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Original research article

Russian Teachers' Perceptions of Kindness and Its Manifestations in Educational Activities

Anna V. Leybina^{1*}, Francisco Pons², Yuri I. Semenov³

¹ Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russian Federation

² University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

³ Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), Yakutsk, Russian Federation

* Corresponding author. E-mail: leybina@yandex.ru

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0967-3837>, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5021-4520>,
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8766-3936>

Abstract

Introduction. In recent years, the research on kindness as a character trait has become a subject of increasing interest. The development of kindness in students is inextricably related to the study of kindness in teachers. However, there is the lack of critical attention paid to pedagogical kindness; the phenomenon of kindness has not been studied previously in Russia. This study aims to examine Russian teachers' perceptions of kindness, its manifestations, and its importance for educational activities.

Methods. The study participants (302 teachers) filled out an online questionnaire to define the concept of kindness, the way it manifests itself in educational activities, the importance of pedagogical kindness, and its impact on students, and also provided information on their gender, age, religiosity, presence and number of children, teaching experience, and the age group of students they work with. To process qualitative data, open coding and axial coding were used; multinomial logistic regression was used to identify associations between teachers' perceptions of kindness and kind actions and sociodemographic variables.

Results. The authors (a) identified five thematic categories in the definition of kindness: personal states and qualities, openness to others, understanding of others, external and internal actions and behaviors and (b) proposed a classification for pedagogically kind actions, according to their manifestations during skills and knowledge acquisition, educational activities accompanying educational process, and kindness outside school. No differences were found between teachers' perceptions of kindness and kind actions and their sociodemographic characteristics. The teachers recognize the importance of pedagogical kindness and its positive impact on students.

Discussion. Kindness is not equivalent to helping behavior. However, kindness usually manifests itself in behavior. Therefore, activity theory should be used as a framework for a further study of pedagogical kindness.

Keywords

pedagogical kindness, kindness, kind actions, activity theory, qualitative analysis, components of kindness, teacher's kindness, helping behavior, altruism, prosocial behavior

Highlights

- ▶ Activity theory is applicable to describing kindness and its manifestations in teachers' work.
- ▶ The concept of kindness is broader than the concept of helping/prosocial behavior.
- ▶ From the teachers' point of view, pedagogical kindness has a positive impact on the educational and upbringing processes.

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Introduction

In recent years, significant attention has been paid to the issues of kindness and its development in the context of school and preschool education. In particular, the Federal State Educational Standard of Basic General Education (2010) indicates that the development of students' benevolent attitudes is one of the main results of the educational process. Children's perceptions of kindness and the activities aimed at the development of kindness have been widely described and discussed (Luchina, 2018; Binfet & Passmore, 2019). However, a scholarly interest has only recently shifted to the study of teacher's kindness. Since the teacher is often a role model for children and has a considerable impact on their lives and worldviews, the teacher's kindness represents an integral component of a successful pedagogical process (Katkov, 2017; Loreman, 2011), and the 'inner warmth' of the mentor contributes to active development and showing interest (Vygotsky, 1991). In addition, teaching and kindness are inextricably interrelated, as they enable students to see the world and various situations through the eyes of their teacher (Eroshenkova, 2019; Clegg & Rowland, 2010). However, there is still no common understanding of the essence of teachers' kindness and its concrete manifestations.

In today's psychology and education kindness of teachers, educators or mentors is designated as 'pedagogical kindness', which manifests itself in academic or emotional support provided by teachers to students (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997) and contributes to creating a safe educational environment and building productive relationships (Akhmerova, Ziatdinova, & Mukhamadeev, 2016; Magnet, Mason, & Trevenen, 2014).

A review of the related literature (Mordovina, 2014; Binfet, 2015; Caldwell, 2017; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) indicate that pedagogical kindness manifests itself through specific actions (external activity), which are considered as kind ones by recipients or observers. Attitudes, motives, goals, and potential readiness for kindness manifestation always underlie pedagogically kind actions.

Kind actions can be classified as follows (Canter, Youngs, & Yaneva, 2017):

1. Psychologically passive actions that do not require any specific activity (e.g. to give place to a person in a hurry).
2. Proactive actions as active assistance (volunteering, blood donation, etc.).
3. Prosocial actions based on social norms (to help others when they ask; to help pick up fallen

things) and containing an emotional component (to listen, to let others talk about their problems).

