



Research Paper

Altruism and Empathy Among Teachers: A Comparative Study Across Primary Schools in West Bengal

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored how altruism and empathy shaped the teaching practices of primary school teachers in West Bengal. Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with teachers from various rural and urban schools, the research examined how these personal values influenced teacher-student relationships, classroom dynamics, and overall educational outcomes. By comparing teachers from government-funded and private schools, the study investigated how these values were developed, expressed, and received in different educational contexts. The findings revealed that while empathy and altruism were deeply ingrained in teachers' professional values, the socio-economic context of the schools played a significant role in how these qualities were manifested. The study highlighted the importance of fostering empathy and altruism in teacher training programs to enhance emotional and academic support for students. By comparing the experiences of teachers across different school types, this research contributed to a deeper understanding of how educators' intrinsic values impacted their teaching approaches and the well-being of their students.

Keywords: Altruism, Empathy, Classroom dynamics, Socio-economic context, Emotional support, Pedagogical approaches, Student well-being

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I. Introduction

Education is often seen as the foundation of societal progress, with teachers playing a crucial role in shaping both the intellect and character of future generations. Beyond imparting knowledge, teachers significantly influence the emotional and moral development of their students. In this context, qualities like altruism and empathy are indispensable, helping teachers cultivate supportive, inclusive, and caring learning environments. These attributes are especially critical in primary schools, where children undergo vital stages of social and emotional growth. Altruism, which refers to selflessly caring for others' well-being, and empathy, the ability to understand and share another's emotions, are not just admirable personal traits but essential professional skills for educators. Altruism, which refers to a genuine concern for the well-being of others, motivates teachers to go beyond their basic responsibilities, dedicating extra time and effort to address the emotional and academic needs of their students (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983). Empathy, on the other hand, helps teachers connect emotionally with students, building trust, communication, and respect within the classroom (Feshbach, 2009). Both qualities are essential for creating a positive learning environment, especially in settings where students come from varied backgrounds or face social and emotional challenges. Research has shown that teachers who are highly empathetic tend to engage in more prosocial actions, which fosters a sense of security and belonging among students (McAllister & Irvine, 2002). Additionally, teachers with strong altruistic tendencies are more likely to demonstrate a greater commitment to their roles, volunteering for extra-curricular activities or providing additional support to struggling students (Klassen et al., 2012). While existing research highlights the importance of altruism and empathy in education, there is a gap in studies examining the cultural and regional factors that influence these qualities, particularly in the context of Indian primary schools. West Bengal, with its rich cultural diversity and varied socio-economic groups, presents a unique opportunity to explore how these values are developed and expressed among teachers. Teachers in both urban and rural areas and also from govt. and privately funded institutions face different challenges that may affect the growth of altruism and empathy. Urban teachers, for instance, may work with a more diverse student population with varied educational needs, while rural teachers may deal with resource limitations and larger class sizes. These factors could shape the way teachers build

relationships and address the needs of their students. Teachers who demonstrate these qualities can significantly impact students' sense of inclusion, confidence, and eagerness to learn. They also play a key role in addressing diverse classroom needs, from managing behavioral issues to promoting positive peer relationships. Inclusion elementary schools in Karanganyar District see a significant boost in teacher competence due to higher levels of emotional intelligence, self-confidence, and altruism (Septiana, 2018). In West Bengal, with its rich diversity in culture, language, and socioeconomic backgrounds, the need for altruism and empathy among teachers becomes even more critical. Teacher well-being and self-confidence are strong indicators of altruistic behaviors, whereas empathy helps foster positive relationships between teachers and students, as well as create a supportive classroom environment (Muhadzir, 2024). Altruism levels among secondary school teachers differ by gender, with male teachers displaying higher levels of altruism compared to their female counterparts (Sajan, 2018). Primary school educators often face challenges such as limited resources, varied student demographics, and the distinct needs of first-generation learners. Examining how altruism and empathy manifest in this setting can provide valuable insights into how these traits influence teacher-student relationships and educational outcomes. This qualitative research aims to explore and compare how altruism and empathy are expressed by primary school teachers in different parts of West Bengal. Through methods like in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions, the study seeks to uncover how these qualities shape teaching practices, interactions with students, and responses to various challenges. The research will also analyze how factors such as school type, community setting, and teachers' personal experiences affect their ability to demonstrate altruism and empathy in their work. By exploring these aspects, the study hopes to offer a deeper understanding of the role of empathy and altruism in teaching. It also aims to suggest ways to nurture these traits to enhance educational practices and policies in primary schools.

