

Exploring Educators' Experiences Regarding Empathy within Inclusive Classrooms

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Abstract

An inclusive educational setting is a model in which educators must have empathic sensitivity, which will enable them to identify the different needs of the various learners. However, there is gap in research concerning educators' own experiences regarding empathy within inclusive classrooms. This qualitative study with a phenomenological research design thus aimed to identify, through the use of in-depth interviews, the educators' own empathic experiences within their inclusive classrooms in the Dr Kenneth Kaunda District in the North West Province, South Africa. A sample of seven female educators from three schools participated in this study. The data were analysed thematically, and the following main themes were identified: intrapersonal pre-proficiency of educators; interpersonal understanding for learners with disabilities; having adaptive skills; and situational aspects that play a role in the empathic experiences of educators. It was determined that future research should focus on more districts in order to gain better representations of the North West Province, also in other provinces to get a better representation of South Africa. In addition, a program must be developed in which educators are trained in the necessary empathic skills.

Keywords: *disabilities, inclusive education, full-service schools, educators, empathy, qualitative research*

Contextualisation

Section 29 of the Bill of Rights states all South Africans have the freedom to receive basic education (Dalton, 2012; Donohue & Bornman, 2014). There are several advantages to receiving basic education, including equal prospects for males and females, a reduction in hunger and poverty, and a better survival rate (Results, 2009). The Basic Education Coalition (2011) and Gehring et al. (2011) claim that basic education is an essential aspect of wellbeing, contributes to societal growth and promotes stability. Türkkahraman, (2012) believes that basic education can permit economic growth and community development, as well as empower learners with the necessary skills and abilities to contribute to societal issues. Basic education can be seen as a vital tool that broadens learners' knowledge and enhances their skill set (Türkkahraman, 2012), thus it is important that each learner has the opportunity to receive such education.

Inclusive education is arguably an ideal educational model, where the educational system is adapted for every learner (whether they have a disability or not) so that all receive equal education (Education White Paper 6, 2001). Dalton (2012) states that after the development of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa in 1996, inclusive education was introduced in South Africa. According to the South African Department of Education (DoE, 2002), inclusive education entails respect towards every learner, despite their differences, by providing support to all learners in an attempt to promote successful learning. Furthermore, the goal of inclusive education is to assist all learners, including learners with physical, intellectual, social or emotional disabilities (Education White Paper 6, 2001; Mentz & Barrett, 2011). Inclusive schools can also be described as full-service schools, which, according to the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2010), can be defined as mainstream educational facilities that aim to provide education to all learners, regardless of their needs. Such schools focus on equity, justice and quality, and aim to increase participation of all learners as well as reduce barriers to education (DBE, 2010). For the purpose of this study, inclusive education is defined as the educational process in which education and learning are provided to all learners, including learners with disabilities, within mainstream schools in the same classes by ensuring that each learner has an equal opportunity to learn the necessary skills.

Even though inclusive education serves as the ideal educational setting, and educational policy specifies that equal learning opportunities must be provided to all learners, Engelbrecht, Nel, Nel, and Tlale, (2015) claim that the reality of inclusive education has not yet been realised in many South African schools. This failure of application is largely a consequence of a lack in resources and facilities, as well as over-crowded classrooms (Engelbrecht et al., 2015). In addition, many educators hold negative attitudes towards inclusion, owing to the new demands on them and their time (Engelbrecht et al., 2015).

For the successful implementation of inclusion within classrooms, educators must therefore have empathy, which serves the foundation for learner care (Swan & Riley, 2015). Rogers (as cited in Elliott, Bohart, Watson, & Greenberg, 2011) defines empathy as the sensitive ability to understand a person's feelings from his or her perspective. According to Stojiljkovic, Djigic, and Zlatkovic, (2012), it is important that an educator has emotional stability and

empathic sensitivity. Empathic sensitivity helps educators create an atmosphere in their classroom in which every learner feels safe, involved and respected (Stojiljkovic et al., 2012). For the purpose of this study, empathy refers to one's ability to put oneself in another's emotional and cognitive situation, and act accordingly with support and understanding. Peck, Maude, and Brotherson (2015) claim that educators who embrace ,

responses of educators, in order to teach them to accept and accommodate each learner in their classrooms. Although various studies (see Barr, 2010; Batson, 2008; Burton, 2015; Decety & Cowell, 2014; Elliott et al., 2011; Hoffman, 2000; Kutlu & Coskun, 2014; McDonald & Messinger, 2012; Nakao & Itakura, 2009; Stojiljkovic, et al., 2012; Swan & Riley, 2015) focus on empathy in inclusive classrooms, none emphasise the importance of educators' own experiences regarding empathy within inclusive classrooms. Thus, these studies overlook the essential aspect of empathic responses from educators within an inclusive classroom. Indeed, as summarised by Barr (2010), educator empathy is a vital area that requires more study. It is this issue that this study aimed to address, and a phenomenological research design allowed us to collect rich data and identify and describe empathy within an inclusive educational setting.

