

# The Exploration of Primary School Teacher's Empathy Levels by Their Demographic Characteristics: A Case Study in Zeytinburnu-Istanbul

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## Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the primary school teachers' empathy levels according to their demographic characteristics. The universe of the study was composed of 591 primary school teachers serving in Zeytinburnu District of Istanbul Province in the 2018-2019 Academic Year and the sample was composed of 190 primary school teachers serving in the randomly selected schools. Demographic Information Form and the Emphatic Skill Scale -B Form that was developed by Dökmen (1988) were used as data collection tools. Frequency, descriptive statistics, one-way variance analysis (ANOVA) and Kruskal-Wallis Variance Analysis were used to analyze the data.

In conclusion, significant differences were found between empathy levels of the teachers and the age variable at the level of 0.05 and the term of office variable at the level of 0.01. Other variables in the study, which are the type of faculty, income level, and housing type, did not show any significant differences at the level of 0.05.

**Keywords:** empathy, primary school teacher

## 1. Introduction

Today, the most important element of developed societies is well-trained manpower. The value and importance given to education in a society will play the most crucial role in shaping the future of that society. Therefore, countries make their biggest investments in education and educators. It is the common idea of all countries that the most accurate investment for the future is the investment in human (Koçak, 1992).

The education system should aim to prepare an individual for the future in terms of both knowledge and personal competences. The most important cornerstones in this way are educational institutions and teachers. Qualified individuals may only be raised by competent teachers (Çelikten & Can, 2003).

The word empathy that we use today has two main starting points: German and Greek. It was used as 'empathia' in ancient Greek. 'Em' means 'into' and 'pathia' means 'perception'. Empathy, which is called 'einfühlung' in German, has been used in the fields of aesthetics and psychology. Theodor Lipps (1897), one of the first to use this term, described 'einfühlung' as follows: 'It is the person's self-projection to an object, the feeling of himself in it, and thus the self-assimilation of that object within himself.' In his later studies after 1987, Lipps described empathy as an individual's trying to understand the person by reflecting himself on to that person and by connecting with him through an internal imitation (as cited in Dökmen, 2012).

Budak (2009) explains empathy in the form of recognizing the other's feelings, thoughts and their possible meanings, substituting oneself for others, living others' feelings and thoughts symbolically and experiencing their positive and negative emotions. He states that the empathy process has been finalized by an appropriate response to the people in the face of this experience.

Hodges and Wegner (1997) are among the researchers who deal with emotional and cognitive role-based empathy from a different perspective. There are situations where we involuntarily and unconsciously put ourselves in others' place. There are also times when we consciously empathize with others by an emotional and cognitive perspective. Those researchers stated that empathy established between people was divided into two as automatic or controlled.

The development process of empathy in children starts within family and continues in school where they are first socialized. The child starts to behave by mimicking the reactions around him during infancy. Later, he pretends the people around him and experiences acting like them while playing. In this process, it is very important for the family to take an emphatic approach towards the child and to meet his physical and mental needs.

Schonert-Reichl et al. (2003: 11) and Feshbach et al. (1983: 7) stated that empathy education given at school was effective in the development of affective and social structures of children. In addition to the empathic approaches observed by the children, integration of empathy education methods into the curriculum by the teacher will support the development of empathy in them.

The researchers involved in empathy education have two different views. The first is that empathy is innate and developed over time, and the second is that empathy can be acquired later. According to Yilmaz (2003) and many other researchers, empathic skill is accepted as an acquirable skill today. In their study, Barnett, Thompson and Pfeifer (1985) resulted in that empathy skills taught to individuals improved the skill of helping others and emphatic skill. Rogers became a pioneer in the first empathy education as well as his research on empathy. Empathic skills are developed as a result of one's experiences and used throughout life. Rogers proved that empathic skills of individuals could be increased with an empathy training program and set an example for future studies (as cited in Rogers 1959: 184-186).

First of all, teachers should love their profession and their students and embrace their job. Even though being a teacher and teaching seem to be the same concepts, such distinction actually points to a critical point. Teaching is defined as educational activities within the boundaries of a school. Being a teacher is one of the traits to be acquired by an educator in his life.

## 2. Method

The sample of the study was composed of 190 primary school teachers serving in Zeytinburnu District Istanbul Province in the 2018-2019 academic year.

Data were obtained by administering the Demographic Information Form consisting of five questions and the Empathic Skill Scale-B Form (ESS-B Form) which was developed by Dökmen (1988) and whose Cronbach Alpha coefficient was 0.83.

Frequency, descriptive statistics, one-way variance analysis (ANOVA) and Kruskal-Wallis Variance Analysis were used to analyze the data. Analyses were conducted with the help of SPSS 21.0 package program.

