The Effectiveness of Empathy Training on Social Adjustment and School Belonging in Elementary Sixth-Grade Students

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Abstract: The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of empathy training on social adjustment and belonging to the school in elementary school students. The present study was conducted as a semi-experimental two-group pretest-posttest design. The statistical population was all sixth grade elementary school students in Tabas city in the academic year of 2016-2017. The study sample was 30 people who were selected by cluster random sampling method. The tools used to collecting data were: Belonging to school inventory and Bell's adjustment inventory For data analysis, Descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, and Univariate and Multivariate analysis of covariance were used ($p < 0.01$). The findings indicated that the mean of the experimental group in the components of social adjustment and belonging to the school increased compared to the control group ($p <0.05$). Therefore, it can be concluded that empathy training has been effective in increasing social adjustment and students' belonging to the school.

Keywords: empathy training, social adjustment, belonging to school, elementary school students.

Introduction

Many researchers now agree that most social behaviors are learned. School is the most important factor in the socialization of students. Therefore, one of the major goals of education is to guide students to social interaction and build effective relationships with others. Therefore, providing a suitable environment, schools can be a factor in the development of adjustment in students (Golmohammadnejad, Bahrami, & Rahimi, 2016). In this regard, one of the signs of socialization is social adjustment. Social adjustment has been put forth as the most important indicator of mental health and is one of the topics that has attracted the attention of many psychologists and educators in particular. There are many definitions of social adjustment; it has been described as synonymous with social skills, which is the ability to interact with others in a way to be acceptable in the tradition of the society (Robinson & Robinson, 2009). Social adjustment is the most important aspect of any person's social development, which is effective in interacting with others, as well as a person's career and academic success (Basir Shabestari, Shirin Beck, Sefidi, & Sherkat Daliri, 2013). Factors such as educational

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practices, values, and beliefs governing individual and society, peers, family, and education are effective in shaping social adjustment (Tolabi, Samadi and Motaharinezhad, 2013). Simultaneously, just as this concept is influenced by factors, its impact on a wide range of factors is examined. Research has shown that increasing adjustment in individuals improves the efficacy of perception, realism, and ability of the correct verbal and behavioral acts and leads to increase self-esteem and confidence in social relationships, the ability to control their own behavior, the ability to endure and cope with frustration, flexibility, a sense of security, and desire to establish social relationships (Shahrakipour, Shirmohammadi, & Nadri, 2010).

On the other hand, when people classify themselves as a member of a group or social class, a sense of belonging is created. This sense may also be evoked by dynamic processes, such as a tendency to promote self or self-affirmation and self-adjustment (Tajfel & Turner, 2007). Generally, a sense of belonging is defined as the quality of relations at the community level; specifically, a sense of belonging to the school is described as the view of individuals that enhance their connection to the school environment (McNeely, Nonnemaker and Blum, 2003). Furthermore, the most important elements of belonging are the effective relationship of individuals with school community members, the extent of their belonging to collective goals, and the extent of their inclusion or involvement in social activities (Rowe, Stewart, & Paterson, 2007).

Posht Mashhadi, Ahmad Abadi, Panaghi, Zadeh Mohammadi and Rafiei (2010), in their research, concluded that obligation and commitment to school rules had a greater share in belonging and relationship with peers. Adelabu (2007) in a study examined the relationship between school membership (sense of belonging, acceptance among friends, and participation in school) with time perspective (present and future) and the development of African-American students and found a positive relationship between sense of belonging and the students' progress. Research shows that communicating with others improves one's health, while social isolation is associated with stress, illness, and premature death. People who lack close friends are more anxious and depressed than those who are close to others (Collier & Thomas, 1988).