Goal of the Study

This qualitative study with a phenomenological research design aimed to identify and describe educators' own empathic experiences in inclusive classrooms in the Dr Kenneth Kaunda District in the North West Province, South Africa. Therefore, the following research question directed this study: *What are educators' experiences regarding their own empathy within inclusive classrooms?*

Method of Investigation

Research Method

In this study, a qualitative research method was used. Nieuwenhuis, (2016a) describes qualitative research as a descriptive method in which the process, meaning and comprehension of obtaining information through words are vital to the researcher when studying social phenomena. The qualitative research method was appropriate for the purpose of this study as it enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of empathy within an inclusive setting, and thus provide insight into the lived experiences of educators' empathy within inclusive classrooms.

Research Design

A phenomenological research design was used for this study as it provided the researchers with the opportunity to acquire an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of the participants regarding a specific phenomenon (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b), i.e. the lived experiences of educators' own empathetic experiences within an inclusive classroom. According to Nieuwenhuis, (2016b, p. 78), "like other qualitative designs, phenomenology is popular in the social and health sciences, but also in education research".

Participants and Research Context

To meet the aim of the study, the participants had to comply with certain criteria. The educators had to be employed at a school within the Dr Kenneth Kaunda District, which is situated in the North West Province, South Africa. This educational setting had to be inclusive, where education is provided to learners without disability along with those who suffer from a visual disability (impaired vision), hearing disability (impaired hearing), cognitive disability (problems with learning), or physical disability (impaired mobility). Furthermore, the educators also had to be willing to participate by signing the informed consent form, be able to speak either English or Afrikaans, have one year of teaching experience within the inclusive educational setting, and be registered as a qualified educator at the Education Association of South Africa. The educators were informed about this study via the principals who served as gatekeepers. The contact details of the mediator (the independent person within this research inquiry) were given to the participants by the principals, which allowed the participants to contact the mediator if they were interested in participating. The final research sample was seven educators who voluntarily participated in this study, all of whom were women, from three schools in the district. Six of the seven educators were White, and one was an Indian woman. Their years of experience in teaching and in inclusive education varied (see Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants

Participant number	Age	Race	Home language	Years of experience in teaching	Years of experience in inclusive education
P1	51	White	English	29 years	5 years
P2	51	White	Afrikaans	22 years	5 years
P3	46	White	English	17 years	8 years
P4	47	White	English	23 years	20 years
P5	59	White	Afrikaans	26 years	11 years
P6	30	Indian	English	9 years	2 years
P7	55	White	Afrikaans	20 years	2 years

Data Collection

As already mentioned, a phenomenological research design (see Nieuwenhuis, 2016b) was used in this study, where the researcher aimed to understand educators' empathic experiences regarding a specific phenomenon, i.e. inclusive classroom. Different data collection methods were used. Firstly, a *demographic questionnaire* was used to gather the basic information of the participants and included questions that established the participants' age, ethnicity, teacher qualification(s), years of teaching experience, as well as years of teaching at specific school. Secondly, an *in-depth interview* was conducted that provided the participants with the opportunity to share their lived experiences regarding their own empathy in an inclusive classroom. According to Greeff (2011), sharing one's experiences concerning a specific phenomenon entails a meaning-making process in which the researcher explores and tries to understand the participants' perspectives or experiences of a certain idea or situation. The in-

depth interview was best suited for the purpose of this study, as it allowed the researcher greater flexibility in asking the participants questions, who were then able to give a fuller account of their lived experience. It also provided the opportunity for probing and clarification (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b) in order to get the best possible understanding about the empathic experiences of the educators within inclusive classrooms.