4. Hidden action (to search for a thing that can make another person happy; to cancel a trip when someone close needs help).

However, the above classification of actions relates to a wide range of actions and does not deal with pedagogical or educational activities.

A working definition treats pedagogical kindness as a moral quality of a teacher that has a positive impact on the upbringing and educational processes (Leybina, Pons, & Binfet, 2019). However, this definition and also classification of teachers' kind actions require further clarification. Some scholars define kindness as a characteristic of temperament (Knafo & Israel, 2012). Taking into account associations between character and temperament as well as character definitions, other researchers find it expedient to consider kindness as a character trait (Asmolov, 2001; Borozdina, 2015; Manolova, 2005).

One of the recently published studies on pedagogical kindness is the research conducted by Binfet & Passmore (2017), which, despite the limitations indicated by the authors themselves, is the first report of teachers' perceptions of kindness. Canadian teachers ($n = 257$) defined the concept of 'kindness' and gave examples of kind actions in teacher's work. Thus, the authors distinguished 11 characteristics of a kind teacher and manifestations of pedagogical kindness:

Consciousness – individuals' ability to place the needs of others above their own ones, responsibility, ability to make additional efforts, and, therefore, flexibility in relation to students' desires and needs.

1. Generosity – individuals' ability to devote their time, energy, physical resources, emotions, and willingness to share knowledge and technology.
2. Help – sharing food, time (e.g. volunteering), and things.
3. Care – sharing resources and materials.
4. Encouragement – individuals' ability to protect and support others, to improve others' lives, and to make others happy.
5. Perspective taking / empathy – individuals' ability to accept, be open, understand others and their feelings, treat others as equals.
6. Altruism – unselfishness, sincerity, not demanding anything in return.
7. Respect – a golden rule, fairness, politeness, good manners.
8. Friendliness – greetings, smiles.
9. Patience – taking into account another's standpoint, understanding, patience.
10. Acknowledgement – individuals' ability to acknowledge the efforts of others.

The above classification contains obvious repetitions and broad definitions. Moreover, it is necessary to describe in more detail the specific situations in teachers' work when these qualities manifest themselves. Living in specific cultural and historical context, Russian teachers may perceive kindness quite differently than their Canadian colleagues (Kulikova, 2018; Obukhov, 2017). Teachers' native language can also be very important, as it represents a system of guidelines in communication, including professional and educational, developed by the environment and culture where they grew up and live in (Leontiev, 1981). Additionally, the study of Canadian colleagues did not consider certain factors that may influence the idea of kindness, including gender (Eagly & Crowley, 1986), age (McNair, Okan, Hadjichristidis, & de Bruin, 2019), religiosity (Rabelo & Pilati, 2019); rural or urban place of living and working (Ennis & Chen, 1995), parenthood (Tudy & Gauran-Tudy, 2020; Rees, 1998); age groups of students a teacher works with – preschool, primary

school, secondary school, and high school students (Randall & Engelhard, 2009; Vartuli, 1999); and teaching experience (Kauts & Chechi, 2014).

Thus, this study *aims* to examine Russian teachers' perceptions of kindness, its manifestation, and importance for educational activities.

Methods

Sampling

The study sample comprised 302 preschool and school teachers from Yaroslavl and the Yaroslavl region ($n = 68$) and the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) ($n = 234$). All the individual participants received a link to an online questionnaire which contained the description of the study, its purposes and importance, and a request for their voluntary participation. The mean age of the study participants was 42.89 ($SD = 11.65$); the average teaching experience was 26.1 ($SD = 9.8$); the average number of own children was 1.97 ($SD = 1.35$). Table 1 shows the qualitative characteristics of the sample.

