

The Sympathetic-and-Empathetic Teacher: A Deweyan Analysis

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Introduction

As we understand Dewey's (1986, 1988) concept of an experienced teacher, she or he possesses the understandings, dispositions, and habits a well-educated, highly skilled, and intelligent person needs and develops in schools, universities, and other settings throughout life. We maintain that in order continually to mature as a teacher, one's preparation should ensure persistent growth in understanding students and cultures, subject matter and cognate fields, the science and art of teaching, and democratic social and political philosophy. We further contend that teacher education faculty and colleagues should monitor this growth while mentoring future teachers to teach prudently and effectively. For us, a teacher's lifelong growth should foster one's abilities to coalesce one's thoughts, feelings, and activities so one matures personally and, as a result of this maturity, grows in one's ability expertly to guide students' growth (Simpson & Jackson, 1997). Of the professional development possibilities Dewey (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) advocates to support teachers' lifelong growth, we focus on growth as a sympathetic-empathetic teacher.

We posit that understanding Dewey's (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) concept of the sympathetic-empathetic teacher is critical to pre- and in-service teachers' growth. We begin by defining and explaining Dewey's (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) two-pronged meaning of sympathy connecting it to contemporary definitions of sympathy and empathy. We then extend Dewey's (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) definition of the sympathetic-empathetic teacher by explaining sympathy-and-empathy's personal-pedagogical and ethical-pedagogical dimensions. Using Dewey's (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) concept of sympathetic-and-empathetic teacher as a lens through which to analyze a problematic, ethical situation in one public school, we illustrate the meaning and value of his philosophy of the sympathetic-empathetic teacher to teachers' decision-making and relational actions in contemporary schools. While our study is conceptual and ethical rather than

qualitative, we use one, real-life, ethical situation ultimately to demonstrate how Dewey's (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) theory can help teachers see problems with ethical clarity and thereby grow in their ethical understanding and resulting decision-making and responses to difficult situations.

Defining Concepts: Sympathy and Empathy

Sympathy

One can trace sympathy's etymology from ancient to relatively modern linguistic roots that reveal various connotations, e.g., a kinship with, feeling for, and relief on behalf of a group or community. More recent meanings that have evolved continue to overlap indicating that a sympathetic person has feelings for others who have problems. Debates about sympathy's precise meaning(s) today often involve the concept of empathy and the two terms' usage in therapy, medicine, anthropology, and ethics (Frazer, 2010; Stueber, 2014). Dewey's (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) view of sympathy was constructed in a context before the English word *empathy* emerged and includes two dimensions: an immediate sensitivity to a person's feelings and an intelligent inquiry into a person's thinking (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987).

We therefore use sympathy to convey Dewey's (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) idea a person immediately feels or cares for another when she or he senses pain or pleasure. For example, sensing students' joys and frustrations stimulates many teachers to celebrate with or care for them. As Dewey (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) observes, "sympathy instinctively transports us" to the side of those experiencing mistreatment or accolades "as if we were personally concerned" (p. 261). When a teacher experiences sympathy *as if* she were personally affected, she does not necessarily understand others' viewpoints but recognizes their anguish; an impulse to assist or comfort them emerges. Dewey (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) further asserts sympathy may be limited largely to a favored set of people, not extended to students and colleagues who are unknown or who are off-putting (pp. 259–262). Consequently, cultivating sympathy for specific students and colleagues may be crucial at times. On the down side, sympathy may stimulate individuals to act impulsively before understanding important details or the consequences of a decision. Thus, sympathy involves dangers from which no one is immune. Likewise, sympathy does not automatically enable a person to overcome arrogance toward some individuals (Dewey, 1922, pp. 137–138). Because "sympathy instinctively transports us" (Dewey & Tufts, 1932, p. 261) to the side of those experiencing mistreatment or accolades "as if we were personally concerned" (p. 261), sympathy may involve so much emotion that one allows it to dictate one's conduct (p. 333).

Empathy

In contrast to sympathy's relatively long history of use in the English language, the English word, *empathy*, arose in 1909 with unsettled and debatable meanings; controversies about its meaning(s) followed indefinitely (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987). Why this new term with its unsettled, debatable, controversial meanings was added is unclear but may explain Dewey's almost exclusive use of *sympathy* for contemporary conceptions of both sympathy and empathy decades after *empathy* appeared in English usage.¹ Why, then, do we employ both terms and the hyphenated expression sympathetic-empathetic teacher? Because much has changed in approximately a century, a) we want to communicate clearly and accurately with contemporary audiences; b) we think both terms—sympathy and empathy—are inclusive of Dewey's original conceptual elements and are within his term, *sympathy*. We, therefore, use the term, *empathy*, to indicate the ability to understand others in part by seeing as through their eyes and by assuming the *perspective* of a neutral, inquisitive person regarding *others' perceptions and problems*. Dewey and Tufts (1932) contend:

The emotion of [empathy; our word substituted for Dewey's sympathy]...is morally invaluable. But it functions *properly* when used as a principle of reflection and insight, rather than of direct action. Intelligent [empathy]...widens and deepens concern for consequences. To put ourselves in the place of another, to see things *from the standpoint of his* [or her] aims and values, to humble our estimate of our own pretensions to the level they assume in *the eyes of an impartial observer*, is the surest way to appreciate what justice demands. (p. 275, emphasis added)

By personal effort and mutual support, one's seeing deeply from another's perspective is possible (Greene, 1978). Learning to walk partly in students' and colleagues' shoes, to understand to a greater degree their perspectives, and to assume to some extent their mindsets requires thinking painstakingly (Cooper, 2011). Moreover, such principles as Dewey's (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) regard for self, others, social and professional groups, and those beyond our borders serve to augment the principle of empathy. Understanding the consequences of recognizing others' authentic identities (Taylor, 1991), respecting one another as persons (Strike & Soltis, 2009), and caring for and about others (Noddings, 1992) can further enlighten our empathetic journeys. Hence, while people seem to sympathize spontaneously, they characteristically empathize somewhat more reflectively (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Many probably readily recognize others' feelings more often than they comprehend others' thinking. Both abilities can enhance teachers' work.

In fact, Dewey (1895/1964) argues teachers and students need reflectively developed sympathetic proclivities and empathetic dispositions (pp. 199–201).

Because he (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) uses the term *sympathy* to convey (a) contemporary conceptions of sympathy and empathy and sometimes uses sympathy to convey (b) both empathy and sympathy simultaneously, one must extract his meaning from each context. Dewey (Dewey & Tufts) also apparently understands the two concepts as organically related. Therefore, we use the two terms to differentiate, not dichotomize, his ideas for contemporary readers.

Dewey's Use of Sympathy, Prong One: The Sympathetic Element

The *sympathetic element* embedded in Dewey's (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) use of the term, *sympathy*, is predominantly spontaneous, instinctive, emotive, impulsive, unreflective, and superficial. Additionally, sympathy is frequently, although not always, limited *in scope* to family, friends, and likable colleagues and students; *in vision* to flagrant insult or harm; *in time* to immediate consequences; and *in awareness* to the novel (Dewey & Tufts, 1932). Sympathy embodies a spontaneous interest in students' personal or academic suffering and involves an instinctive sensing of their needs (Dewey & Tufts, 1932). Moreover, a teacher's spontaneous interest in students' learning pains and pleasures can lead to her students' deeper learning and to her and their healthy rapport. Thus, Dewey (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) may correctly claim: "Nothing can make up for the absence of immediate sensitiveness" (pp. 295–296).

Dewey's Use of Sympathy, Prong Two: the Empathetic Element

On the other hand, *the empathetic element* in Dewey's (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) use of the word, *sympathy*, suggests the empathetic teacher is intentional, reflective, imaginative, investigative, affective, and evaluative and is involved in understanding, teaching, and acting on others' behalves. Consequently, the empathetic element goes beyond sympathy to imply a growing, knowledgeable regard for students and associates. Dewey (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) also claims the empathetic teacher contemplates consequences, for empathy "is the surest guarantee for the exercise of *consideration*, for examination of a proposed line of conduct in all of its bearing" (p. 259, emphasis in original). This contemplating consequences occurs because the empathetic element is not a "cold calculation" of what is at stake in an ethical situation but, instead, "is the animating mold of moral judgment" (p. 298) and action. When these qualities—e.g., growing knowledgeable regard; contemplating consequences; exercising consideration; examining conduct; and utilizing moral judgment—are operative, Dewey (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) refers to the outcome as "properly" working, "intelligent sympathy [*empathy* in our usage]" (p. 275). In terms of his theorizing, Dewey (Dewey & Tufts,

1932) provides both (a) a contrast between an impulsive sympathy and an intelligent sympathy [empathy] and (b) a view of the potential complementary nature of contemporary sympathy and empathy within his single term, sympathy. By using this single term, *sympathy*, Dewey (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) illuminates a teacher's sudden impulse to ease students' pains and enjoy their pleasures (impulsive sympathy) as complementing her reflective decisions to understand them better so she might effectively and ethically engage them in learning experiences (intelligent sympathy).

Having explained Dewey's (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) two-pronged definition of sympathy and connected it to contemporary uses of sympathy (impulsive sympathy) and empathy (intelligent sympathy), for clarity and reading ease, we henceforth use *sympathy* to mean Dewey's impulsive sympathy and *empathy* to mean Dewey's intelligent sympathy. Of course, a person who acts on impulsive sympathy can use her intelligence, e.g., when she comforts students. Conversely, a person who uses so-called intelligent sympathy can draw faulty conclusions. To highlight the complementary relation between sympathy and empathy and note when both prongs of Dewey's (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) sympathy are at work, we use the term from our title, *sympathetic-and-empathetic*.