In order to achieve the aim of this study, two open-ended questions were asked during the in-depth interview: the first was to address the experiences of each participant regarding her own empathy within inclusive classroom, and the second addressed the contexts or situations that have typically influenced or affected her experiences regarding her own empathy within the inclusive classroom. These two broad questions were in accordance with the guidelines provided by Moustakas (1994, as cited in Creswell, 2007) for asking in-depth interview questions that are appropriate for the phenomenological research design. The definition of empathy (i.e. an individual's ability to put oneself in another's emotional and cognitive situation, and act accordingly with support and understanding) used for the purpose of this research inquiry was provided and explained to each participant prior to the in-depth interview.

Lastly, the researchers made use of *field notes*. The use of field notes was necessary in ensuring the "bracketing" that is essential for phenomenological research (see Nieuwenhuis, 2016b). Bracketing is where researchers set aside their own experiences "to take a fresh perspective towards the phenomenon" (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b, p. 78). The researchers thus made use of field notes throughout their research process (data collection and analysis) as part of their "bracketing" process.

Data Analysis

The data collected through the in-depth interviews was transcribed verbatim prior to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis, according to Clarke and Braun (2013), can be described as the process in which data is studied thoroughly through reading, coding and identifying themes. This process enabled the researchers to follow a structured and chronological method, which in turn increased the level of trustworthiness (Morgan, 2013). The researchers continuously focused on the empathic experiences of the educators in inclusive classrooms by reviewing the description of the terms (empathy and inclusive classrooms) throughout the analysis.

Thematic analysis in this study consisted of the following steps (Clarke & Braun, 2013): firstly, the researchers familiarised with the data by actively reading and re-reading through the data and transcribing it verbatim. Secondly, codes were created according to significance. Thirdly, possible themes were highlighted from the codes and categorised under an overarching theme. Next, the researchers revised the themes by making them significant to the data. The last phase of thematic analysis required the researchers to label the themes and identify possible subthemes for each theme. According to Nieuwenhuis, (2016b), as part of the phenomenological research process, once the themes have been identified, the researcher must develop the following: a textual description of what the participants experienced; a structural description of the participants' experiences regarding how they experienced the phenomenon in terms of conditions, situations and/or context; and "a combination of the textual and structural descriptions to convey an overall essence of the experience" (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b, p. 78).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured by following the model of Lincoln and Guba provided by Krefting (1991), which motivated the researcher to focus on four aspects. The first aspect is truth value, which establishes confidence and credibility in the researchers findings about the context and themes presented by the participants (Krefting, 1991). The researchers had to be truthful about the data collected regarding the lived experiences of the educators' empathy in inclusive classrooms, and present accurate interpretations thereof (Krefting, 1991). Truth value was ensured by accurate verbatim transcriptions of the data collected, active engagement with the data (code and re-coding of all the data), and making use of a co-coder (a registered research psychologist within the School of Psychosocial Health, North-West University, South Africa). The second aspect of Lincoln and Guba's model is applicability. In this study, the researchers presented the methodology in a comprehensive and detailed manner to aid in future research. The third aspect, consistency, was ensured by the researchers through asking prepared questions in the interview stage of data collection stage. The final aspect is neutrality, which requires the researchers to be objective (Schurink, Fouché, & De Vos, 2011). Neutrality was achieved by only focussing on the information provided by the participants, and not integrating the researchers own perspectives and motivations (Krefting, 1991) via bracketing, making sure that the data collected supported any interpretations and conclusions made. The researchers also made use of an audit strategy (record keeping) to ensure objectivity.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the North-West University (NWU-00342-16-A1), South Africa, as well as from the District Director of Education and Sport Development, Dr Kenneth Kaunda District, North West Province, South Africa.

After approval was obtained from all relevant legal parties, schools (principals) and governing bodies were approached for permission to conduct the research study at their schools. After permission was received, the researchers assigned a mediator who provided the educators (participants) with a consent form to complete if they agreed to participate in the study. Both the participant and the mediator signed the consent form in each other's presence. An eyewitness was also asked to sign the consent forms.

Ethical considerations were taken into account by communicating to each participant the importance of confidentiality and ensuring that no personal details would be made public. In addition, the anonymity of each participant was maintained at all times by assigning each one a participant number during the data analysis process. It was also made clear to the participants that they could withdraw from the study before data analysis if they wished. The principal at each school provided an available and appropriate room for the purpose of conducting the in-depth interviews. These rooms provided a comfortable, familiar and safe environment for the participants. Finally, safe keeping of all data and findings is the responsibility of the North-West University (South Africa).

Findings

Through the process of thematic analysis, four core themes (educators' experiences of their own empathy: themes 1 to 3; and situational aspects that played a role: theme 4) with subthemes (see table 2) were identified. The appropriate verbatim quotations were also provided as support for the themes.