| <u>Variable</u> | <u><i>n</i></u> | <u>%</u> |
|--------------------|-----------------|----------|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 57 | 18.87 |
| Female | 246 | 81.13 |
| Place of residence | | |
| Urban | 170 | 56.29 |
| Rural | 132 | 43.71 |
| Religiosity | | |
| Yes | 99 | 32.78 |
| No | 147 | 48.67 |
| I don't know | 56 | 18.55 |

| <i>Qualitative characteristics of the sample</i> | | | |
|---|----------|----------|--|
| <u>Variable</u> | <u>n</u> | <u>%</u> | |
| Native language | | | |
| National language of one of the republics of the Russian Federation | 124 | 41.07 | |
| Russian | 115 | 38.07 | |
| Russian and one of the national languages of the Russian Federation | 63 | 20.86 | |
| Children | | | |
| Yes | 249 | 82.45 | |
| No | 53 | 17.55 | |
| Age group of students | | | |
| High school | 32 | 10.59 | |
| Secondary school | 34 | 11.26 | |
| Primary school | 35 | 11.60 | |
| Preschool | 96 | 31.79 | |
| Secondary and high school | 58 | 19.20 | |
| More than two groups | 47 | 15.56 | |

Measurements

The online questionnaire contained questions related to the following:

1. *General socio-demographic information*: the variables are presented in the descriptive characteristics of the sample.

2. *Definitions of kindness*: providing a general definition of kindness and examples of teachers' kindness which manifests itself in specific actions (describe situations).

3. *Importance of kindness*: evaluating the importance of kindness in teachers' work and its impact on students.
4. *Occurrence of kind actions towards children*: providing information on the frequency of kind actions and on the difference between kindness inside and outside school.
5. *The desire to change individual level of kindness*.

Data analysis

The data was processed using the Intellectus Statistics (2020) and the standard content analysis procedure using the QDA Miner Lite v 2.0.8. (Provalis Research, 2020).

At the first stage of qualitative data analysis which represent the teachers' answers on the questions related to kindness perception, an open coding procedure was carried out without relying on a previously found theory (Charmaz, 2014), organized separately to provide definitions of pedagogical kindness and examples of its manifestations in teachers' work. During the procedure the main categories in the notions of kindness and the types of teacher' kind actions were identified (Ryan & Bernard, 2003); these categories and types were assigned with codes for categorization. Upon completion of the open coding procedure, the axial coding phase began (Charmaz, 2014), which made it possible to identify a number of broad categories for both the ideas of kindness and the examples of kind actions. If several categories or types were identified in a single answer, then each of the categories or types was considered separately. After defining the categories, similar categories were combined into broad ones.

Results

The way teachers understand kindness

When asked to define kindness, 98.1 % of the respondents provided specific 'codable' answers ($n = 524$). We combined 13 themes derived from definitions into 5 categories as follows: external (visible) actions and behaviors (30.2 %); internal (hidden) actions and behaviors (8.2 %); understanding of others (17.9 %); openness to others (24.9 %); personal states and qualities (13.2 %) (Table 2). A separate category (5.6 %) contains descriptions of the absence of unkind actions, thoughts, and feelings: 'absence of evil actions', 'absence of aggression', 'not to wish or do harm to another', 'not to be arrogant', 'not to differentiate good individuals from bad ones', 'not to offend', 'not to cause inconvenience', 'not to put individual interests above the interests of others, if it may harm someone', 'not to be indifferent', and 'not to slender'.

Multinomial logistic regression of independent variables, including age, gender, religiosity, place of residence, native language, presence and number of children, teaching experience, and the age group of students, demonstrated no significant differences in the five categories, which speaks in favour of a relative universality of the way teachers perceive kindness.

| <u>Themes</u> | <u>%</u> | <u>Description and definition</u> |
|-------------------------------|----------|-----------------------------------|
| Personal states and qualities | 13.2 % | |

Table 2

Codes for the themes of kindness definition

| <u>Themes</u> | <u>%</u> | <u>Description and definition</u> |
|--|----------|--|
| 1. Individual states | 5.5 % | Love and respect to oneself, happiness, ability to see the world in bright colors, live in harmony with the world, to consider all things positively, joy, warmth of the soul |
| 2. Values and moral characteristics | 6.6 % | Sincerity, honesty and trust, justice, conscience, conscientiousness, modesty, devotion |
| 3. Self-regulation / emotional stability | 1.1 % | Regulation of emotions, patience, fully developed emotions, staying gentle, tranquility |
| Openness to others | 24.9 % | |
| 4. Orientation towards people | 13.2 % | Responsiveness, sensitivity, attention to others, openness to others, open heart, cordiality |
| 5. Love and good attitude | 11.7 % | Loving others, nature, motherland, the world; good and warm attitudes, seeing good in others, benevolence, charity, mercy, favor, humanism |
| Understanding of others | 17.9 % | |
| 6. Understanding others (cognition) | 7.9 % | Relating with understanding; understanding others, ability to stand in others' shoes, understanding others' behaviors; lenience |
| 7. Understanding others (emotions) | 5.1 % | Empathy, compassion, sympathy, joy of others' win |
| 8. Tolerance | 4.9 % | Not differentiating others by age and social status, simplicity in communication, treating others as equals, multidimensional perception of others (not differentiating good individuals from bad ones), to accept others, to respect others' opinion, loyalty |