Personal-Pedagogical-Ethical Endeavors

Two critical educational matters emerge from Dewey's (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) reasons for encouraging educators' sympathetic-and-empathetic growth: teachers need to be both effective and ethical. As we analyze teachers' personal-pedagogical-ethical endeavors, we find Dewey's (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) concept of the sympathetic-emphatic teacher to be larger than our definition above, larger than what may at first meet the eye. First, the teacher needs sympathy and empathy to interact personally and pedagogically with students. *In the personal realm*, the teacher needs sympathy for students and colleagues experiencing frustrations, challenges, and problems. The teacher needs to feel their challenges so she or he is motivated to act on their behalves. Thus, being regularly detached from others, especially the young, is incompatible with Dewey's (1938/2010) view of the teacher. *In the pedagogical realm*, the teacher needs to empathize to understand how students think as they attempt to answer questions, solve problems, and complete projects; the teacher needs to empathize, teach, guide, re-teach, and re-tutor effectively. Ideally, as empathetic co-learners, teachers and students enjoy a "vital [intellectual] current flowing" (Dewey, 1929/1988, p. 22) between them because they are also co-thinkers. Second, in addition to needing sympathy and empathy to interact personally and pedagogically with students, educators need empathy to function effectively within teaching's explicitly ethical dimensions or *in the ethical realm*. Much as

teachers empathetically strive to understand students' culturally diverse backgrounds and lifestyles, they also should endeavor to understand how students' ethical diversity and backgrounds influence their thinking and behaviors (Kunzman, 2006). Since the ethical and personal are embedded in the pedagogical and within each another, we discuss only two dimensions. The first dimension, requiring sympathy and empathy and functioning in personal and pedagogical realms, we name *the personal-pedagogical*; the second dimension, requiring empathy, we name *the ethical-pedagogical*. Our concepts of personal-pedagogical and ethical-pedagogical are distinctive, complementary, and mutually depend on each other. We now extend our definitions of *the personal-pedagogical* and *ethical-pedagogical dimensions*.

The Personal-Pedagogical Dimension

The Personal Side

When Dewey (1895/1964) seems to be discussing sympathy, he maintains individuals ordinarily have “a native sympathy” or “genial impulse” and “sympathy with human life and its aspirations” (p. 199). Elsewhere, he (1916/2010) asserts the artistic teacher needs empathetic insight into the external behavior and the inner states of

...the life of children, what is going on in their more outward motions, in the things they do, but [also in] what is going on in their feelings, their imagination[s], [and] what effect the schoolroom is having on the[ir] permanent disposition[s], the side of their emotions and imagination[s]. (p. 44)

We infer he is asking teachers to develop empathy so they can build on what may be termed quantitative assessment and can evaluate the pedagogical import and significance of students' *behaviors, feelings, imaginations, dispositions, and emotions*. Dewey (1916/2010) hints at going beyond a narrow quantitative assessment to suggest the “schoolroom”—with all its qualitative complexities—needs far-reaching evaluation. Thus, Dewey (1964, 1988) focuses on broadly knowing each student as student, person, and member of groups because such knowledge is crucial to working successfully and appropriately in school and classroom environments. Adding that attentiveness to the person as student and human being matters, Dewey (1916/2010) charges teachers to collaborate with colleagues and social institutions to nurture in students a harmony of “certain affections and desires and sympathies [along with the]...power to carry out intellectual plans” (p. 45). He (1903/2010) affirms one powerful motive to such action is “sympathy and affection, the going out of emotions to the most appealing and the most rewarding object of love—a little child” (p. 151). Although *sympathy, affection, and love* are not mentioned in context as potentially problematic, one knows people have impulses and emotions that can

easily go too far as we later demonstrate through our teacher-Sofia example. Because Dewey (1938/2010) assigns great importance to sympathy and empathy, one need not wonder why he says only teachers who have the ability “to stay young indefinitely and to retain a lively sympathy with the spirit of youth should remain long in the teaching profession” (p. 35).

The Pedagogical Side

Shifting our discussion to *the pedagogical side* of the personal-pedagogical dimension, we highlight Dewey (1938/2010) stresses that empathetic insight—seeing as through each learner’s eyes and understanding—enables teachers to observe “movements of...minds...[and be] sensitive to all the signs [of their] response...to subject-matter” (p. 36). Specifically, he (1938/2010) underscores empathy most impresses when it is “alive to [student] perplexities and problems, discerning of their causes” and has the “tact to put the finger on the cause of failure, quick to see every sign of promise and to nourish it to maturity” (p. 36). Indeed, empathetic teachers’ minds should “move in harmony with those of others, appreciating their difficulties, entering into their problems, sharing their intellectual victories” (Dewey, 1938/2010, p. 36). Dewey (1928/2010) makes clear that discerning the “connected course of [the student’s] actions” and “prolonged sequence of activities” (p. 182) is critical and comes from understanding a student’s sustained intellectual interests and activities.