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes Regarding Educators' Own Empathic Experience within Their Inclusive Classrooms

Theme 1: Subthemes:	Intrapersonal proficiency of educators 1.1 Having certain character traits 1.2 Portraying a power role 1.3 Decrease in self-confidence by feeling that they do not have enough empathy
Theme 2: Subthemes:	Interpersonal understanding for learners with disabilities 2.1 Earning the learners' trust 2.2 Motivating and acknowledging the learners
Theme 3: Subthemes:	Adaptive teaching skills 3.1 Differentiating between the different needs of the learners 3.2 Having a creative teaching approach
Theme 4: Subthemes:	Situational aspects playing a role in the empathic experiences of educators 4.1 Facilities and support 4.2 Time constraints 4.3 Lack of learner discipline 4.4 Parental influence 4.5 Household issues influencing educators' empathy 4.6 Empathy being influenced through educational experience 4.7 Empathy being influenced after educators have become mothers

Theme 1: Intrapersonal Proficiency of Educators

During the data collection process, it was apparent that certain intrapersonal aspects played an important role in the empathic experiences of educators. These intrapersonal aspects can be explained as having certain character traits that enabled the participants to be empathic, as well as to portray a power role. However, some participants believed that they experienced a

decrease in self-confidence because they did not feel as if they had enough empathy for the different learners in their classroom.

Having certain character traits. Having certain character traits was reported as playing a vital role in the empathic experiences of educators in their inclusive classroom. One participant stated the following regarding empathy for learners with disabilities: “[...] *So for a long time I had a heart for children who struggle, who really struggle [...] But I often feel the pain of others very easily and I can put myself in the same situation*” (P1). Two other participants added that, “*I think you must have it in your heart*” (P2) and that “[...] *what we do here comes from our hearts*” (P7).

Other character traits that were mentioned by the participants include having patience as well as passion, as noted by one participant: “*This position allows me to have more patience*” (P1). Another said that, “*You must definitely have the patience and a passion for people because if you don’t have passion for people’s children, then it doesn’t help that you are a teacher*” (P3). In addition, it is necessary to be emotionally available for the learners, as specified by one participant, who stated that, “*I get very emotionally involved and I get a lot of criticism, I know, but I feel that’s the only way I reach the children [...] I easily get emotionally involved and I feel it makes me a better teacher*” (P3). Another participant said,

I will always tell a child to come to me during break if I observed something, or [...] I will sometimes just, I do this often, sometimes a person can just see that a child hasn’t had a good day today, then [...] I write a note and then in passing just put it in the child’s pencil case [...] (P5).

Furthermore, some participants stated that inquisitiveness also seems vital in order to experience empathy in their classroom: “*To understand them and to want to work with people, want to find out and want to know about them [...] The fact that I can understand and I want to know what the conditions are at home*” (P3). Also, to be committed serves as an opportunity for educators to be empathic towards the learners in their classroom, as seen in the following statements: “*You can have how many prescriptions and documents that tell you what to do, but [...] [you have to be] committed [...]*” (P2), and that “*I search images mainly from a point of view; I look for apparatus and stuff like that [...] You can’t stop and say you know everything*” (P1). Therefore, it appears as if these character traits helped the participants to understand the learners and their situations.

Portraying a power role. Certain rules and boundaries need to be set, and the teacher needs to fulfil a power role to encourage or discipline a learner, as noted by one participant, who reported that, “[...] *the boundaries that I set [...] you take a parental position first before you can even take a teachers role*” (P1). Another participant said, “[...] *as an educator, I don’t think we realise the influence we can have on the total development of a child [...] we are in a position, and we might say or do something that could hurt or damage a child*” (P4). Additionally, rules play an essential role, as specified by one participant: “*On my class rules, there is a lot of stuff, but the most important is: believe in themselves, never give up*” (P7). Hence, it is important that educators realise the influence they can have on the learners, and the tremendous power they have to build or undermine a learner’s confidence.

Decrease in self-confidence by not feeling adequate. It was evident that some participants do not feel good enough as educators, because of all the demands that are placed on them. This observation is supported by a participant, who stated that,

[...] at times you go home feeling I achieved nothing today and all I did was moan and correct [...] I often thought that maybe I'm not good enough as a teacher and that I don't do enough [...] There's far more that I can do [...] (P1).

