

# Empathy Research and Teacher Preparation: Benefits and Obstacles

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Teacher preparation is critical in cultivating good teachers, but more importantly in helping teachers learn how to meet the academic and emotional needs of preK-12 students. Teaching and training the socio-emotional trait of empathy is an important skill for pre-service teachers to develop. However, due to the multiple definitions, fields of study, and purposes of researching empathy, complications arise with measuring, researching and training empathy. This paper discusses each of the difficulties that surround the research of empathy, but also makes a strong case for the need to overcome the obstacles in order to benefit from empathy training for both pre-service teachers and students alike.

## Introduction

The word empathy is used in common conversation today; however, prior to the late 1950s it was seldom used at all (Freedberg, 2007). Its evolution can be traced back to the Greek word *empathia*, translated as “to suffer with” (Cunningham, 2009, p. 681). For the modern era a noted psychologist Carl Rogers in 1957 highlighted the word for the therapeutic community. Rogers defined empathy as a way “to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy, and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto, as if one were the other person, but without ever losing the ‘as if’ condition” (Hackney, 1978, p. 36). Truax and Carkhuff (1965), other early researchers of empathy, modified the definition slightly to “the skill with which the therapist is able to know and communicate the client’s inner being” (p. 5). Thus they changed the definition from Roger’s cognitively based definition to a more behavioral one and here began the search for the “true” definition of empathy. According to Hackney (1978) by 1968 over 21 definitions of empathy were used in just the domain of psychology, and as

this discussion will show this was only the beginning.

While Rogers was one of the first researchers to unpack and see the need for empathy in the work of therapists, he also saw its importance in all human relationships (Furman, 2005). Empathy can also be seen in the language of philosophers and art critics and more recently in the medical field (Spiro, 1992). The field of education has similarly begun to see the importance of empathy in teaching its teachers. White (1999) outlined empathy and understanding of the student as one of the four “personal-social emotional feelings that impact teaching and what is learned in the classroom” (p. 122).

## Empathy Research Obstacles

Five significant issues repeatedly arise in the literature as researchers continue to try and understand the socio-emotional trait of empathy. The first, as already mentioned, is the multiple definitions for empathy. The second issue is the variety of professions that use the term empathy. Third, is the variety of purposes for studying empathy, including most commonly cognitive, affective, and behavioral approaches (Lam, Kolomito, &

Alamparambil, 2011). However, empathy can also be studied from a social skills or peer relations point of view (Baker, Parks-Savage, & Reh fuss, 2009); a moral development standpoint (Sezen-Balcikanli, 2009); a cultural diversity perspective (Lu, Dane, & Gellman, 2005); and even using a service-learning angle (Lundy, 2007). Each of these points of view can make any kind of consistent study of empathy rather complicated. The fourth issue centers on the difficulties in measuring empathy for empirical work. Empathy is a personal and emotional trait that occurs inside of a person's mind and being. To quantitatively measure this is difficult. And finally, possibly because of the difficulties mentioned above, there is very limited empirical research conducted on the phenomenon of empathy.

Due to each of these hindrances, the study of empathy can be difficult. However, in order to meet the socio-emotional and academic needs of our students, we must try to find some common ground in which multiple fields can study and benefit from teaching empathy. This discussion will look more closely at each of the five trouble points regarding researching empathy, but more importantly it will focus on addressing the concerns that surround how to teach empathy within teacher preparation programs.

## **Definitions of Empathy**

**Components.** There are three central elements to consider for the word empathy. From the cognitive component it, “refers to one's ability to take the perspective of others, and see the world through his or her perspective.” The second, from an affective component which, “involves experiencing the feelings of another person.” The third, the behavioral component, “involves verbal and non-verbal communication to indicate an understanding of an emotional resonance

with the other person” (Lam, Kolomitro, & Alamparambil, 2011, p. 163). It can be argued that all three components are necessary to truly define empathy.

**Synonyms.** To further complicate matters, there are also a variety of other terms that many use as synonyms for empathy such as sympathy, perspective taking, and compassion. Sympathy not only sounds similar to the word empathy, but their definitions are often interchanged. Spiro (1992) explained the difference as,

Empathy is more than knowing what we see, it is the emotion generated by the image. It is difficult to distinguish empathy from sympathy: Where empathy feels ‘I am you,’ sympathy may well mean ‘I want to help you.’ Sympathy involves compassion but not passion. (p. 843)

Seward (as cited Ingram & Nakazawa, 2003) indicates “Sympathy: ‘I see you, I hear you, I feel for you.’ Empathy: ‘I see you, I hear you, I am with you.’” (p. 487).

Similar to sympathy is the word compassion. The Merriam-Webster dictionary (2011) defines it as, “sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it” (retrieved online). This definition even uses the word sympathetic to help explain compassion, again showing the similarities.