The Ethical-Pedagogical Dimension

By examining the personal-pedagogical dimension, we have, to some degree, already touched upon *the ethical-pedagogical dimension*. Similar to the way sympathy can enhance personal relationships among students and teachers, empathy can deepen understanding of students’ outward behaviors and inner thoughts. Likewise, sympathetic-empathetic understanding should flow into empathetic, ethical-pedagogical inquiry. To paraphrase Dewey (Dewey & Tufts, 1932): as an emotion with both feelings and cognitive content, empathy is uniquely helpful as an intellectual tool for understanding and actualizing fairness. Even so, it is useful to recognize one’s empathy can grow as one more fully comprehends students as persons. When teachers cultivate their capacities to imagine what it is like to be particular students and encounter their challenges, personal empathies can move to a deeper level, for “a person’s ideas and treatment of his fellows are dependent upon *his powers to put himself imaginatively in their place*” (Dewey, 1934, p. 348, emphasis added). By implication, Dewey (1934) suggests that, as educators get inside students’ thinking, they can better guide these students to imagine or see the desires and interests of their classmates, teachers, and neighbors. So, Dewey (1934) avers, correctly or incorrectly,

growth in ethically understanding another may lead to expanding and restructuring one's own personal capacities and dispositions:

It is when the desires and aims, the interests and modes of response of another *become an expansion of our own being* that we understand him. We learn to see with his eyes, hear with his ears, and their results give true instruction, for they are *built into our own structure*. (p. 336, emphasis added)

Using an empathetic lens for inquiry advances one's ethical beliefs and values, particularly as they bear on building and sustaining productive school and classroom cultures (Kunzman, 2006). Not merely a tool for understanding students and colleagues, empathy is also a virtue vital to developing students' abilities as they learn to see into and understand others' minds and emotions, including their teachers'. As teachers, then, one needs to develop students' empathy by nurturing their imaginations so they can improve their abilities to see the nuances and intricacies of diverse people's ethical ideas and interests (Dewey, 1916).

Applying Dewey's Thinking: Classroom Teacher, Sofia Marks

In this section, we present and analyze one teacher's actions in one problematic situation in her teaching life through Dewey's (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) concepts of sympathy and empathy. While the details of her situation are numerous, we draw on specifics that inform our analysis.

Description of the Teacher and Situation²

Sofia Marks is a fifth-grade, elementary-school teacher in a public-school district in a southwestern state of the US. When the incidents we analyze arose, she had taught for over a decade and at her current school for five years. Although they may not know to name particular pedagogical practices "Deweyan," many consider Sofia an excellent teacher because she intuitively engages in Deweyan pedagogy by connecting curricula to students' personal interests, backgrounds, and needs; by developing a multifaceted understanding of each student; and by drawing upon her substantial, classroom-teaching experience and upon her knowledge and understanding of student development. Sofia reportedly senses students' personal and academic struggles, gets inside their heads to determine precisely where learning obstacles reside, and then personalizes instruction. As she had done with many other children in her care, Sofia connected with her new student, Jonathan Foster. In Jonathan's case, due to his extraordinary circumstances (described subsequently), Sofia immediately sympathized with him because of his recent trauma and hoped she might help him get past that event through her caring commitment to him. Although Sofia's strengths in Deweyan pedagogy—her sympathetic-and-empathetic teaching—have served her students, colleagues, and the school community well, in her interactions

with Jonathan, her sympathy runs awry creating personal and professional disequilibria and a school predicament. In this section, we analyze her sympathetic-and-empathetic actions in one particular situation involving one traumatized, 11-year-old boy, Jonathan, and, indirectly, his 7-year-old sister, Claudia.

Jonathan and Claudia's parents died in a horrific, fiery automobile accident. Shortly thereafter, Child Protective Services (CPS) moved the siblings to a foster home. After disclosing the heartrending situation to the principal, Jonathan and Claudia's foster parents enrolled them in the school where Sofia Marks teaches; Jonathan became one of Sofia's students. After a short time, both children were doing well academically and behaviorally. Meanwhile, CPS sought a family member to take the siblings permanently and successfully located their biological-mother's brother who agreed to take them into his home and rear them.