Another participant observed, *"[...] the pressure and extra admin and extra stuff we have, I feel that I am no longer a good teacher, because I don't have the empathy that I had when I began."* (P3). Therefore, educators who feel inadequate owing to their feelings of not doing enough or having too much work results in them experiencing a decrease in self-confidence.

Theme 2: Interpersonal Understanding for Learners with Disabilities

During data gathering, it was evident that the participants showed understanding of the learners' situations by trying to earn the learners' trust, and trying to create an environment in which the learners were acknowledged and motivated to learn.

Earning the learners' trust. It was apparent to most participants that earning the trust of their learners enables them to experience empathy, as mentioned by one participant: *"You must win their trust, because [...] we actually live in such a broken world that there are so few people that children can really trust [...]"* (P2). For another participant, it was necessary to earn the trust of the learners in order for the learners to be able to open up: *"But I just feel it's the only way I get to the children [learners], and you build their trust [...] and as they learn to trust you, they open up..."* (P3). Hence, earning the learner's trust enables the participants to show interpersonal understanding of the learners' situation.

Motivating and acknowledging the learners. To acknowledge and motivate the learners and to empower them seem to play important roles for the participants regarding how they deal with the various academic abilities of their learners, as stated by one participant: *"You have to get them [learners] to decide for themselves [make own choices]"* (P1). In addition, one needs *"[...] to praise and really try to motivate them [...] and that motivation helps them to be more self-assured [...]"* (P2). Another participant said that one should motivate the learners to work to the best of their academic capabilities: *"[...] most of the time I try to get them feel a little bit of pressure so that they motivate themselves to work on the same pace as the classroom"* (P6). To continue to motivate the learners and reinforce positive academic performance, one participant said, *"[...] I motivate my [learners] with gold stars [...] so I try to motivate each one on their level [...] and I think it is very important to keep boosting it"* (P7). Participant 5 noted the importance of acknowledging the learners: *"[...] say to a child in the morning 'your hair looks nice' [...] and sometimes give [them] a hug [...] and if I know a child has excelled [...] I will go out of my way to congratulate them"* (P5). Evidently, most participants considered motivation and acknowledgment as important for empowering the learners.

Theme 3: Adaptive Teaching Skills

The data gathered also showed that participants' experience of empathy inspired them to adapt to the new educational environment of inclusion. They did so by differentiating between

the learners' different needs, and developing a creative teaching approach in order to comply with their different needs.

Differentiating between the different needs of the learners. One participant emphasised the uniqueness of every learner, stating that, *"We do a lot of differentiation [...] within the class because of inclusion [...] So in my class especially, you try because everyone is different"* (P3). Some participants focussed on differentiating by providing suitable learning materials appropriate to each learner's need, as indicated by one participant who claimed that she *"...[had] another [learner] who is partially sighted [...] for example I enlarge things [worksheets] for her"* (P2). Another participant said, *"[...] with the worksheets I make an adjustment [...] I would do an alternative assessment, so I will perhaps ask verbal questions and I am going to test the skill, not the work [...]"* (P4). Thus, differentiation plays a vital role for educators, helping them to adapt to learners' needs and provide the relevant learning material.

Having a creative teaching approach. Adapting their teaching approach in order to meet the different needs of each learner motivates most participants to think creatively. One participant said that, *"We come to the class, and then I go back to the very concrete [...] It's a constant repeat: finding different ways, creative ways of trying to get them see that even games work wonderfully [...]"* (P1). Another participant pointed to identifying innovative ways to convey the work in a comprehensive manner:

[...] you got to play around and you got to be open to look for different options and I do a lot of Google [...] So then we need to make ourselves available to find ways to make it understandable to them and that's not always easy (P1).

Additionally, it seemed vital for the participants to be inventive, for example, *"[we] put music on and we do a lot of movement [...] I have a trampoline at the back"* (P3). Another technique is to make use of visual aids: *"I love the projector and showing them videos, and actually for children with barriers the videos work so well [...] In the beginning I also played music [...] and I believe in a lot of visual work with our learners"* (P6). Yet another participant said, *"I believe in a lot of visual work with the learners [...] I work a lot on the carpet for them to feel and touch"* (P7). Participant 7 went on to note the importance of focussing on the reality of the learners: *"[...] everything we do we must pull it through to the reality. The other day we did an advertisement [...] I had to teach them what a slogan means, and when I said 'finger liking good', they immediately answered KFC"* (P7). Therefore, educators are able to adjust to the new educational system of inclusion by adapting their teaching style through differentiation and being creative.