## 3. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Findings on Demographic Characteristics of the Study Group

Parameters		N	%
Age	20-35	36	19,0
	36-49	77	40,7
	50 and over	76	40,2
Type Of Faculty	Faculty of Education	143	75,7
	Faculty of Arts and Sciences	8	4,2
	Other	38	20,1
Term Of Office	Less than 7 years	64	33,9
	7 – 19 years	79	41,8
	More than 20 years	46	24,3
Income Level	Less than TL 4000	18	9,5
	TL 4001 – 5000	53	28,0
	More than TL 5001	118	62,4
Housing Type	Owner	111	58,7
	Tenant	70	37,0
	Other	8	4,2

In Table 1, it is understood that the majority of the research group consists of faculty of education graduates with over 36 years of age who have 7-19 years of term of office, more than TL 5001 monthly income and their own houses. Based on these values, the group is thought to adopt similar values in terms of demographic characteristics.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics Regarding Empathy Scores of the Study Group by Their Demographic Characteristics

Parameters	Groups	N	Mean $\pm$ Ss	Min.	Max.
Age	20-35	36	135.91 $\pm$ 18.36	107.00	183.00
	36-49	77	126.77 $\pm$ 20.48	84.00	199.00
	50 and over	76	132.69 $\pm$ 19.93	99.00	179.00
Type of faculty	Faculty of Edu.	143	129.27 $\pm$ 20.05	84.00	199.00
	Fac. of Arts and Sci.	8	136.87 $\pm$ 14.31	115.00	154.00
	Other	38	135.76 $\pm$ 20.69	89.00	183.00
Term of Office	Less than 7 years	64	138.03 $\pm$ 19.12	107.00	199.00
	7 – 19 years	79	118.40 $\pm$ 15.76	84.00	153.00
	More than 20 years	46	142.43 $\pm$ 16.21	114.00	179.00
Income Level	Less than TL 4000	18	134.83 $\pm$ 20.41	89.00	179.00
	4001 – 5000	53	133.15 $\pm$ 20.81	89.00	183.00
	More than TL 5001	118	129.28 $\pm$ 19.71	84.00	199.00
Housing Type	Owner	111	130.47 $\pm$ 20.03	89.00	199.00
	Tenant	70	130.10 $\pm$ 20.62	84.00	179.00
	Other	8	143.75 $\pm$ 12.39	128.00	167.00

Table 3. Results of Variance Analysis Regarding Empathy Scores of the Study Group by Their Demographic Characteristics

Parameters	Groups	SD	F Cal.	Significance Level
Age	20-35	2	0.047	P=0.047<0.05*
	36-49			
	50 and over			
Term of Office	Less than 7 years	2	0.000	P=0.000<0.01**
	7 – 19 years			
	More than 20 years			

In Table 3, a significant difference was found between the groups in the age variable at the level of 0.05 and in the term of office variable at the level of 0.01.

It is thought that the significant difference in the age variable may be due to the lower mean values of the 36-49 age group compared to the others, and consequently may be due to the professional expectations or personal reasons of middle age groups.

Balcı (2012) examined the empathic tendencies of teachers in Besiktas District of Istanbul Province in terms of demographic characteristics and found similar results with our study. In her study, Balcı found that the empathy levels of teachers aged 51 and over were higher than those in the 31-40 age group. Ünal (1972) and Önemliürk (1998) are among the ones that proved the empathic tendency of individuals increase over time. Similarly, Özbek (2002) concluded that empathy increases with age in working life of individuals. Seymen (2007) determined that empathic tendencies of nurses are higher in the age of 41 and over.

Table 4. Results of Kruskal Wallis Analysis Regarding Empathy Scores of the Study Group by Their Demographic Characteristics

Parameters	Groups	SD	F Cal.	Significance Level
Type of faculty	Faculty of Edu.		0.146	P=0.146>0.05
	Fac. of Arts and Sci.			
	Other			
Income Level	Less than TL 4000	2	0.260	P=0.260>0.05
	4001 – 5000			
	More than TL 5001			
Housing Type	Owner		0.085	P=0.085>0.05
	Tenant			
	Other			

In Table 4, there was no significant difference between the type of faculty that teachers graduated from (the type of faculty), income level and housing type parameters and empathy scores of the participants at the level of 0.05.

The results show that the study group has a demographic structure in which the participants have 7-19 years of the term of office, more than TL 5001 monthly income and their own houses.

Significant differences were found between the empathy scores by the age variable at the level of 0.05 and by the term of office variable at the level of 0.01. There was no significant difference between the empathy scores of the groups at the level of 0.05 by type of faculty, income level, and housing type variables.

Previous studies revealed similar results with regarding the age and term of office variables and the empathy levels of teachers. In other words, in cases where age factor does not make any difference in empathic skills, seniority does not make any difference, too.

As teachers get older that the age more than 20 years, there may be many factors in increasing their empathic skills. It is possible for people to realize the importance of the empathic approach in solving problems with the accumulation of life experience and to utilize empathy in their lives more and more over the years.

Balcı (2012) examined the empathic tendencies of teachers in Besiktas District of Istanbul Province in terms of demographic characteristics and found similar results with our study. In her study, Balcı found that the empathy levels of teachers aged 51 and over were higher than those in the 31-40 age group. Ünal (1972) and Önemlitürk (1998) are among the ones that proved the empathic tendency of individuals increase over time. Similarly, Özbek (2002) concluded that empathy increases with age in working life of individuals. Seymen (2007) determined that empathic tendencies of nurses are higher in the age of 41 and over.