Significances of the study

Investigating altruism and empathy among primary school teachers in West Bengal carries immense importance, especially within the field of primary education. Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping students' academic achievements, emotional health, and social skills. Understanding how altruism and empathy impact teaching methods is vital for creating a supportive and inclusive educational environment. Through qualitative exploration, this research provides valuable insights into how these traits manifest across diverse settings in West Bengal, addressing critical gaps in the current body of knowledge. Empathy and altruism are essential traits for building strong teacher-student relationships. Teachers who demonstrate empathy are better equipped to understand and respond to students' varying emotional and academic needs, while altruism drives them to offer additional care and attention (Feshbach, 2009). This study sheds light on how these qualities influence classroom dynamics and learning outcomes, particularly within West Bengal's culturally and socioeconomically varied schools. These insights pave the way for improving interactions and fostering a more supportive classroom environment. Pre-service teachers displayed significantly higher levels of empathic concern and altruistic behavior tendencies compared to non-pre-service teachers. Additionally, mediation analyses showed that empathic concern partially explained the link between the field of study and altruistic tendencies. A moderated mediation analysis further revealed that self-control reduced the impact of empathic concern on altruistic behavior tendencies. These findings suggest that the altruistic tendencies of pre-service teachers are shaped by both empathic concern and self-control (Li et al., 2022). On the other hand, Adolescent girls tend to exhibit higher levels of altruism and empathy compared to boys. Additionally, a strong positive correlation exists between altruism and empathy in both genders (Kaushik et al., 2021). Another study has shown that Students with varying levels of empathy perceive altruism and selfishness differently, emphasizing both the advantages and disadvantages of helping behavior (Kashirskaya, 2020). Research has shown that Physical education teachers in Kütahya exhibit higher levels of altruism. Female teachers tend to be less selfish, college-educated teachers demonstrate lower selfish behavior, and those from metropolitan areas display greater altruism (Eynur et al 2020). Investigations have revealed that in elementary education teachers, higher levels of altruism are positively linked to better communication skills. However, in secondary education teachers, altruism is negatively associated with problem-solving skills (Aslan et al., 2018). The empathy levels of primary school teachers are strongly affected by their age and years of service, but not by factors such as faculty type, income level, or housing type (Erşen et al., 2019). Research indicated that Empathy plays a key role in mediating the link between socioeconomic status and altruistic behavior among Chinese middle school students. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to exhibit more generous behavior towards others from similar low-SES backgrounds (Liu et al., 2023). Evidence suggests that Teacher empathy and motivation directly enhance student academic achievement, with a lesser impact when mediated by a sense of school belongingness (Sarwer et al., 2024). Teacher empathy has a positive impact on attitudes towards people with disabilities, whereas cognitive empathy is negatively related (Parchomiuk, (2019). Another Investigations have revealed that Teachers in Jakarta demonstrate a sense of altruism and connection in their approach to students, which enhances both their well-being and educational results (Olitalia et al 2013). On the other hand, the teaching effectiveness of secondary school teachers differs

notably according to their gender, location, and position, but does not vary in terms of teaching strategies or social factors (Roy et al., 2018). Previous studies have highlighted that Empathy in primary school teachers is not a strong predictor of stress related to instructional assignments, but personal distress and daydreaming can help predict these stress levels (Platsidou et al., 2017). Remedial teachers who have higher levels of altruism tend to be more compassionate, motivated to better others' circumstances, and more willing to put aside their own interests for the sake of others (Shulzhenko et al., 2020). Research indicates that spiritual experiences have a direct effect on altruism, whereas spiritual thoughts influence altruism indirectly by fostering empathy in university students (Huber et al., 2012). On the other hand, research has shown that empathy plays a key role in helping teachers effectively carry out their professional duties, as reflected in their self-evaluation of job performance (Stojiljković et al., 2012). Evidence suggests that in India, altruistic behavior among teachers is often not fully developed, even though it plays a crucial role in fostering healthy relationships and contributing to the effectiveness of organizations (Somashekhara et al., 2011). The findings can significantly shape teacher training programs by emphasizing emotional intelligence, empathy, and prosocial behaviors. Evidence suggests that targeted training can enhance these traits, leading to better teaching practices and increased student engagement (Klassen et al., 2012). Given the unique challenges faced by urban and rural schools in West Bengal, the comparative approach of this study will help design training programs tailored to their specific needs. West Bengal's mix of urban and rural schools offers a unique perspective on how local culture, socio-economic factors, and institutional contexts influence teachers' empathy and altruism. By comparing these settings, the study adds a nuanced understanding of how these traits function in different environments. These insights can guide policymakers and school leaders in crafting culturally sensitive strategies to enhance teacher development and well-being. This research is particularly valuable for promoting inclusive education. Teachers who embody empathy and altruism are better prepared to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, including those with special needs (Sharma & Sokal, 2015). By exploring how these traits foster inclusivity, the study can contribute to strategies that advance equity and inclusion across primary schools in the region. By focusing on altruism and empathy—traits often overshadowed by technical skills—this research broadens the academic conversation about teacher psychology. It bridges a gap in the literature by offering a qualitative investigation of these traits within West Bengal's socio-cultural context, enriching the global understanding of how emotional and moral qualities influence education.

