

More than a feeling

It seems like an almost heretical question to pose within the teaching profession, but ... could too much empathy be a bad thing? **Colin Foster** suspects so...

What qualities do schools look for when employing a teacher? High on the list, I'm sure, is empathy.

Because who could possibly argue with that? If the Oxford English Dictionary is correct, and empathy is indeed 'The ability to understand and share the feelings of another', then that's surely an essential prerequisite for anyone wanting to work with children and young people.

Teaching is, after all, famously one of the 'caring professions', with personal attributes such as empathy playing an arguably even more important role than subject knowledge and pedagogical skill. When parents send their children off to school each morning, the very least they expect is that the teachers who'll be looking after them *in loco parentis* won't be sociopaths, but rather people who care, and who have a deep capacity for empathy.

Against empathy

The 2018 book *Against Empathy* by Paul Bloom has an arresting title, but it's important to note that Bloom is fully supportive of compassion. That much is clear from the book's subtitle, 'The case for rational compassion'. Before you dismiss what he has to say, it's essential to understand that this isn't a book that endorses being horrible to people. Actually, it's quite the opposite.

Bloom's core argument is that we don't make good decisions in other people's best interests, or respond well to real-world incidents,

if we're overly influenced by how another person's situation makes us feel.

Being motivated solely by our natural human empathy may sometimes lead to us being more disposed towards actions that alleviate someone's pain and distress in the short term – or merely make us feel better – while leaving them worse off in the long run.

Actions motivated by empathy will often leave us feeling as though we've 'done the right thing' and are a 'good person'. When looked at more coolly, however, we might not have helped the other person as much as we'd like to think. Without realising it, we might have even helped to make things worse.

Compassionate rationality

Let's consider some examples. When a student is distressed about something, we obviously want and need to be compassionate.

We give them time, listen to what they want to say and try to take the pressure off them. We might ask them how we can help, and possibly seek to involve other professionals, if needed. All are sensible courses of action informed by common sense.

However, the motivation for taking such actions won't be primarily empathy. Focusing on empathy may cause us to misdirect our available resources principally towards those

who 'shout the loudest' by being extremely vocal about their problems. Over-serving those students can risk establishing a cycle of reinforcement, where they learn over time to continue claiming more and more of the wrong kind of attention – the type that won't really support them in their personal growth. In the meantime, other students with less 'noisy' problems will be overlooked.

Compassionate rationality, on the other hand, could entail actively *looking*

for students with difficulties who might naturally generate less attention towards themselves. Rather than waiting and responding to the most dramatic incidents and people, we instead deliberately seek out those students who are quieter and more withdrawn; whose issues may be just as serious, perhaps even more so, than their peers who loudly demand our attention.

Proactive support

Students can sometimes experience genuinely appalling events and changes within their lives that can be very hard for us to hear. Being led by our empathy can result in us being astonished that some of our young people are able to function at all, and expressing amazement at their ability to even make it into school.

We may find ourselves doubting whether we, as

adults, would have the capacity to cope with what they're facing, and humbled by their apparent reserves of strength and bravery. All that may be true, and should be acknowledged.

But empathetic reactions such as these can also trap us into seeing such students in ways that may not support their long-term wellbeing.

A more *compassionately rational* response may involve asking what

proactive support would be in their best interests to help them take the next steps in their journey. An *overly empathetic* perspective might make us feel guilty about expecting anything from them.

The need for distance

Professionals in other caring professions readily recognise the importance of distance – not just as a protective mechanism for carers, but because over-involvement isn't necessarily always in the person's best interests.

For illustrations of this, we can look to medicine. In his 2022 book, *And Finally: Matters of Life and Death*, the neurosurgeon and author Henry Marsh wrote that, 'As a doctor, you could not do the work if you were truly empathic – if you literally felt yourself what your patient was feeling ... You have to practise instead a limited form of

compassion, without losing your humanity in the process.'

If this is right, then when you next enter hospital for a surgical procedure, you shouldn't be hoping that you'll get the surgeon with the greatest reserves of empathy. Such a person might be too distracted, or too inhibited to

carry out the procedure that you'll ultimately need to be performed as competently as possible. There's the possibility that they may hold themselves back from seeing the necessary actions through to their full conclusion.