The sense of belonging to the school leads to students' cohesion, consensus, and empathy. On the other hand, one of the problems that arise after lack of empathy is incompatibility (lack of adjustment), so that research shows a significant relationship between empathy and adjustment (Homayoun & Birami, 2015). The term 'empathy' is first used by Lipz in psychology research in the early twentieth century (Ahmadi, 2006). It is a mechanism that influences children's moral development and is one of the important emotional abilities; its symptoms and signs begin in early childhood and pre-school years. Empathy is an important stimulus in the emergence of friendly behaviors (Bani Asadi, Borjali, Mofidi, & Bani Assadi, 2015). People with more empathy do more compassionate and caring behaviors to others, are sensitive and concerned about harming others, show positive emotions to others, have positive physical interactions with others, make positive verbal interactions, and are more sensitive to nonverbal interactions (Borba, 2001).

The ability to make empathy means to be able to understand the lives of others even when we are not in that situation, making us accept and respect other human beings while they differ from us. Those who learn this skill more, care about others, tolerate different people, and are more amiable. Empathy improves social relationships and leads to supportive and accepting behaviors towards other people (Emami Naeini, 2010). Based on empathy, humans are able to perceive and respond to the thoughts and behavior of others as they are, not as they like (Alavi Gonabadi, 2010). The results of Gordon (2003) study show that in the children who participate in empathy programs, there is a decreased aggression, increased social behavior, and increased social and

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emotional perception. Similarly, the study by Strayer & Roberts (2004) shows that children with low empathy exhibit more aggressive behaviors. In addition, Jolliffe and Farrington's (2004) meta-analysis indicates a negative relationship between antisocial behaviors and warm empathy in adolescents.

Social adjustment is one of the elements of individual and social health. In order to have a healthy and dynamic society, as well as to create the essential background to develop scientific and economic advancements in various fields, training people with a high social adjustment is necessary, and ignoring them may lead to a lazy and incompatible generation. Also, the most important consequence of going to and belonging to the school process is the development of the necessary social skills. On the one hand, given the important role and impact of empathy in promoting social adjustment and school belonging, the present study is conducted to investigate the effectiveness of empathy education on the enhancement of social adjustment and school belonging in elementary sixth-grade students. The researchers address the question of whether empathy education is effective on the enhancement of social adjustment and school belonging in elementary sixth-grade students or not.

Material and Method

TStatistical population, sample, and sampling method

The statistical population of this study consisted of all sixth-grade male elementary school students in Tabas city in the academic year of 2016-2017. The sample was selected among the primary schools of Tabas city through convenient sampling method; thus, at first one school was selected among the primary schools of the city randomly, then among the two sixth-grade classes, one was selected and divided into experimental (N=15) and control (N=15) groups.

Research instruments

1. School Belonging Questionnaire: This questionnaire has been developed by Brew, Beatty, and Watt (2004) as 27 positive sentences on a Likert scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree). The questionnaire has also been revised by Beatty and Brew (2005), which generally has 6 subscales of teacher's support (items 5, 8, 11, 17, 25, 28, 31, 33, & 45), community participation (items 22, 32, 34, & 38), a sense of fairness and respect at school (items 1, 6, 7, & 23), a positive feeling about school (items 18, 29, 40, & 43), a person's relationship with school (items 30, 37, & 39), and scientific participation (items 10, 12, & 26). Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was reported as the following: the whole questionnaire as 0.75, the component of a sense of belonging to peers as 0.73, teacher's support as 0.89, a sense of fairness and respect at school as 0.75, community participation as 0.84, individual relationship with school as 0.69, and for scientific participation as 0.78 (Brew, Beatty, & Watt, 2004). In the study of Makian and Kelantar Kousheh (2015), the Cronbach's alpha for the whole scale was 0.88, indicating the optimal reliability of the scale. In order to determine divergent validity, the correlation of this scale with the academic burnout questionnaire was calculated (-0.567), which indicated a negative and significant correlation. In addition, the correlation between school belonging and achievement motivation scales was 0.441, confirming the convergent validity of the belonging to school scale. The results of exploratory factor analysis confirmed the existence of six subscales of teacher's support, community participation, a sense of fairness and respect, positive school feeling, individual belonging to school, and scientific participation for this scale. Cronbach's alpha reliability was 0.86 in the present study.