Theories incorporating Altruism

Social Exchange Theory suggests that human relationships are shaped by cost-benefit evaluation. According to this theory, people engage in altruistic actions when they help others in order to receive rewards, like social recognition, personal happiness, or the possibility of receiving help in return later. Although the theory is typically associated with self-interest, some interpretations expand it to view altruistic actions as a way to gain social capital or personal satisfaction (Homans, 1958). Kin Selection Theory, based on evolutionary biology, proposes that individuals are more inclined to act altruistically toward family members to enhance the survival of shared genetic traits. The theory highlights that helping others in the family benefits the helper's genes by supporting the survival and reproduction of relatives (Hamilton, 1964). The Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis proposes that people help others because they experience empathy for them. Batson argues that when individuals feel empathy for someone in need, they are more likely to offer help, even if there is no personal gain for themselves. This theory suggests that empathy is the driving force behind genuine altruistic behavior (Batson, 1991). Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) proposes that altruistic actions are shaped by three factors: attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. The theory states that people are more likely to engage in altruistic behaviors when they have a positive view of helping others, believe that helping is expected by society, and feel confident in their ability to help (Ajzen, 1991). Reciprocity Theory suggests that altruism arises from the belief that one will receive help in return. It emphasizes the idea of mutual benefit between individuals, proposing that acts of kindness are often motivated by the expectation of future reciprocity, even if they seem selfless at first (Trivers, 1971). Social Identity Theory argues that people classify themselves into social groups and feel a sense of belonging to them. Altruistic actions can happen when individuals help members of their own group, as it contributes to the group's status and well-being. These acts of help are often motivated by a desire to strengthen the social identity and unity of the group they belong to (Tajfel et al., 1979). The Negative State Relief Model suggests that people help others to improve their own negative emotional states. When individuals experience negative feelings like guilt, sadness, or anxiety, they may engage in helping behaviors to alleviate their discomfort. This model views altruism as a means to reduce personal emotional distress, even when the person being helped does not directly benefit the helper (Cialdini et al., 1987). Theory explains that people are less likely to help in emergencies when others are present. Known as the "bystander effect," it suggests that individuals may avoid helping because they believe others will take responsibility. While it doesn't directly relate to altruism, this concept highlights how group dynamics can prevent altruistic behavior (Darley & Latané, 1968). Terror Management Theory posits that people engage in prosocial behaviors, such as helping others, as a way to cope with anxiety about their own mortality. Assisting others, particularly within one's cultural or social group,

can help provide a sense of meaning and alleviate existential fears (Greenberg et al., 1986). Altruistic Personality Theory focuses on the traits that make some individuals more likely to engage in helping behavior, even without external rewards. It suggests that certain characteristics, such as empathy and compassion, make individuals more inclined to act altruistically in various situations (Penner et al., 2005). The Compassionate Love Theory suggests that altruistic behavior is motivated by compassionate love, which involves deep empathy and care for others' well-being. People who feel this type of love are driven by selflessness and a desire to ease others' suffering (Henderson, 1981). Maslow's Humanistic Theory suggests that altruism is a part of self-actualization. As individuals meet their basic needs, such as safety and social connections, they move toward higher-level needs like self-esteem and self-actualization. At this stage, they are motivated to help others and contribute to society as part of their personal growth and fulfillment (Maslow, 1954). Including altruism in educational theories emphasizes how teachers' selfless actions contribute to creating a supportive and positive learning atmosphere. These theories propose that teachers' altruistic behaviors play a crucial role in shaping student growth, classroom interactions, and overall educational success.