In his study with 481 primary school teachers in Istanbul Province, Posluoğlu (2014) examined the relationship between primary school teachers' communication skills and empathy skills in terms of the age variable and reached the conclusion that the empathy skills of teachers aged 21-50 were higher than those aged 51 and over.

A significant difference was found in the term of office variable at the level of 0.01. The main reason for the high level of empathic skills of teachers who have a long term of office may be the increase in these teachers' professional experience and their ability to recognize and analyze children more quickly.

It is statistically clear that teachers who have more seniority in our country are married and have children. Many studies show that married individuals have higher empathic skills. Likewise, it is possible for teachers with children to be more empathetic and tolerant towards students in their classrooms.

In his study examining the empathy levels of high school administrators, Önemlitürk (1998) stated that the empathic skills increased as the term of office increased. Moreover, Akgöz et al. (2005) found that empathic tendency increased as physicians' term of office increased.

Posluoğlu (2014) found in his research with primary school teachers that the empathic skills of teachers with 6-10 years of seniority were higher. Alver (2003) examined the empathic tendencies of public employees and showed that empathic tendency decreases with advancing age.

In his study examining the empathic tendencies of primary school teachers in Sakarya Province, Akbulut (2010) determined that the term of office did not make a difference in empathy. Bulut and Düşmez (2014) examined the empathic tendencies of teachers in terms of some demographic variables in their study with 140 primary school teachers in Iğdır Province. As a result, they found that teachers' age and term of office did not affect their empathic skill levels. Tanrıdağ (1992) and Yıldırım (2003) reached the same results.

In their study with preschool teachers, Yılmaz (2011) and Kılıç (2002) found that empathic tendency and age and seniority did not make a significant difference. However, the main reason for this conclusion in the research of kindergarten teachers may be that the children are at the youngest and loveliest ages when they are newly acquainted with school life, that the lessons are mainly focused on games and entertainment, and that there are no worries such as academic success expected from the students.

Gürsel (2016) examined the empathic tendencies of subject matter teachers in Istanbul in terms of various variables and concluded that age and term of office did not make a significant difference. Erçoban (2003) reached the same result in terms of age and term of office in his study conducted with in-field teachers. The reason why age and seniority do not make a difference in the empathic tendency of in-field teachers may be that teachers teach for a few hours a week, are focused on academic success rather than communication and do not recognize students and establish emotional bonds.

There are many studies supporting the results of the present study. In their study with primary school teachers, Bulut and Düşmez (2014) concluded that the type of faculty was not an effective variable on the level of empathy. Gürsel (2016) reached the same conclusion in his study where he examined the empathic tendencies of in-field teachers in terms of various variables.

Akbulut (2010) examined the effect of the type of faculty on the empathic tendency in his study. The mean scores of the teachers who graduated from the Faculty of Education, Faculty of Arts and Sciences and other faculties were found to be very close to each other and it was concluded that there was no significant difference. These results are in line with the results of our study.

Alçay (2009) examined the empathic skills of administrators and teachers serving in different schools and concluded that empathy did not make a difference in terms of the type of faculty. Dev (2010) worked with 260 educators while examining the empathic skills of administrators and teachers serving in primary schools in terms of various variables. He found that the type of faculty did not make any difference in empathy. Agboyraz (2015) examined the empathic tendencies and the level of democratic values of the primary school teachers in Gaziantep Province and stated that the type of faculty did not make a significant difference.

On the other hand, there are studies that obtained results contrary to our study. In his study examining the empathic tendencies of secondary school teachers, Barut (2004), concluded that there was a significant difference between the type of faculty and empathic tendency.

It can be observed that the studies in which the financial capability of teachers such as monthly income was examined as a separate variable are not adequate in the literature. This may be due to the fact that the overall teachers have fixed monthly earnings. On the other hand, participants may be hesitant to respond to such questions. In our study, it was concluded that variables such as monthly income and being a householder or tenant did not affect the empathic skill level, which may be due to the fact that emotional satisfaction constitutes a basis for teaching profession has a great effect. Teachers do their job with a commitment and self-sacrifice without expecting any financial interest and gain.

When the studies on the subject were examined, Erçoban (2003) examined empathic tendency levels of secondary school teachers by certain variables such as gender, marital status, seniority, age, monthly income, choosing the profession voluntarily or not. As a result of the study, it was found that the teachers who chose the profession voluntarily and found his/her income sufficient had higher empathic tendencies and that the other variables did not make a significant difference.

There are also studies that do not support the results of our study. Atli (2008) conducted a study in some of the provinces in the Eastern and Southeastern regions examining the empathic tendencies of 243 staff serving in orphanages and kindergartens. A significant difference was found in the empathic tendency levels of the staff according to their salaries.

As an important personality trait, empathy develops as a result of the individual's interaction with the social environment, which contributes to the development of an important part of the personality characteristics after birth. Besides, it is known that the primary education process, which constitutes the first close social external environment, is important for empathy to become a personality trait. Many personality traits of an individual can be formed as a result of modeling. In this sense, the results obtained from the primary school teachers in the study group can be evaluated positively as supported by the literature.

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