Perspective-taking is another common phrase that is associated with empathy. While, perspective taking can be used as a tool to aid empathy, is not as a synonym for it. Batson, Sager, Garst, Kang, Rubchinsky, and Dawson (1997) used perspective-taking in their research to induce empathy in their subjects. The process of physically and emotionally putting yourself in the place of

another through role play or some other controlled environment can lead to a better understanding of empathy, but the two words are not interchangeable.

**Definitions within different fields of study.** To complicate things further, different fields of study have their own definitions for empathy. Rogers (1959) and Truax and Carkhuff's (1965) definitions began the movement to using empathy in a therapeutic realm. Nevertheless, Cunningham (2009) posits empathy and its many definitions as being a "fuzzy concept" (p. 681). More recently the social work community has taken the earlier definitions and suited it to fit their needs using the meaning "to perceive accurately and sensitively the inner feelings of the client, and to communicate them in language attuned to the client's experience of the moment..." (Lu, Dane, & Gellman, 2005).

The helping professions of psychology and social work led to the medical field seeing the importance of empathy and another definition emerged. From the medical perspective, "empathy has been defined as 'the act of correctly acknowledging the emotional state of another person without experiencing that state oneself'" (Romm, 2007, p. 91). Because of the physical pain, suffering, and multiple ailments that doctors and nurses see each day, the distinction in this definition emphasizes the separation between patient and self, but still focuses on correctly identifying the feelings, needs, and concerns of the patient.

Finally, the helping profession of education came into the mix of empathy research. Boyer (2010) contends that within the field of education "empathy is the ability to interpret signals of distress or pleasure with effortful control" (p. 313). On the surface this definition sounds very different

from the others. However, the use of empathy in a classroom in the midst of 20, 30, or more students must look different than in a one-on-one therapist-client or doctor-patient relationship. Not only must a teacher be able to recognize the, often not so overt, signs from students in times of both "distress and pleasure," but the teacher must keep complete control over the situation in order to diminish any additional stress that could be caused from the situation(s). With this said, the aspect of *care* is more apparent in the definition of empathy in the classroom than perhaps other definitions (White, 1999). Perhaps, this is why the word *care* is used and studied in education from authors such as Nel Noddings (2005) and Kirsten Olsen (2009). Yet, once again, care is not empathy, and the two should not be interchanged. So even with the multitude of definitions present we still must embrace the importance of empathy in our teacher preparation programs if we truly are in the business of helping students succeed in the classroom.

### **Professions Where Empathy is Commonly Studied or Used**

**Art.** The art world was the first area to see empathy as significant and to write about it. In 1873, the idea that "the viewer of a work of art, and particularly the viewer's subjective feelings, contribute to the perception of form in art" was introduced (Verducci, 2000). This subjective nature of empathy has continued to play a role in the complexity of understanding, defining and interpreting empathy. The artist and the art connoisseur are not alone in this, but the subjective nature of empathy has also come into play in other fields as well, especially around designing curriculum and teaching.

**Psychology.** In the psychological field, even before Rogers popularized empathy in therapy, Hastdorf and Bender (1952) stated,

“It is obvious that the perception of persons lies at the very heart of social psychology and that an understanding of empathic ability will contribute greatly to our understanding of many problems in both social psychological and personality theory” (p. 574). The importance of empathy in this field is still echoed today with empirical research demonstrating “that empathy has been closely correlated with effective outcomes in social work practice” (Freedberg, 2007, p. 251). Constant reminders in the literature about the importance of and the need for empathetic counselors, therapists, and social workers have driven continued research to understand how empathy can be taught to students training in these fields. Unfortunately, no one has come upon the “magic potion” or more aptly put, “magic curriculum” that will ensure students learn how to incorporate empathy into their practice.

**Medicine.** The medical field was the next to try and incorporate empathy training into their curriculum. Through many research studies, empathy has been found to play a significant role in medical care concerning the doctor-patient relationship (Deloney & Graham, 2003). How patients are spoken to and interacted with can contribute to the healing process and the overall health of the patient. One issue with which the medical field has struggled is to maintain the strength of medical students’ empathetic tendencies especially once students become residents and are faced with long hours, numerous patients, and enormous expectations placed on their success. Benbassat and Baurnal (2004) found that “23% of U.S. medical residents thought that they had become less humanistic during their training, and that as many as 61% reported becoming more cynical” (p. 832). These startling numbers explain why the medical field has continued to make an attempt to teach empathy in both

classroom settings and through role modeling in the hospital setting, but once again because of the difficult nature of teaching empathy they have struggled to know exactly the best way to go about it.