2. Bell's Adjustment Questionnaire: This questionnaire has been developed by Bell and includes 5 com-

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ponents of home adjustment, job adjustment, health adjustment, emotional adjustment, and social adjustment. The whole questionnaire consists of 160 yes-no items (yes=1; no=0) (Warba, Sathiyaseelen, Vijayakumar, Vasantharaj, Russell, & Jacob, 2007). In the present study, a 32-item social adjustment subscale was used. In the research of Mikaili Moni' & Madadi Imamzadeh (2008), the reliability of the total social adjustment subscale was calculated as 0.84 by Cronbach's alpha, and its reliability was equal to 0.80. In the present study, the total reliability was calculated to be 0.79 through Cronbach's alpha.

Research design

The research method was semi-experimental, and the design used in this study was the pretest-posttest with two-group design (experimental and control). The independent variable was empathy education, and the dependent variables were social adjustment and a sense of school belonging.

Intervention process

Students in the experimental group received empathy education for 8 sessions of 60 minutes, two sessions per week, which was continued for one month; however, the control group received no training. In this study, the children received empathy education using a training program (John Bozorgi, Nouri, & Agah Harris, 2011) proper for children aged 4 to 12 years. The description of the program has been presented in Table 1. The training program of John Bozorgi, Nouri, and Agah Harris (2008) consists of four steps as follows:

Step 1: Getting to know the physiological sensations, such as hunger, thirst, fatigue, cold, and heat;

Step 2: Getting to know psychological emotions, such as sadness, anger, and happiness;

Step 3: Focusing on the similarity and difference of one's feelings with that of others and emphasizing one's own feelings;

Step 4: Strengthening empathetic responses done in eight sessions. If needed, each session is held in two or more sessions.

Table 1. A brief description of empathy education sessions

Session	The objectives of each session	The trend of sessions
1	Communicating and getting acquaintance with children; organizing the training sessions;	Introducing the group members; Creating a good relationship with each other and the educator; stating the rules of the sessions;
2	Familiarity with physiological feelings; Recognizing the feelings of the self; Identifying the feelings of other people; Stating the feelings of the self;	Performing related activities (play, poetry, etc.); Homework representation; Getting feedback;
3	Familiarity with physiological feelings; Recognizing the feelings of the self; Identifying the feelings of other people; Stating the feelings of the self;	Performing related activities (play, poetry, etc.); Homework representation; Getting feedback;
4	Familiarity with physiological feelings; Recognizing the feelings of the self; Identifying the feelings of other people; Stating the feelings of the self;	Performing related activities (plays, stories, paintings, etc.); Homework representation; Getting feedback;

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5	Familiarity with physiological feelings; Recognizing the feelings of the self; Identifying the feelings of other people; Stating the feelings of the self;	Performing related activities (plays, stories, poetry, etc.); Homework representation; Getting feedback;
6	Recognizing the feelings of the self; Identifying the feelings of other people; Stating the feelings of the self;	Performing related activities (stories, play, poetry, etc.); Homework representation; Getting feedback;
7	Reinforcing sympathetic responses; Recognizing the feelings of the self; Identifying the feelings of other people; Empowering the child at empathy skill;	Performing related activities (play, poetry, etc.); Homework representation; Getting feedback;
8	Empathy evaluation; Recognizing the feelings of the self; Identifying the feelings of other people; Stating the feelings of the self; Administrating post-test;	Empathy evaluation; Holding an exhibition of the children's activities; Administrating post-test; Holding a closing meeting;

In this research, all related ethical principles, including the confidentiality of questionnaires, the conscious consent of the individuals participated, and the right to abandon the research, were observed. SPSS software version 22 was used for data analysis; univariate and multivariate analyses of covariance were applied to test the hypotheses.