Legally, the arrangement was settled, and the children were soon to leave the school when things became suddenly awkward and tense. CPS called the school principal, Mr. George Adams, and told him Sofia was not to be alone or have any contact with Jonathan outside her classroom. The CPS official explained that Sofia had called CPS, while Jonathan was with her during the school day, insisting Jonathan did not want to live with his uncle. Instead, he wanted to live with Sofia and her family. Sofia reportedly told the official that she and her husband wanted to adopt Jonathan but did not mention adopting Claudia. Later, Jonathan's foster parents reported Jonathan told them he did not want to go to his uncle, and they should just send Claudia. He wanted Sofia to be his mom and said she had told him when he became 12 years old, he could decide with whom he wanted to live. The foster parents said Sofia's words increasingly upset and confused Jonathan who cried late into the night. The next day, Saturday, after Jonathan received over 100 text-messages from Sofia's phone, his foster parents blocked the number.

On Monday, Principal George Adams met with Sofia asking her if there had been any reason for Jonathan to interpret her intentions as anything other than maternal. She replied, "No. I love him and want him as part of my family." Emphatic that she had done nothing wrong, she proclaimed she had contacted CPS only because no one would return her attorney's calls. Adams explained the school would comply with CPS' directive, he had transferred Jonathan to a new classroom, and he expected her to have no conversations with Jonathan in school or out until the legal ramifications of the situation were clear. He concluded that if she persisted in contacting Jonathan directly, disciplinary action would ensue up to and including terminating her employment. The school's lawyer added that failure to comply with Adams' instructions would at least mean disciplinary action for insubordination. Sofia stated

she would talk with her attorney to find out what her rights were; until that time, she would do as Adams directed. She added that her love for Jonathan and desire to help him was not necessarily the school's business as long as she complied during school hours.

Adams and a school board member met with Sofia after Jonathan and Claudia had left for their uncle's home. Adams did not want to lose Sofia as a teacher but thought it was imperative she make no further contact with Jonathan. Moreover, he thought it essential she understand why her actions were inappropriate and potentially harmful to Jonathan and Claudia. The academic year ended with a tenuous détente but with the understanding Sofia could return the next year if she complied with Adams' directive. He believed her, still, to be an effective teacher who could learn from the experience; the district's attorney concluded Sofia had not committed any act for which she could be clearly disciplined.

Deweyan Analysis of Sofia Marks' Situation

When analyzing these events, five questions emerge connecting Dewey's (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) theory to the situation. The questions are: 1) was Sofia acting outside the scope of a reasonable, sympathetic-empathetic teacher's actions; 2) was the principal correct in compelling Sofia to terminate her relationship with Jonathan and thereby acting within the school community's expectations of sympathetic-empathetic teaching; 3) what was the best way to frame the argument Sofia's actions were or were not consistent with sympathetic-empathetic teaching and therefore were or were not in Jonathan's best interests; 4) was it reasonable to retain Sofia as a teacher—was there a plausible argument that she is a sympathetic-empathetic teacher willing and capable of growing from this experience; and 5) what does one learn by examining Sofia's situation as a whole? We address each of these questions in turn.

Question 1: Was Sofia acting outside the scope of a sympathetic-empathetic teacher's actions?

Upon discussion, we agree Sofia acted in an excessive manner: emotions drove her luring her across the proverbial line. Her actions interfered with the legal processes and decision-making to uphold the legal standard of acting in Jonathan's best interests. Her proposed action to adopt him alone gave the impression she was indifferent to Claudia whom she appeared willing to separate from Jonathan without regard for the harm separation might cause and with neither sympathy nor empathy for Jonathan and Claudia's plight as separated siblings having recently lost their parents. Her reinforcing Jonathan's desire to maintain a developing mother-son relationship made helping him accept the move to his uncle almost impossible. Deweyan thinking may suggest she sympathized with only Jonathan excluding Claudia because Sofia did not interact with her since Claudia was not her student. Likewise, she seems

to have a diminished interest in Jonathan's uncle's welfare and feelings. Furthermore, her intense concern for the immediate consequences of the situation for Jonathan and her seem to slight both intermediate and long-term consequences on all parties.

Some may wonder if one should view Sofia's actions through the teacher's traditional duty of standing *in loco parentis*. Historically, that concept was used legally in the US to permit school officials to make decisions regarding students that otherwise belong solely to parents, such as when and how to discipline students. In some instances, school personnel utilized *in loco parentis* to permit educators to do things parents had rejected and asked the school not to do. Thus, *in loco parentis* extended to situations where the educators' decision about the best interests of a child was permitted even against parental wishes.

The *in loco parentis* principle, however, did not privilege an individual teacher's decision over that of higher-ranking school officials.³ When there was dissent within a system about which actions the school would take *in loco parentis*, those with the most authority or greatest expertise made the official judgment. In contrast, Sofia stood alone in—or, perhaps, outside—the district in her assessment of what constituted the best action for Jonathan. Her actions conflicted with the decisions of the governmental agency responsible for making decisions in the best interest of children in its care thus creating a likely conflict between two, state, governmental bodies—public-school district (State Board of Education) and CPS—over jurisdiction and power that in court would likely be resolved in CPS's favor. In this instance, the authority to act for Jonathan *in loco parentis* regarding future custody and adoption rested explicitly with CPS, not with educators or educational institutions.