**Education.** The educational field has begun to see the importance of incorporating empathy into the preparation of teachers. Boyer (2010) states,

Literature indicates that an ethos of caring deeply and empathically about children and their welfare has been identified as being at the heart of purposeful teaching, vital to personal happiness and daily attitude renewal and essential to inspiring children to care about their own learning (p. 313).

Many educational theorists see the impact that empathy can have in the classroom. For example, numerous character and moral educators such as Thomas Lickona (1991), William Bennett (1993), Maxine Greene (1995), Nel Noddings (2005), Deborah Meier (1996), John Deigh (1995), and Martha Nussbaum (1995) have written on the importance of empathy in the lives of our children (Verducci, 2000). But once again, the issue of how to incorporate and successfully prepare our educators to understand and integrate empathy into the classroom is at the forefront of research and discussion.

### **Purposes for Empathy in Teacher Preparation**

Before we can begin the conversation on how to teach empathy we must first discuss the separate purposes for wanting to teach empathy, purposes that are almost as many and varied as the definitions themselves. Although the aforementioned fields utilize empathy training, for this discussion the

focus will be on the purposes of empathy curriculum and training solely within the field of education. We will begin with purposes for teaching empathy to teachers. In 2005, approximately 364,000 new teachers were hired in the United States. According to National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the 2017 projection for new teachers is 464,000 in both public and private schools (2011). These numbers contribute to the projected 4.2 million teachers who will be teaching students in 2017 (NCES, 2011). These teachers demographically are 90% white females who grew up lower middle or middle class, and in rural or suburban homes (Chou, 2007; Gomez, 1994; Hodgkinson, 2002; Marbley, Bonner, McKisick, Henfield, & Watts, 2007) and who are primarily monolingual (Gomez, 1994). These same teachers will, however, be teaching a growing number of racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse students. According to the NCES (2016), the percentage of white students enrolled in elementary and secondary public schools dropped to 50% and is projected to continue to drop to 46% by 2025. With these mismatched percentages of diversity between teachers and students, universities must continually look at ways to help better meet diversity needs. We as teacher educators must better prepare students to educate in classrooms where teachers may not look like or who do not come from similar backgrounds as their students.

**Diversity.** With this said, Lu, Dane, and Gellman (2005) used an experiential model to demonstrate the importance of empathy in relation to cultural sensitivity and diversity issues in the school system. The ability to put yourself *in the shoes* of another is so imperative when teaching students from such varied backgrounds in order to better understand each individual child and in turn meet their educational needs. Teachers must

understand that not all students come from a white, middle class background and if successful teaching is to occur, they must use empathy to embrace each of their students and their ways of knowing, being, and feeling each day. This task is not easy, but the necessity of it has been expressed over and over again since the late 1950s.

**Social skills.** It is important to help connect empathy to social skills and peer relationships. In order for children to navigate successfully through their world, they must know what is socially acceptable concerning behavioral responses in their day to day lives. This does not imply that teachers are the holders of what is socially acceptable, but instead that we help students to be successful in every aspect. As Baker, Parks-Savage, and Rehfuss (2009) found in their study, students ages 6-12 are developmentally prepared to begin socialization and, because it is becoming increasingly more important to their social success, they are more open to learning. Carozzi, Gaa, and Liberman (1983) cite Piaget (1950) perception that “maintained that the ability to empathize increases with the cognitive development of the child and with increased social interaction” (p. 113). Piaget (1950) goes on to say that this increased social interaction results “in reduced egocentrism and heightened social sensitivity” (p. 113).

**Moral development.** In addition to social skill development, empathy is used to promote moral development in students. Kohlberg (1969) saw empathy and moral development as relational, and some studies have used the two ideas to support one another in claims of importance (Carozzi, Gaa, & Liberman, 1983; Sezen-Balcikanli, 2009). Empathy is first seen in Preconventional Morality (Level I), Individualism and Exchange (Stage 2) of

Kohlberg's moral development theory. Stage 2 begins to look at the needs of others by assessing how it will benefit the individual (Crain, 1985). Although this is not absolute empathy it is the beginning stages. Empathy begins to become more apparent in Kohlberg's model by Conventional Morality (Level II), Good Interpersonal Relationships (Stage 3). At this stage, "good behavior means having good motives and interpersonal feelings such as love, empathy, trust, and concern for others" (Crain, 1985, p. 121). From Stage 3 through Stage 6 of Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory society or the greater whole is considered over the individual, thus empathy plays a large role within moral development.

**Service learning.** Service-learning can help foster empathy within both our pre-service teachers and their future students. There is a push for service-learning in our schools. A study found positive correlation between empathy scores and student participation in service-learning (Lundy, 2007). Although the study was looking at the positive aspects of service-learning, the underlying belief that empathy is key for students to possess was at the heart of the study. By using service-learning to improve empathy, scores of students confirmed the researcher's belief that emotional empathy is critical.