Setting the boundaries

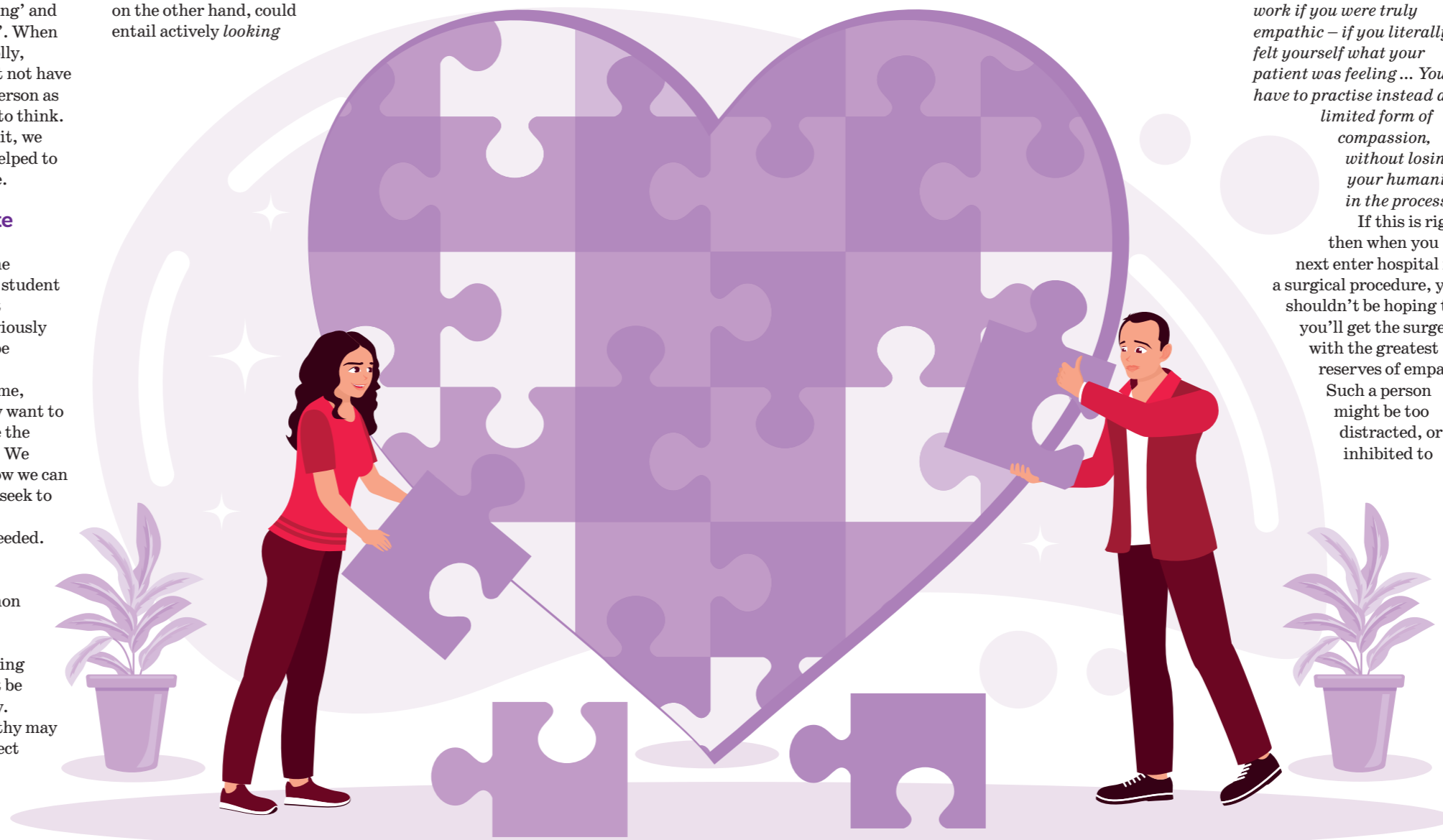
If this is the case for doctors and other professionals, then perhaps there's something valuable here that education professionals in schools can learn as well.

If teachers are to go on serving their students in the most effective ways they can, then what's needed are boundaries – which should include being compassionate, rather than empathy-led.

Burned-out, emotionally exhausted teachers aren't going to be in the best position to offer care and support to their students. Facing students who present with complex needs, day after day, while fully feeling the depth of those problems – especially at a time when schools have increasingly limited access to external solutions and support – will likely lead to disillusionment and burnout.

Instead, we should focus on developing greater reserves of rational compassion, so that staff are encouraged to think hard about what actions will put the students' interests first, and actively limit the extent to which we make important decisions based primarily on empathy.

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