As noted earlier, Dewey (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) considers empathy a tool for fairness only if all concerned “humble our estimate” (p. 275) of our abilities and importance. Unfortunately, Sofia appears to overestimate her ability and the necessity to intervene by opposing the CPS decision because she elevates herself while underrating others' professional judgment, abilities, and motives. If one reads Sofia's actions through Dewey's (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) notion of intelligent sympathy—empathy—her actions do not seem to emerge from empathy because she failed carefully to analyze the full set of salient factors and consequences in her desired actions, especially in terms of Jonathan's needs.

Question 2: Was the principal correct in compelling Sofia to terminate her relationship with Jonathan and thereby acting within the school community's expectations of sympathetic-empathetic teaching?

The answer to this second question seems inescapably, “yes.” Jonathan and Claudia were going to live with their uncle's family. Whatever Claudia's feelings about relocation, Jonathan apparently

resisted the new situation encouraged by Sofia's promised alternative. The circumstances as a whole would make the new adoptive family's job of integrating the two children a delicate process. The horrendous death of Jonathan and Claudia's parents had traumatized them and resulted in their temporary relocation where Jonathan found Sofia who intensely loved and sought to protect him. Now, he was being removed to unknown location and conditions against his will. Nevertheless, logically, Sofia had no further role in Jonathan's life, and any continued contact with him would reasonably lead to further unhappiness.

Question 3: What was the best way to frame the argument that Sofia's actions were or were not consistent with sympathetic-empathetic teaching and therefore were or were not in Jonathan's best interests?

When Jonathan and Claudia's parents died and the children became wards of the state, loving relationships' informal and affectionate dimensions did not factor into deciding their futures but instead, statutory presumptions about sanguinity preferences leading to an evidence-based determination founded on established norms and general standards. As soon as the children became the state's wards, CPS procedures guided their movements: foster care, placement with a family member, and possible adoption. Whatever her motives, Sofia had interposed herself disruptively into a state-mandated process in which no role for her existed outside her function as Jonathan's teacher. Even if she had volunteered to provide both children a loving home, she could only appropriately do so if a willing and appropriate family member had not agreed to care for the children. Once a family member entered the equation, Sofia could not appropriately ask to adopt one or both children. Assuming, as is reasonable, she did love Jonathan and wanted to support his healing, her perspective was narrowly relational and clashed with the systemic and inevitable resolution.⁴

One way to interpret Sofia's actions is to assume her *initial* sympathetic-empathetic responses were spontaneous *and* reasonable. As Dewey (1903/2010) writes, a young child is generally "the most appealing and the most rewarding object of love" (p. 151) and how much more so here given Jonathan's needs and response to Sofia. However, Sofia's surge of sympathy moved towards a deep, emotional commitment that apparently dictated her conduct, limited her reflection, and narrowed her focus. In contrast, Dewey (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) posits one function of empathy as a principle of reflection is to widen and deepen concern for consequences—something inherent to ethical actions. Sofia's conduct demonstrated a narrowing rather than widening and deepening concern for consequences.

Question 4: Was it reasonable to retain Sofia as a teacher—was there a plausible argument that she is a sympathetic-emphatic teacher willing and capable of growing through this experience?

Subject to her agreement to sever all connection with Jonathan, Principal Adams chose to retain Sofia even though neither he nor any faculty member was aware of the events involving Sofia and Jonathan prior to CPS' call. At first, Sofia's plan to adopt Jonathan was so private even Claudia's teacher was in the dark. Sofia's experience was emotionally devastating because she felt she had to rescue, heal, and guide Jonathan to a happy life. The events, however, were potentially *sui generis* and thus unlikely to occur again. More pointedly, although her initial response was angry and self-protective, her performance as a classroom teacher before and during this time suggested she was capable of developing as a teacher and person. In other instances, her concern for students' growth yielded positive results and aligned with the best tradition of the school. Deciding to invite Sofia back, therefore, seems both fair and judicious illustrating a Deweyan (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) interest in wisdom and fairness. Whether it would have been well-advised for her to accept the invitation is a separate question.

Question 5: What might one learn by examining Sofia's situation as a whole?

Since Dewey (1930/1984) contends that in the first stage of thinking one must interpret a situation's qualities as a whole (Dewey & Tufts, 1932), we asked what one learns after considering one's own and each stakeholder's immediate intuitions, inferences, and perceptions of the situation? What qualities did we and others sense? Did a "pervasive quality" (Dewey, 1930/1984, pp. 258–262) regulate each person's thinking about the situation? Later, one should consider which ethical principles are relevant to choosing among potential solutions (Dewey & Tufts, 1932).