**Cognitive, affective, and behavioral development.** Finally, as defined earlier, empathy has three separate components that factor into the purposes for wanting to teach empathy. The distinctions between the three have already been stated, but it is significant to note again that cognitive, affective and behavioral empathy all play a part in understanding empathy and how to teach it to others. Even as the other purposes were discussed they each fit into either all three or a combination of the three depending on the

purpose addressed. As mentioned above, Piaget believed that with increased empathy came increased cognitive development (Carlozzi, Gaa, & Liberman, 1983). In addition, neuroscientists have discovered a connection between empathy and the brain that also supports the more cognitive focus on empathy (Romm, 2007; Ruby & Decety, 2004). Additional studies seem to focus on the affective and behavioral components of empathy in order to be able to analyze the behaviors exhibited by students (Shapiro, 2002; Sutherland, 1986).

### Measuring Empathy

So, if we are able to get past the multiple definitions, fields of study, and purposes of empathy we arrive at the more formidable question...how do you measure empathy? For if the goal is teaching empathy there must be a way to measure the outcomes, right? Herein lies another difficulty when considering empathy curriculum and preparation. Before a discussion around instruments can even occur, a more thorough discussion of what aspect of empathy is to be measured must occur. The primary considerations are internal vs. external processes of empathy and indirect vs. direct teaching methods of empathy. Cunningham (2009) noted, "Empathy is notoriously difficult to evaluate because it happens within the minds of students..." (p. 694). Because of this internalizing of empathy, most studies use self-reporting scales or questionnaires. In fact, 22 out of the 29 studies reviewed used some scale measurement while the other seven studies used observation or written response (Lam, Kolomitro, & Alamparambil, 2011). By using a scale format, the researchers try to get an external measurement from an internal mode of thinking. Although difficult, currently, no more effective manner has been documented.

Another factor to consider is indirect vs. direct instruction. Although this was a less significant factor in the review of literature, Wear and Zarconi (2008) noted the differences in formal and hidden curricula and how this could impact the results of their study on teaching compassion to medical students. Although this study did not specifically measure empathy, the measurement of any emotion can have similar results. Knowing how the teaching of empathy is being addressed is a vital part of the measurement of empathy and needs to be carefully monitored within any study. Yet without a systematic way of both creating and monitoring the execution of empathy curriculum, this factor can alter effects and statistical results of empathy research and therefore must be guarded against.

### **Limited Research**

The final difficulty when trying to come to a consensus on teaching empathy curriculum is the overwhelming lack of empirical studies over the past 30 years. The latest review of the literature published in July 2011 which asked the question, “Can empathy be taught?”, appeared to be an exhaustive review and found only 29 usable studies (Lam, Kolomito, & Alamparambil, 2011). In this author’s own search a similar scenario occurred. In addition to the limited number, only nine of the 29 were conducted in the past ten years. Although most of the authors felt that they had enough information to reach the decision that yes, empathy can be taught, it was followed by a long list of caveats to consider. The problems that the latest literature review found were the lack of consistency in empathy definitions, validity and reliability issues with the scales administered, unclear and inconsistent methodologies, and a lack of ability for any generalizable means (Lam, Kolomito, & Alamparambil, 2011). The irony is that the

same conclusions were drawn in a 1973 small review, a 1983 study, and a 1999 literature review (Crabb, Moracco, & Bender, 1983; Greif & Hogan, 1973; Reynolds, Scott, & Jessiman, 1999).

### **Conclusion**

With the multiple definitions, fields of study, and purposes of empathy research, along with the difficulties in measurement, and limited number of empirical empathy studies, the field of empathy research is still wide open. So if, in fact, empathy is believed to be essential, then the research cannot stop just because a definitive answer has not been agreed upon yet. The statement Greif and Hogan (1973) made at the end of their review appears to still be true today, “The degree to which an empathic disposition can be trained is an empirical question” (p. 284). They had hoped their measures and study could have shed light on this question...shed light, maybe...answered, no. Instead, the question still needs an answer without the many caveats attached. More empirical research must be done to continue to explore this topic and more attention must be paid to the future teacher’s and the need for empathy in the classroom. As a teacher educator it can begin by modeling empathy in the preservice teacher classroom and in interactions with both students, faculty, and staff throughout each day. We can create small group and whole class discussion topics that require students to think about empathy and its importance in the classroom. And once our students begin practicums and residency requirements, as supervisors we can highlight real life scenarios where empathy could have been displayed and praise when empathy is shown. The hope of this current discussion is to show the importance of empathy training in teacher preparation. The path is not a simple path, but vital to meeting students’ needs in the preK-12 classrooms throughout

our nation. With more research and attention paid to the socio-emotional trait of empathy we will continue to push forward to achieve classrooms where all children can thrive.

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