| Themes | % | Description and definition |
|--------------------------------|--------|--|
| External actions and behaviors | 30.2 % | |
| 9. Help | 15.3 % | Help in difficult situations, help, care, support, to be a pillar in a difficult time, help when it is needed or not needed, listening |
| 10. Politeness/respect | 8.5 % | Treating with respect, smiling, listening to the end, friendliness, careful attitude, good wishes, good breeding, tact, gratitude, caress, gentleness |
| 11. Kind/pleasant actions | 6.4 % | Making others' lives comfortable, making nice things to others, sharing, sharing inner warmth, useful deeds, making others happy, creating friendly atmosphere |
| Internal actions and behaviors | 8.2 % | |
| 12. Forgiveness | 2.5 % | Forgiving an enemy, not holding grudges, forgiving mistakes |
| 13. Altruistic actions | 5.7 % | Compromise, self-sacrifice, going towards meeting others' view, selfless actions |

Note: the respondents' statements were used (translated from Russian).

Thus, external and internal kind actions, which are key in understanding kindness (38.4 % of codes), have certain internal prerequisites (Pines & Maslach, 2000) that teachers inextricably linked to the concept of kindness. This means that when considering the phenomenon of kindness, activity theory by A. N. Leontiev (Leontiev, 1981) may be applied, and kindness may be understood as a character trait (Borozdina, 2015). Thus, teachers perceive *kindness as a character trait generated by personal states and qualities, openness to others and the ability to understand them, which manifests itself in external and internal positive actions and behaviors towards others*. This definition goes in line with the theory of planned behavior used to describe kindness (Caldwell, 2017). However, kindness not always manifests itself in helping behavior mentioned by 15.3 % of respondents, or altruism (5.7 %), which means that the category of kind behavior is broader than the category of helping/prosocial behavior (Shermazanyan, 2015).

The way pedagogical kindness manifests itself

Manifestation in actions and behaviors is key in teachers' perceptions of kindness. Therefore, our understanding of external manifestations (actions and behaviors) is important for describing pedagogical kindness. When asked to give examples of pedagogical kindness, 91.39 % of respondents provided specific 'codable' answers ($n = 422$), of which we distinguished 19 themes (Table 3), grouped into 3 categories: *kindness in the educational process associated with skills and knowledge acquisition* (15.9 %); *kindness accompanying educational activities* (54.2 %); *kindness outside school* (22.3 %). A distinctive feature here is that certain actions, for example, material assistance, are anonymous. Some respondents (7.6 %) noted that it is not the custom to talk about kind actions.

Multinomial logistic regression of independent variables, including age, gender, religiosity, place of residence, native language, presence and number of children, teaching experience, and the age group of students, demonstrated no significant differences in the three categories, which speaks in favour of a relative universality of the behavioral manifestations of pedagogical kindness.

Table 3

Codes for the themes of kindness manifestation

| <u>Themes</u> | <u>%</u> | <u>Description and examples</u> |
|--|----------|--|
| Kindness associated with skills and knowledge acquisition – 15.9 % | | |
| 1. Free educational assistance | 4.9 % | Additional lessons, tutoring, work with slow learners, workshops, tutoring for the Unified State Examination, work with children with special needs |
| 2. Additional efforts as a part of educational activity | 2.4 % | Explain material clearly, additional explanations, to find effective ways of knowledge transfer to the students who do not understand the material |
| 3. Moral support and inspiration as a part of classes | 4.3 % | Praise, support, to allow redoing a task, to evoke interest, to grant a higher mark, to appreciate hard work and inspire for future success, to make students not afraid of making mistakes, to create success situations, to acknowledge own mistakes and misunderstandings |
| 4. Mildness during classes | 3.5 % | To assign simple home tasks, to provide liberty of actions, not to punish for mistakes, not to punish on public, provide constructive critique, without humiliation; to accept students' weaknesses and to help in coping with them |
| 5. Support in other subjects | 0.8 % | Support in understanding and preparation of other subjects |