Theme 4: Situational Aspects Playing a Role in the Empathic Experiences of Educators

During the in-depth interview it became clear that there are certain situational aspects that play a role in the educators' empathy within their inclusive classrooms. These situational aspects include: facilities and support, time constraints, lack of learner discipline, parental interference, household issues of educators, empathy being influenced through educational experience, and empathy being influenced after educators have become mothers.

Facilities and support. It was evident that most participants' empathy is influenced by facilities provided by and support from the Department of Education. One participant voiced her frustration with the lack of facilities and support provided, stating that,

[...] now we're a mainstream school and that label, that etiquette of you are now an inclusive school, [is] forced upon us. Because actually we don't have the facilities to do that [such as] hearing aids [...] we were supposed to have assistance [such as] occupational therapists, and psychologists, and everything at your disposal, but none of that is here [...]. How do you cope with that in a big class without an assistant? (P1)

In contrast with the above, another participant from a different school indicated that, *"We are now very happy that the Department has helped us. They gave us money to buy [some] stuff [...] but they also said that they would send us an occupational therapist or a psychologist"* (P4). Thus, a lack of facilities and support can cause a lot of frustration; the provision thereof allows educators to provide the best teaching environment for the learners.

Time constraints. Data showed that several participants experienced frustration regarding the time constraints in accordance with their work demands. One participant said,

I mean, the teachers then have to accommodate for one learner: change a worksheet, change her whole way of doing things to make it easier for her [...] You don't always have the time and the places available, or you've got other stuff on your desk that you have to do [...] (P1).

Also, there is additional pressure placed upon educators to complete their assessments in a limited amount of time. One participant complained of *"[...] the pressure and extra admin and the extra stuff that we have"* (P3). Another participant admitted that the unreliability of the education system negatively impacts the learners. She said, *"Our education system is letting the children down [...] they are expecting a whole lot of work, a lot of paperwork, a lot of double work"* (P4). Importantly, one participant believed that not having enough time impacts her ability to feel empathy: *"people don't have time to get to everything. I think it is one of the [...] empathy thieves"* (P2). Another participant elaborated: *"I think also the time constraint is one of the main things that would probably influence our empathy towards the children [...]. The amount of work content to be covered in a certain period of time [...] definitely frustrating most of the time"* (P6). Thus, a lack of time for the amount of work that is expected of educators seems to be a frustration, which negatively influences their empathy.

Lack of learner discipline. According to the data gathered, the lack of discipline among learners greatly influences the participants' empathy within their inclusive classrooms. One participant voiced her frustration, stating that a lack of discipline deprives her of her empathy: *"...If there is no discipline [...] it steals my empathy that I should have for the [learner]"* (P2). Another participant also pointed to discipline: *"[...] disobedient children [learners] I think have a great influence [on empathy]"* (P5). Evidently, the lack of discipline among learners causes some participants to feel frustrated and prevents them from focussing on the learners.

Parental influence. According to most participants, the role that parents play influences their empathy in a negative manner. For one participant, *"Parents interfere tremendously [...]. I've had the most parental interference that I have had to deal with in all my teaching years"* (P1). Moreover, *"No parent cooperation makes you lose empathy [...]"* (P3), and *"[...] a lot of the time they're reluctant to help [...] that's the biggest challenge we're dealing with"* (P6). One participant, however, realised that support from the parents can aid in her empathic experiences:

“[...] You must have a good relationship with the parents. You go much further if you work with them [parents] [...]. Have a good relationship with the parents and the child” (P4). Thus, according to the participants, parents play a very important role and can have a definite influence on their own empathy.

Household issues influencing educators’ empathy. Participants’ personal responsibilities at home also play a role in their empathy, as noted by one participant: *“I think your own household circumstances also play a role because [...] if I [...] am stressed, my empathy levels are low”* (P3). Another participant pointed to the personal roles one must fulfil at home as well: *“[...] you have responsibilities, your personal responsibilities, your family and things you need at home”* (P6). Thus, the personal responsibilities educators have in their lives outside school also influence their empathy towards the learners, either positively or negatively.

Empathy being influenced through educational experience. It was clearly stated by one participant that her empathy only started to develop with teaching experience: *“I think with my age I also became more empathic [...] when I was younger I mainly focused on teaching my subject”* (P5). Her educational experience thus aided in her development of empathy in her classroom.