Also needing pondering are Jonathan and Claudia's, Sofia's, CPS', the foster parents', the school's, and the uncle's family's perceptions of good. Dewey (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) indicates multiple, conflicting goods are common in problematic situations. For Sofia, the good might be similar to Jonathan's. For Claudia, the good is a glaring unknown. Multiple other goods exist for CPS, the foster family, the school, and the uncle's family. The evils are also somewhat different if overlapping on occasions. While we have embedded some principles that help decide among goods and evils in the previous discussions, we attend next to sensing or intuiting the whole situation's qualities.

Four quick points are especially noteworthy. First, the entire situation entails all that is relevant to addressing the problem. Second, one must clearly identify the situation's goods and ills. Third, the whole situation tells a qualitative story that requires all stakeholders' insightful

interpretations. Fourth, although every participant's insights merit consideration, Dewey (1930/1984) contends experienced, empathetic participants usually better sense and see the situation's dominant qualities than do others. Ultimately, once one grasps the entire situation, which qualities immediately surface? Tragic, sad, and/or unfortunate ones? Unbalanced, disharmonious, and/or divisive ones? Imprudent, dangerous, and/or destructive ones? How and with what evidence might different people support their perceptions? What do the identified qualities suggest about participants' desires, needs, and interests? Which ills should one reduce or eliminate to construct a new, unified situation? How does the situation stimulate participants to arrive at imaginative solutions? Ultimately, who decides on how to use the pooled information?

Finally, many other questions arose during the analysis of this situation we hope others will explore. For instance, when a school is strongly interpersonal and encourages teacher heroism, what are district administrators' and school-based leaders' responsibilities? Are they partially responsible if a teacher's behavior is a logical, if distorted, extension of a school's expectations? Instead of encouraging a highly individualistic culture to grow in a school, should leadership and staff cultivate a sense of *community and shared responsibility* for each other and students? Should at least one explicit goal—making clear that in complex and ambiguous situations involving students, a single teacher, no matter how sympathetically and empathetically attuned, is unlikely to consider all the salient factors, possible options, and consequences as well as a community of teachers—be addressed?

Conclusion

In "My Pedagogic Creed," Dewey (1896/1959) writes: if we "secure right habits of action and thought, with reference to the good, the true, and the beautiful, the emotions will for the most part take care of themselves" (p. 30). While Dewey may be correct, in relation to the operation of sympathy and empathy in effective and ethical teaching, emotions may interfere with practicing right habits and thought more than he seemingly acknowledges. Given that sympathy is usually an immediate and instinctive response to students' struggles and that a culture of teaching is built upon the premise that teachers have a duty to care for their students, the teacher's first surge of sympathetic feeling is to protect and nurture a student in trouble. After all, are teachers not charged with "doing what's right for the kids"? If the student responds to the teacher's sympathetic feelings and actions, reciprocal feelings may produce a strong, emotional current. Thus, a strong connection is possible between teacher and student particularly when the student is suffering and the teacher feels capable of alleviating that pain.

Consequently, while Sofia's situation with Jonathan was unusual, her sympathetic feelings were not—they were variations of a common emotional response to students' pain. She might be expected, as a competent teacher, to move from sympathy to empathy, then to reflective intelligence and thereby to operate from right habits of action and thought. Instead, she appears to have acted like an overly protective parent with intense emotions that shaped and drove her actions. If her feelings were an anomaly, the situation would be an interesting counterpoint among a universe of rational acts. Instead, although the role her emotions play in her actions seems far from idiosyncratic and very much a commonplace deviation, her chosen "solution" seems anything but regular and commonplace for a teacher acting on a deeply cared-for student's behalf.

If Dewey (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) is correct about sympathetic-and-empathetic teaching, the paradox becomes: without sympathy—without relationships built on emotional connections—a nuanced process of empathetic and ethical conduct is unlikely to emerge. As integral as emotions are to continuing sympathetic-empathetic relationships between teachers and students, so are right habits of action and thought in the lifelong process of becoming an ethical, caring, and effective teacher. While sympathy and strong emotional responses are potentially dangerous, they are also essential to moving beyond an impersonal process. The ethics of good teaching requires much more than the impersonal. In Deweyan terms, once disequilibrium occurs, how does one foster the requisite balance of feeling and thinking, and how, then, does one make a balancing move from sympathy to sympathy-and-empathy and thus to intelligent action? Although answering these questions is beyond our purpose, we offer four observations.

First, while there is no one way of maintaining and reintroducing personal and institutional balance, Dewey (1933/1986) observes the "best thinking occurs when the easy and the difficult" (p. 350) are balanced. In Sofia's situation, she appears to have had an unseen need that resulted in uncharacteristic choices and behaviors. Some desire tipped the balance causing her to judge poorly and act unwisely. She found it too easy to think and act on her sympathy rather than counterbalance her sympathy with empathetic thinking. Pappas (2008), therefore, rightly highlights the ideal of balance in Dewey's moral thought.