| Table 3 | | |
|---|----------|--|
| <i>Codes for the themes of kindness manifestation</i> | | |
| <u>Themes</u> | <u>%</u> | <u>Description and examples</u> |
| Kindness accompanying educational activities – 54.2 % | | |
| 6. Moral support and encouragement in extracurricular activities and personal development | 14.2 % | To comfort, to calm a student down, to nudge development, participation in competitions, to help a student open-up, to develop creative potential, public speaking, assist with self-determination, to develop student's self-confidence, love to life, communication skills, to help in beating fear and lack of self-confidence, to change students' attitude towards themselves, to organize interesting events, to bring to interesting places |
| 7. Objectivity and respect | 5.1 % | To relate to everyone with understanding, to avoid having 'favorites', to accept students as they are, to respect boundaries, to communicate ethically and politely |
| 8. Tolerance to bad behaviors | 5.9 % | Sympathetic consideration of students missing classes, being rude, expressing negative behavior |
| 9. Physical manifestation | 4.9 % | To smile, to respond to hugs and caress, to hug, to hold a student's hand, to put a hand on a shoulder |
| 10. Attention to a student | 9.3 % | To listen, to talk about student's problems, to ask students about themselves, their life, family, hobbies; to give advice, if a student asked for that, to commiserate with a student |
| 11. Care after a student | 2.4 % | To lend own thing (e.g. scarf) if a student has forgotten his/her own; help to clear the wound, help to dress-up, to look after students' appearance |
| 12. Resolution of problematic situations | 6.7 % | Constructive and careful resolution of challenging situations, with consideration of all parties' interests; to keep secrets which a student shared with a teacher, not to spread information about difficult situations or accidents if this causes negative consequences to a student |
| 13. Regulation of relations in students' group | 5.7 % | To protect an offended child, to take his/her side, to deliver developing talks and events, intended for relationships harmonization; public praise to increase a student's status |

Table 3

Codes for the themes of kindness manifestation

| <u>Themes</u> | <u>%</u> | <u>Description and examples</u> |
|---------------------------------------|----------|---|
| Kindness outside school – 22.3 % | | |
| 14. To be a mediator for kind actions | 4.1 % | To organize fundraising activities, facilitate kind words and actions exchange; to motivate students to help each other and their families |
| 15. Work with a family | 2 % | To assist children in establishing trustful relations with their families |
| 16. Physical help | 2.2 % | To carry a child if he/she can't walk; to clean child's house (if parents can't do that), to assist in digging up a garden |
| 17. Custody | 1.8 % | To arrange legal custody of a student, to provide temporary shelter, foster care |
| 18. Material help | 11 % | To buy goods and groceries for poor children and families, to pay for student's lunch, to buy stationery, to pay for a ride, to donate money for medical treatment, anonymous material help |
| 19. Assistance to former students | 1.2 % | To assist in a difficult situation, to help in resolving a challenging issue |

Note: the respondents' statements were used (translated from Russian).

The respondents referred the most part of kind actions to the manifestations of *kindness accompanying educational activities* with moral support (14.2 %) and attention to a student (9.3 %) as the most frequent examples of kind actions, and *kindness outside school* with material assistance (11 %) as one of the most popular examples. *Kindness associated with skills and knowledge acquisition* had the least number of examples. This may be explained by the fact that the actions that could be characterized as kind are considered an inherent part of the educational and developmental process during classes (Kan-Kalik, 1987).

The above classification goes in line with the one proposed by Canter et al. (2017) in terms of the presence of all the four types of actions: hidden ('anonymous material assistance'),

passive ('assigning simple home tasks'), prosocial psychological action ('listening'), proactive action ('organizing fundraising activities'). Classification by Canter et al. was not used for coding as it does not consider specific characteristics of educational activities. However, this classification may speak in favour of the similarity of kind actions in pedagogical activities and outside them.