Results

Descriptive results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of social adjustment and school belonging in the two measurement phases separately for experimental and control groups

Group	Variable	Pre-test		Post-test	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Experimental	Total score of school belonging	88.40	23.48	107.26	25.79
Control	Total score of school belonging	93.60	24.89	96.66	25.60
Experimental	Positive feeling to school	19.13	5.38	22.13	5.80
	Teacher's support	10	3.29	13.06	3.53
	A sense of fairness and respect at school	9.73	3.08	12.93	3.23
	School connectedness	12	2.44	14.73	2.63
	Community participation	9.74	2.81	12.9	3.23
	Scientific participation	27.80	6.60	31.46	7.21
Control	Positive feeling to school	20.20	5.40	20.73	5.61
	Teacher's support	10.06	3.86	10.40	3.94
	A sense of fairness and respect at school	11.33	2.96	11.66	3.19
	School connectedness	11.86	2.94	12.33	3.15
	Community participation	11.53	2.92	12.13	3.02
	Scientific participation	28.60	6.93	29.40	6.97
Experimental	Social adjustment	19.26	4.69	20	4.58
Control	Social adjustment	19.20	5.64	22.066	5.94

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After confirming the assumptions of multivariate covariance analyses, including the covariance matrix consistency test (box), data normality (Kolmogorov-Smirnov), and homogeneity of variances (Levine's F), the analysis was performed. The results are as follows (Table 3).

Table 3. Results of covariance analysis to compare students' social adjustment in experimental and control groups

The source of changes	SS	DF	MS	F-value	Sig.
Pre-test	772.362	1	772.362	1258.391	0.01
Group	34.156	1	34.156	55.649	0.01
Error	16.572	27	0.614		
Total	820.967	29			

The obtained F-value is 55.649, and its significance level is 0.01. Hence, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the research hypothesis is confirmed. Based on this fact and given the higher mean scores of the experimental group in the post-test, it can be concluded that self-empathy education is effective and enhances social adjustment.

Table 4. Results of multivariate covariance analysis for comparison of school belonging in experimental and control groups

Effect	Tests	Value	F	Df of Effect	Df of Error	Sig.
Group	Pillai's Trace	0.889	22.591	6	17	0.01
	Wilks Lambda	0.111	22.591	6	17	0.01
	Hotelling's Trace	7.973	22.591	6	17	0.01
	Roy's *L*argest Root	7.973	22.591	6	17	0.01

As can be seen, the significance level of all four relevant multivariate statistics, including Pillai's Trace, Wilks Lambda, Hotelling Effect, and Roy's Largest Root, are less than 0.01 ($p<0.01$). Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected, and it becomes clear that there is a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in the school belonging scores in the post-test.

Table 5. Inter-group effects test to compare the components of school belonging in experimental and control groups in the post-test

Variables	Source	SS	DF	MS	F	Sig.
Positive feeling to school	Between-group	8.519	1	8.519	26.021	0.01
	Within-group	7.203	22	0.327		
Teacher's support	Between-group	8.832	1	8.832	26.535	0.01
	Within-group	7.323	22	0.323		
A sense of fairness and respect at school	Between-group	4.827	1	4.827	15.240	0.01
	Within-group	6.967	22	0.317		
Community participation	Between-group	3.404	1	3.404	10.087	0.01
	Within-group	7.424	22	0.337		
School connectedness	Between-group	8.438	1	8.438	21.443	0.01
	Within-group	8.657	22	0.393		
Scientific participation	Between-group	18.808	1	18.808	58.088	0.01
	Within-group	7.123	22	0.324		

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According to the presented results, the obtained F-value is significant for all components at the level of 0.01; thus, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the research hypothesis is confirmed. Given the higher mean scores of the experimental group in the post-test phase, it is concluded that empathy education is effective and increases the school belonging in the sixth-grade elementary students.