Second, isolation in teaching, a sociologically familiar description of teachers' workplace habits (Lortie, 1975), may be an impediment to ethical teaching. Combining practice in isolation with a school-wide emphasis on forming caring classrooms may multiply risks to teachers and students alike. Having a school-wide emphasis on being a caring

community may be a partial antidote to a tendency of some to become overly sympathetic.

Third, aspiring or practicing school-based educators may correctly think teachers already have too much to learn and too much to do to add still another learning goal—becoming a sympathetic-empathetic teacher; therefore, hesitancy to accept another responsibility, even if it involves ethics, is understandable. Despite their hesitancy, most teachers would agree that being effective, ethical educators requires engaging in complex interactions with students and colleagues; teaching students *how to value* rather than imposing one's own values (Simon, Howe, & Kirschenbaum, 1984); having the ethical obligation effectively to foster students' learning and ethical behaviors; and having the ethical obligation to create positive learning environments by encouraging democratic ethics of equity, care, and inquiry. Such engaging, teaching, fostering, and creating concern teachers deeply and partially define them as sympathetic-empathetic teachers. Indeed, those running both pre- and in-service teacher programs have a responsibility to examine with their students what it means to be ethically sympathetic and empathetic teachers. Here Dewey (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) underscores that one cannot separately cultivate virtues, including sympathy and empathy, for they "interpenetrate one another" and collectively enhance "a rounded and positive character" (pp. 257, 259). If Dewey (Dewey & Tufts, 1932) is correct, complementary qualities should accompany one's cultivating sympathy and empathy including interest in inquiring into the evolving factors that influence human behavior, evaluating the ideas and values that are studied, thinking with and acting on the ideas and values that are being reflectively retained and refined, understanding when and why certain choices are well advised, foreseeing the consequences of actions in different circumstances, and acting on behalf of one's own and others' mutual betterment when making decisions.

Finally, educators should work to advance students' reflecting upon their experiences with and their resulting understandings of sympathy and empathy. By teaching students to be interested in and attentive to others' pain and pleasure and to see the virtue of using empathy as an intellectual tool, school personnel nourish "right habits of action and thought, with reference to the good, the true, and the beautiful" (Dewey 1896/1964, p. 93). Although one neither magically produces nor permanently achieves these habits, they are worthy of ongoing human pursuit and admiration unless research and reflection indicate their actual consequences are contextually counterproductive. Like Dewey (1934), we encourage educators to pursue the process of becoming a sympathetic-empathetic teacher; to determine if, when, how, and to what

degree they have worked through the process; and, in response to that determination, to revisit the process as needed to achieve and retain moral balance.

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Endnotes

- ¹ When comparing Dewey and Tufts' (1932) use of sympathy with that of G. H. Mead's (1934), it is clear they had similar understandings of the word.
- ² All names are fictional, and many details are reconstructed to protect the anonymity of the individuals whose stories we relate and analyze.
- ³ The legal doctrine of in loco parentis has existed as a matter of common law and in school district policies throughout the U.S. as long as common schools have operated. The U.S. Supreme Court finally expressly decreed public schools have such interests as safe and efficient operations that permit them to impose punishments on students against parents' wishes (See Ingraham v. Wright, 1975; New Jersey v. T. L. O., 1985). Schools can also make decisions about the educational programs students follow despite parental objections, subject to legislatively created statutory limitations. Although the conflicts between governmental officials and parents about a child's best interests are not limited to education, schools have been an arena where such conflicts often arise. Such conflicts can also arise within schools where such employees as teachers work to provide educational or other services district policy or state law prescribes. The scope of such issues is beyond full explication in this article. Suffice it to say, if Sofia had violated a superior's direct and legal order, such as those the principal clearly made here, she would be subject to insubordination charges. CPS was acting within the scope of its legislatively assigned duties in respect to Jonathan, and Sofia had no authority to disregard its decisions. In all likelihood, unlike the school district, she lacked standing to challenge CPS' decision in court.
- ⁴ There are occasionally exceptions to the mechanistic legal processes of settling children removed from biological parents. Furthermore, on some occasions, the legal, decision-making apparatus can lead to decisions no reasonable person would describe as protecting the best interests of a child (indeed, most literature of a biographical nature about children put into the "system" of foster care, e.g., suggests a Dickensian nightmare). Nonetheless, in this case, the preferred option of putting children with blood relatives was available. There was neither indication that choice was problematic nor was there any

reason to suggest splitting the two siblings so Sofia could adopt Jonathan was inherently desirable. These cases are very often difficult and hard to judge in terms of “best interests,” to say the least (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013).