Theories incorporating Empathy

Theory suggests that empathy stems from our capacity to understand and anticipate the mental states, thoughts, and feelings of others (Premack & Woodruff, 1978). The theory proposes that people subconsciously imitate and align their emotions with others, resulting in shared emotional experiences (Hatfield et al., 1994). The hypothesis posits that empathy for others can inspire altruistic behavior, even when it involves personal sacrifices (Batson, 1991). Perspective examines the brain mechanisms behind empathy, emphasizing shared neural pathways for individual and observed experiences (Decety & Jackson, 2004). Hoffman's model explains that empathy develops in stages, blending innate emotional responses with learned cognitive processes through socialization (Hoffman, 2001). Theory suggests that empathy emerges when people perceive a connection between their own experiences and those of others (Davis, 1994). Another theory found distinguishes between empathy and compassion, proposing that compassion combines empathic concern with the motivation to reduce others' suffering (Singer & Klimecki, 2014). Prosocial Behavior Theory highlights empathy's role in developing prosocial behaviors, emphasizing the importance of emotional regulation and moral reasoning (Eisenberg et al., 2006). Empathy is linked to mirror neurons, which fire both when an individual performs an action and when they see someone else do the same. These neurons enable us to understand and connect with others' emotions and intentions (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004). Carl Rogers viewed empathy as a cornerstone of effective therapy, involving a deep understanding and appreciation of another's experiences (Rogers, 1957). Empathy consists of two components: automatic emotional sharing driven by the limbic system and deliberate cognitive perspective-taking supported by higher brain regions (Decety & Moriguchi, 2007). Empathy is shaped by gender roles and societal expectations, with women often socialized to express more empathy (Eagly, 1987).

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) identifies empathy as essential for understanding others' feelings and needs without judgment or aggression (Rosenberg, 2003). Early attachment experiences influence empathy development, with secure attachments fostering a stronger ability to empathize (Bowlby, 1988). Empathy extends beyond individuals to broader social contexts, helping to create policies and practices that promote equity and social justice (Segal, 2011).

Altruism and Empathy in Educational Practices: Worldwide Perspective

Altruism and empathy are fundamental to successful educational practices across the globe. Altruism, which involves selflessly caring for others' well-being, and empathy, the ability to understand and share others' emotions, create inclusive and supportive learning environments. These values shape teacher-student connections, peer relationships, and the overall atmosphere in schools, driving both personal growth and academic achievement. Teachers who exhibit altruism often prioritize students' needs beyond their official duties, offering emotional and academic guidance. For example, Finland's celebrated education system embraces a student-centered approach, emphasizing personal development and well-being (Sahlberg, 2015). Initiatives such as the UNESCO Associated Schools Network (ASPnet) promote altruism by involving students in community service and global citizenship projects (UNESCO, 2021). Empathy is a core focus of SEL programs worldwide. The "RULER" program in the United States, for instance, helps students identify and manage emotions, encouraging empathetic interactions (Brackett et al., 2019). In Japan, "moral education" (dōtoku) incorporates empathy through storytelling, role-playing, and discussions, fostering a sense of social responsibility (Cave, 2007). Schools that emphasize altruism and empathy often experience lower levels of bullying and violence. Research in Canada shows that empathy-based programs significantly reduce peer aggression (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2012). The World Economic Forum highlights altruism and empathy as key skills for the 21st century, essential for thriving in diverse and collaborative work environments (WEF, 2020). Despite their importance, embedding altruism and empathy in education faces obstacles such as cultural differences, gaps in teacher training, and policy constraints.

Moving forward, efforts should prioritize professional development, cross-cultural studies, and leveraging technology to strengthen these values in classrooms.

