Model 2, therefore, explains the same amount of the variance as the first model. In the last step, when we add the students' perceived intercultural attitudes of their teachers, both empathy subscales stay important predictors and the teachers' intercultural attitudes add 2,6% to the explained variance of students' attitudes. When we only include these three into a regression, they alone explain 16% of the variance, so the last model explains only 0,5% more variance in *attitudes towards immigrants* in Croatian students.

Table 4.
Hierarchical multiple regression analysis of variables that predict Attitudes towards immigrants in the sample of students from Sweden.

	Attitudes towards immigrants					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β
Step 1:						
Empathic concern	0,18	0,19*	0,14	0,14*	0,13	0,14
Perspective taking	0,23	0,24**	0,21	0,22**	0,21	0,22**
R^2	0,141***					
Step 2:						
S-T relations (+)			0,23	0,27***	0,27	0,27***
S-T relations (-)			-0,03	-0,03	-0,03	-0,03
ΔR^2	0,078**					
Step 3:						
ICC					0,03	0,03
ΔR^2	0					
R^2	0,141***		0,220**		0,220	
<i>F</i> for ΔR^2	17,093***		10,355***		0,001	

Notes. *** $p \leq 0.001$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$ (significant β 's in bold); *B* = estimated value of raw regression coefficient; β = estimated standardized value of regression coefficient; R^2 = percentage of explained variance; ΔR^2 =change in the percentage of explained variance; S-T=student-teacher; ICC=Inclusive classroom climate.

In Sweden, empathy scales are important predictors of *attitudes towards immigrants*, they alone explain more than 14% of the variance. They also stay important positive predictors when adding student-teacher relations into the regression model, whereas only the amount of teachers with which they have *positive relations* (and not the frequency of *negative relations*) significantly predicts more positive attitudes of students. Model 2 explains 22% of the variance in attitudes towards immigrants. In the last step, when we add the students' perceived intercultural attitudes of their teachers, the subscale of empathy, empathic concern, loses its predictive significance (still marginally significant, with $p = ,53$), while the teachers' intercultural attitudes do not add significantly to the explained variance of students' attitudes. When we only include *perspective taking* and *positive relations* with teachers into a regression, they alone explain 20% of the variance (21,7% if we also add *empathic concern* into the model).

5. DISCUSSION

In the present study, we have taken a closer look into the relationship between *attitudes towards immigrants*, two components of empathy (*perspective taking*, *empathic concern*), quality of student-teacher relations (both positive and negative) and *inclusive classroom climate* (presented as perceived intercultural sensitivity of teachers) in samples

of 8th-grade students in three EU countries (Slovenia, Croatia, and Sweden). We were interested in which individual and classroom-level components are significant predictors of *attitudes towards immigrants*, and if the findings are similar across different countries.

Findings showed that on the individual level, empathy is an important predictor in all three countries. Consistent with previous studies (i.e. Miklikowska, 2018), students who reported a higher ability to take the perspective of another person and express more empathic concern, have more positive attitudes towards immigrants. Both components (*empathic concern* and *perspective taking*) are significant predictors, at least until we add the classroom-level variable (*inclusive classroom climate*) into the model (third step). In the last step, empathic concern loses its predictability significance in two countries (still marginally important in Sweden), leaving *perspective taking* as the one component of empathy, which seems to be more important when addressing attitudes towards outer groups. Which is not surprising, considering perspective taking involves the ability to see and understand the situation from the perspective of others. Our findings are consistent with studies (Stephan & Finlay, 1999) that show perspective taking is especially crucial when diminishing prejudices because it helps to acknowledge and understand diversities. This finding can be used in tackling prejudice in the school setting. Based on our findings and confirmed positive associations between *perspective taking* and *empathic concern* with *attitudes towards immigrants* in all three samples, we would promote empathy-based programs for fostering positive attitudes towards immigrants and other outer groups. Different authors report the efficacy of such training (i.e. Teding van Berkhout & Malouff, 2016). Furthermore, Beelmann and Heinemann (2014) discovered positive effects of empathy training on prejudice prevention and fostering positive in-group relationships in childhood and adolescence samples.

At the classroom level, classroom climate was measured with the perceived quality of the relationship between students and teachers (both positive and negative) and the perceived intercultural attitudes of their teachers. Our findings differ between countries in a manner of (in)significance (and not as unexpected or ambiguous results). In Slovenia, the frequency of *negative relations* with teachers is an important negative predictor of attitudes, while in Sweden the amount of teachers, the students have *positive relations* with, is an important positive predictor. In Croatia, none of the perceived relationships with teachers is a statistically significant predictor of students' attitudes. We have added the predictor of *inclusive classroom climate* as a teacher level variable in a separate step (it consists of the assessment of teachers' intercultural attitudes). It is an important positive predictor in Slovenia and Croatia, and not in Sweden. Similarly, authors discovered classroom climate, exposure to hate speech, inequality, and unfair teachers, leads to increased prejudice (i.e. Gniewosz & Noack, 2008; Schachner et al., 2018; Soral et al., 2018). Although the results of the regression on the classroom level are not consistent between countries, a common thread can be seen, which is consistent with previous studies (Gniewosz & Noack, 2008). When trying to address the attitudes of students, the relationships with teachers and teacher's attitudes should also be considered. As the teachers' influence on the students is widely recognized, a whole-school approach should be considered when creating an intervention. This supports the development of a programme, aiming at improving the empathic abilities of students and teachers, especially focused on perspective taking. Prevention and intervention of different prejudices and diverse ways of discrimination can be, besides on the individual level, addressed also on a classroom and school level, by trying to influence classroom/school climate and especially by working with teachers. Raising awareness of their influence and the importance of the relationship with each

student should be the focus of these training sessions. One way this could be addressed is by using existing socio-emotional and intercultural programmes (i.e. Jensen et al., 2020).

Our findings provide an interesting insight into the complex relationship between empathy, classroom climate and attitudes towards immigrants in different EU countries, putting empathy in a spotlight. Empathy was associated with better attitudes towards immigrants in all three countries. Additionally, at least in two out of three countries, the importance of the relationship with teachers and an inclusive classroom climate was important as well. Nevertheless, the limitation of the study is the age-specificity of the sample and reliance on the self-report measures. In the future, a multi-method and longitudinal research design are advised.

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the triplet relationship in science concepts representations. She also cooperated on EU projects (HAND in HAND, BRAVEdu, ETTECEC) and led the evaluation of a national project (Inovativna učna okolja podprta z inovativno pedagogiko 1:1). She is currently working on several EU projects (HEAD, DITEAM and NEMO) and is a PhD candidate in Experimental psychology.

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