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of empathy education on increasing social adjustment and school belonging in sixth-grade elementary students. The first finding shows a difference between the experimental and control groups in the social adjustment variable, and this rate of social adjustment is higher in the experimental group than the control one, meaning that empathy education is effective in increasing students' social adjustment. It can be inferred from the above finding that empathy education enhances social adjustment. The result is closely related to similar researches. The findings of Khalili, Faraghdani, Shaterian Mohammadi (2016) show that the combined training of the mind theory and the four-factor empathy program is effective on emotional-social self-efficacy and bullying in elementary students. In studying the effect of empathy education on social adjustment and aggression in female students, Barzegar Bafravei (2015) shows that after controlling the pre-test scores, a significant difference appears between the two experimental and control groups in the mean scores of empathy, social adjustment, aggression, and t the components of these factors. The results of Gordon (2003) study show that in children who participate in empathy programs, there is a decreased aggression, increased social behavior, together with increased social and emotional perception. Empathy education helps individuals change their interpersonal relationships, mainly relationships with peers and family members through greater awareness of emotion, emotional notation, experience, change in processes, and control over behaviors (Matthys & John, 2010). Through empathy education, individuals learn to control negative emotions, such as anxiety, depression, and frustration, and increase their resistance to events. In such an education, students try to understand negative thoughts that cause confusion and avoidance while communicating with others. They are trained to resolve maladaptive self-talk, tagging, and labeling, which come from the feedback loop, replace misinterpretation or inappropriate interpretation with optimistic ones, especially when placed in various traumatic situations, and finally show more resistance against accidents (Strayer & Roberts, 2004). All of these capabilities lead to increased social adjustment. In other words, empathy is a feeling that makes the child know her/his obligations against others and stimulates his/her conscience. It is what drives children toward patience, compassion, understanding the needs of others, caring for those who are hurt or in trouble. A child who learns empathy is more sympathetic and compassionate and also usually more capable of controlling pressures and events. Therefore, it can be said that empathy education enhances adjustment in individuals (Taher, Abolghasemi, Hajloo, & Narimani, 2016).

Another result shows that the school belonging in the experimental group is higher than that of the control; thus, it can be said that empathy education is effective in school belonging, promoting school belonging in the students. The above finding is consistent with other researches on the topic. However, to the best of author's knowledge, no research is about empathy and academic variables. For example, Cheraghian (2015), in his study concerning the effect of positive thinking on the enhancement of school belonging and positive relationships with others, finds a significant difference between school belonging and relationships with other students in the experimental group who receive positive thinking training compared to those of the control who do not receive any training in the area. Therefore, positive thinking training is effective in promoting school belong-

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ing. Likewise, in a study by Brunero, Lamont, and Coates (2010) on nursing students, they find the key role of empathy education in enhancing students' academic achievement.

In explaining the above findings, it can be stated that empathy is an important ability that integrates an individual with the feelings and thoughts of others, connects him/her to the social world, draws him/her to help others, and prevents him/her from harming others. Empathy is the driving force of social behaviors, leading to group cohesion (Rieffe, Ketelaar & Wiefferink, 2010). The result of these relationships leads to increase students' self-esteem and academic self-efficacy. Adolescents who understand the social rules well and have strong and stable relationships with family and others develop a high level of self-esteem, academic self-efficacy, and academic achievement. In one explanation, it may be argued that since the present study examines the empathy effect on factors, such as institutionalizing empathy, the meaning/concept of empathy, promoting positive thoughts at school, and applying positive thinking to life and school, we expect participants in empathy sessions to have a high sense of belonging to the school. In another explanation, it can be said that in empathy education, people learn to be attentive to one another, leading to increased attention, respect, and affection in individuals, and consequently increased belonging.

One of the limitations of the study was measuring the follow-up phase after the post-test. Also, although sociological variables, such as social class and parental education level, could be influential on the sense of belonging to the school, demographic factors could not be controlled because of sampling constraints. Given the findings of the study and based on the results of the statistical analysis and the high degree of affectability of students from empathy skills, it is suggested that schools use empathy group training to modify variables related to school belonging and social adjustment with the help of experienced therapists. It is recommended that schools enhance empathy through holding the training workshops and teach parents the empathy skills in family education sessions. Finally, a longitudinal study of the sustainability of empathy education on school belonging and social adjustment is also recommended.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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