Obviously, activity theory by A. N. Leontiev (Leontiev, 1981) may be appropriate for considering pedagogically kind actions. Among kind actions there are external kind actions and behaviors visible to everyone (e.g. praise, help, etc.) and internal ones (ability to accept students as they are, to treat students' absence at lessons with understanding, to keep secrets), which corresponds to the general definition of kindness formulated above.

Importance of kindness in educational activities

Some respondents (57.61 %) argued that pedagogical kindness is essential for educational activities, while others (32.45 %) noted that it is quite important. Herewith, 70.20 % of respondents believed that it has a significant positive impact on students' academic success and their personal development; 22.51 % of respondents believed that kindness has a moderate positive effect. Therefore, the teachers themselves highly appreciated the importance of pedagogical kindness and its positive impact, which means that there is a need for further research of this phenomenon.

The way the teachers evaluate their own pedagogical kindness

Some teachers (53.64 %) noted that they are quite often kind to students, while others (26.82 %) argued that they are always kind. Such a level of self-assessment of kindness in the context of its high importance explains that 64.23 % of respondents pointed out that they did not notice any difference between the levels of their kindness at school and outside it and 16.22 % believed that their level of kindness at school was higher than outside it. The majority of teachers (80.79 %) mentioned that they were satisfied with their level of kindness and they did not want to change it (increase or decrease).

Discussion

The data on the categorization of pedagogical kindness and kind actions in teachers' perceptions are largely similar to those presented in the study by Binfet & Passmore (2017). In particular, the categories identified by Canadian colleagues, including consciousness, help, care, inspiration, perspective taking / empathy, altruism, respect, friendliness, patience, and acknowledgement are also found among the categories indicated by Russian teachers, which may speak in favour of a relative universality of this concept in different cultures.

The classification of kindness presented in this study has a clearer structure, develops and contributes to the results obtained by Canadian colleagues in previous research, provides specific descriptions, and makes it possible to categorize themes into more understandable categories that have similar characteristics, which determine the levels and personal predispositions of kindness. This contributes to the formulation of the evidence-based definition of kindness and to its further study. In particular, the following five categories of themes in the definition of kindness have been distinguished:

1. Personal states and qualities: individual state, values and moral characteristics, self-regulation, and emotional stability.

2. Openness to others: orientation towards others (attention), love and good attitude towards them.

3. Cognitive and emotional understanding of others and tolerance.

4. External actions and behaviors: help, politeness and respect, kind or pleasant actions.

5. Internal actions and behaviors: forgiveness, altruistic internal actions.

Relying on activity theory, we formulated a general definition of kindness as it was perceived by teachers.

In terms of examples of kind actions towards students, more specific descriptions of behaviors that teachers themselves consider as kind have been obtained and a classification of kind actions has been proposed, where all such actions were divided according to their presence in the educational process associated with skills and knowledge acquisition, in educational activities accompanying educational process, or outside school. It is logical that pedagogical kindness was observed in the educational process, educational and extracurricular activities. It should be noted that describing pedagogical kindness a significant number of teachers implied kindness outside school and even beyond the traditional understanding of the student-teacher relationship.

No differences were observed in the definitions of teachers' kindness and examples of kind actions depending on gender, age, religiosity, place of residence, native language, presence and number of children, teaching experience, and the age group of students, which indicated a relative universality in the way Russian teachers understand this phenomenon.

An important finding was that, as perceived by teachers, kind behavior was not equivalent to helping/prosocial behavior (Thielmann, Spadaro, & Balliet, 2020; Erkhova, 2002), altruism (Palta, 2019), or a separate element of the 'network of kindness' (Knafo & Israel, 2012).

Teachers recognized the importance of kindness in their work and its considerable positive impact on students' academic success and their personal development, which means that it is necessary to study this phenomenon in more detail. Since the theory of activity has been considered, further research on pedagogical kindness manifested in specific actions requires further investigation of goals and motives underlying actions, as well as operations when performing kind actions of a specific category. Additionally, it is important to study the components of kind actions, including decision-making, implementation, control, and correction. This may help describe pedagogical kindness and formulate its scientifically grounded definition. Further research should also involve teachers from other regions of the Russian Federation.

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No conflict of interest