Empathy being influenced after educators had become mothers. It was apparent that one participant had low levels of empathy, which was enhanced until she herself became a mother:

I actually as a start off teacher, I did not have that much empathy [...]. And I actually started in a sense to realise that this is somebody’s child [...]. And I think as time goes by like now, I have a lot of sympathy and empathy for children who struggle (P4).

She further explained that,

Because I felt that was not what I studied to do. I did not study to go beyond the call of duty and then I came here and I’ve learned to make a lot with a little bit of stuff [...]. When I had my own children it made a big difference because I didn’t have empathy towards other people’s children [...]. This is what I studied to do and this is what I am going to do. I ignored the children that struggled and it was wrong of me I think that now I feel really bad about it (P4).

Another participant also explained the effect of having a child with a disability and how it influences her empathy, explaining that, *“I have a son who has Asperger [Syndrome] and I think that opened my eyes [...].”* (P7). It is clear that these two participants have developed empathy as part of both their experience in their inclusive classrooms, as well as in their personal lives.

Discussion

This qualitative study with a phenomenological research design aimed to identify educators’ own empathic experiences in inclusive classrooms in the Dr Kenneth Kaunda District in the North West Province, South Africa. The following research question directed this study: *What are educators’ experiences regarding their own empathy within inclusive classrooms?*

The educators had several experiences regarding empathy in their inclusive classrooms. Previous research done by Zeiger (2016) found that focusing on certain traits that an educator must have serves as an opportunity to create a suitable environment for the learners. Zeiger's finding was confirmed by this study, as participants noted that certain traits must be present within educators. In addition, Kelly (2017) claims that along with these traits, educators have a power role, which has a large influence in the lives of learners. This claim was also supported by the study's findings, as educators emphasised the power role they have in the lives of their classroom learners, whether it be through their words, actions or the classroom rules they set.

Yet despite having certain traits and a power role, educators still might experience low self-confidence owing to several factors. According to Mach,i (2007), educators feel a decrease in their self-esteem because of their unwillingness to find new ways to help learners with barriers to learning. Research done by Chimhenga, (2016) concurs, finding that educators' lack of confidence makes them feel inadequate to teach learners who experience barriers to learning. This research study supported this finding, as participants noted that because of their own personal deficiency, they do not feel good enough as educators, and feel that they must do more in order to feel adequate.

Alrubail, (2015) emphasises the importance of educators creating a trusting relationship with the learners, which is verified by the study's findings. A trusting relationship aids in the understanding of the learner as a whole, including why the learner acts in a certain manner. Zeiger (2016) not only affirms the importance of creating a trusting relationship with the learners, but also states why it is necessary to motivate the learners. Weimer (2013) argues that motivation helps the learners to achieve the necessary outcomes, while Magare, Kitching and Roos, (2010) believe that educators who focus on the successful outcomes of the learners encourage them to progress by reinforcing their successes. In this current study, participants stated that they try stimulating the learners by motivating them to work according to their own pace, and also encourage their growth by giving them gold stars.

Differentiation between the different needs of the learners also serves as a motivation for the educators to experience empathy. According to Thakur (2014), differentiation is an important tool in inclusive classrooms, requiring educators to restructure their classroom and ways of teaching. Differentiation can be seen as an effective and creative strategy that enables learners, despite their needs, to receive the appropriate education (Thakur, 2014). Magare, et al. (2010) add that educators must intentionally adjust their teaching approach in order to provide a suitable learning environment for all learners. Participants in this study acknowledged the importance of differentiation by drawing attention to the need in the inclusive classroom to first do an assessment of the child's needs, and then to provide learning opportunities according to each learners' ability. The participants also highlighted the necessity to enlarge the font of some learners' worksheets and to handle each learner according to their individual abilities.

Several situational aspects were also reported to play a role in the educators' experience regarding their empathy in the classroom. For instance, facilities and support serve as situational factors. According to Roux (2014), the absence of appropriate school facilities serves as a major challenge. Naicker (2006), Roux (2014) and Schoeman (2012) add that a lack in proper infrastructure and resources at schools prohibits the accommodation of all learners with different types of disabilities. Moreover, inadequate lighting or an excess of loud noise prevents learners with hearing and visual difficulties from fully participating in class (Graham, 2014). In this

study, the participants admitted that resources, facilities and support play a vital role in their experiences regarding empathy. The participants' frustration was evident if their school was not fully equipped with the necessary resources to accommodate learners with disabilities. In contrast are the views of those participants who worked at a school where the vital resources are provided by the Department of Education. Thus, facilities and resources influence the empathic experiences of educators within their inclusive classrooms.