Altruism and Empathy in Educational Practices: A West Bengal Perspective

Altruism and empathy are vital in creating a well-rounded educational atmosphere that nurtures emotional, social, and academic growth. In West Bengal, these values are particularly important due to the region's rich socio-economic and cultural diversity. Altruism in education refers to the selfless efforts of teachers and educational stakeholders aimed at benefiting students, often exceeding their formal responsibilities. In West Bengal, teachers commonly exhibit altruism in many ways, 1) Contributing Time and Resources: Many teachers in rural and disadvantaged areas dedicate personal time and resources to support their students' overall development (Das, 2021). 2) Promoting Inclusivity: Teachers work to ensure that students from various socio-economic backgrounds have equal access to learning opportunities. 3) Providing Mentorship: Teachers often go beyond academics to mentor students, helping them navigate personal and social challenges. Programs like "Shiksha Bondhu" highlight the critical role teachers play in aiding underprivileged students in the state (Mukherjee & Bhattacharya, 2019). Empathy involves the ability to understand and share others' feelings. In schools, empathetic educators create environments that address both the emotional and academic needs of their students. Empathy requires acknowledging and respecting the diverse cultural backgrounds of students in West Bengal (Sen & Roy, 2020). Teachers often serve as a source of comfort for students dealing with hardships, particularly those from marginalized communities. By fostering mutual respect and understanding, empathetic educators create opportunities for teamwork between teachers and students. Despite the cultural emphasis on these values, several barriers persist: Overcrowded classrooms hinder personalized attention. Socio-economic inequalities create obstacles to equal learning opportunities (Chakraborty, 2023). Limited professional development options restrict teachers' ability to implement empathy-driven practices effectively.

To strengthen altruistic and empathetic practices in education: Conduct workshops to develop teachers' emotional intelligence and empathy. Develop policies that encourage and support these values in schools. Foster collaboration between schools and local communities to address socio-economic challenges.

Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

Recruitment should focus on selecting candidates with evident altruistic and empathetic traits. Tools like psychometric evaluations or situational judgment tests can aid in identifying these qualities. Pre-service teacher education should include modules on social-emotional learning (SEL), empathy, and altruism development. Reasoning: Studies show that empathetic teachers are more effective in meeting diverse student needs and fostering inclusive classrooms (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Incorporate empathy and altruism into CPD programs through workshops and activities that enhance emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. Schools can establish peer learning groups for teachers to exchange ideas on nurturing empathy in the classroom. SEL-focused CPD helps teachers manage classrooms better and promotes students' overall well-being (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Embed SEL into primary school curricula to encourage empathy and altruism among students. Teachers can use storytelling, role-playing, and group activities to nurture prosocial behavior in children. Teachers who model empathy inspire similar behaviors in students, enhancing the overall school environment (Batson, 2011). Establish policies that prioritize teachers' mental health and emotional support, including access to counseling services. Implement mentorship programs where experienced teachers guide their peers in managing emotional challenges. Teachers' emotional health directly impacts their ability to demonstrate empathy and altruism (Hargreaves, 2000). Foster school-community partnerships through initiatives that emphasize empathy and altruism, like community service projects. Engage teachers in community activities to deepen their understanding of students' socio-economic realities. school-community ties build trust and mutual understanding (Epstein, 2011). Distribute resources fairly across urban, rural, and tribal schools to better support teachers in disadvantaged areas. Offer specialized training and incentives to keep teachers motivated and altruistic in low-resource settings. Teachers working in underprivileged environments face unique challenges that can affect their altruistic contributions.

II. Conclusion

This study examined the roles of altruism and empathy among teachers in primary schools across West Bengal, offering valuable insights into how these qualities shape teaching methods and student success. Teachers in the region demonstrate a strong sense of empathy and altruism, which is reflected in their daily interactions with students, their efforts to go beyond the curriculum to address student needs, and their dedication to creating supportive learning environments. Interviews and observations revealed that empathy is not just an inborn trait but also a skill that is developed over time, improving teacher-student relationships. Altruistic actions, such as staying after school to help struggling students or sacrificing personal time for school activities, showcase teachers' deep commitment to their students' well-being. However, the study also pointed out obstacles that limit the

expression of these qualities, such as large class sizes, lack of resources, and high stress, which can sometimes affect teachers' ability to consistently show empathy and altruism. A comparison of rural and urban schools and teachers from govt. and private institutions revealed how these qualities are expressed differently. In rural areas, teachers often show a stronger sense of community involvement, while in urban areas, teachers focus more on individual student needs within a structured system. Still, in both contexts, school leadership plays a vital role in promoting a culture of empathy and altruism, which is essential for sustaining these practices. In summary, the findings emphasize the importance of creating environments where teachers feel supported in their altruistic efforts and are encouraged to practice empathy. Future educational policies and training programs should aim to cultivate these qualities in teachers, enhancing the overall educational experience for students. Further research could examine the long-term effects of empathetic and altruistic teaching on student achievement and well-being.

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