Other relevant factors are time constraints and lack of learner discipline. Time constraints can cause educators to foster a negative attitude towards inclusion, as stated by Engelbrecht et al. (2015) and confirmed by the participants in this study. They pointed out their dissatisfaction at not being able to complete all their work in the limited amount of time that is provided to them. One participant also stated that there is not enough time for the number of assessments that educators are expected to do within their classrooms. A lack of learner discipline also leads to difficulties being experienced by educators in managing their classrooms (Nisreen, 2013). In this study, the participants explained their frustration at the disobedience of learners who interrupt their classrooms.

Factors outside the classroom also influence the empathic experiences of educators. According to Mare (2014) and Magare, et al. (2010), parental influence plays a significant role in the academic performance of the learner. In a study done by Johnson and Descartes (2017), they claim that all parents try to influence their children's studies. Participants in this study also showed that parental influence plays an important role in educators' empathic experiences. According to the participants, if the parents work cooperatively with the educators, it will aid in the learning process of the learners. Another outside factor is household issues. According to Lynch (2015), some educators find it difficult to keep their personal life separate from their work life, which may cause educators to become tired. Indeed, in this study participants admitted to experiencing a change in their empathic experiences after a troublesome night at home, or having personal responsibilities.

Previous experience with inclusive education is also a factor in the theme of personal experience in the inclusive classroom. Bradshaw and Mundia, (2006) claim that educators who have had previous experience with inclusive education are more likely to maintain a positive attitude regarding the inclusion of all learners. In this study, participants stated that they became more empathic as they gained educational experience. Similarly, the empathic experiences of educators can be influenced by their role as mothers. Thomas (2015) states that having children can motivate an educator to be prouder of the good work learners do and to motivate them to achieve what they can. This assertion was confirmed by the participants, who claimed that their empathy had grown since they had children of their own. Such empathy is important, for, as Konrath and Grynberg, (2013) emphasise, high levels of empathy can lead to prosocial behaviour, where an individual learns to help others. Therefore, educators with high empathy levels are able to understand the learners' needs.

Limitations and Recommendations

Limitations of this study include the small number of participants – all of whom were female educators. Moreover, the majority (six) were White, and one was Indian. Thus the sample shows limited variation, which makes generalisation to the broader Dr Kenneth Kaunda District, North West Province (South Africa) not possible, as is not representative of all gender and ethnic

groups in the district. Furthermore, most schools that are listed as full-service schools in the Dr Kenneth Kaunda District are not inclusive, and only three full-service schools were willing to participate, of which only one had the necessary facilities.

Possible recommendations for further research regarding this topic include focussing on more than one district, because of the limited number of schools actually complying with the criteria of a full-service school. Doing so would allow the researchers to possibly interview more educators, from a variety of age groups, gender and race, which will provide a more in-depth perspective on the empathic experiences of educators within their inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, it is recommended that a possible program be put in place that teaches educators the necessity of empathy in the inclusive classroom. This program can also include training to provide the essential skills for educators to apply in their inclusive classroom. Because empathy can be seen as a core element in the inclusive classrooms, where learners are considered as individuals with unique needs, it is necessary that further research is done in order to ensure that each educator is equipped with the vital empathy skills to accommodate these learners' needs.

Conclusion

The aim of this research study was to identify educators' own empathic experiences in inclusive classrooms in the Dr Kenneth Kaunda District in the North West Province (South Africa). The researchers found that empathy plays a vital role in the educational experiences of educators within their inclusive classrooms. In addition, there are also situations and factors that influence such experiences. The empathic experiences of educators within their inclusive classrooms, which were explicitly specified in the findings of this study and substantiated by other literature, include the educators' ability to have intrapersonal proficiency; the educator's ability to show interpersonal understanding for learners with barriers; the educator having adaptive teaching skills; and situational aspects that play a role in the empathic experiences of educators.

Empathy can be identified as a fundamental aspect in education, where educators are thus motivated to acknowledge every learner, with or without a barrier to learning, and help to fully understand their needs in order to provide the necessary education and equal learning opportunities to all. Educators in inclusive schools have been identified as the population group on which future researchers must focus, mainly because educators within an inclusive educational setting endure a variety of situations that impact on their educational experience. Also, educators can be seen as key in the transference of knowledge and skills to the learners, and need empathy to do so in a suitable manner, and according to each learner's need. Programs teaching the importance of empathy and conveying empathic skills are necessary in the training of each educator.

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