CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

What do teachers say about empathy?

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Social Work

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May 2017

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Abstract

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This project was a non-experimental descriptive study to describe elementary teachers' beliefs of cognitive empathy development in students and the incorporation of empathy development into the curriculum. This concept was important because empathy is considered a "pro-social" behavior which has been positively related to social emotional learning (SEL); increased levels of SEL are known to decrease negative behaviors in elementary aged children while increasing positive behaviors (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011). The incorporation of SEL has been more prevalent in recent times as new research highlights the importance. Students do not typically learn at school through autonomous efforts, rather a collaboration with teacher(s) and peers. Teachers believed interactions with other humans to be the most significant in terms of empathy development. The study population (n=33) was composed of those that teach at an elementary level (kindergarten through sixth grade) within the Portland Metro area. The thoughts and viewpoints of elementary school teachers on empathy and empathy development were measured with a 45-item anonymous survey. The majority of teachers believed there was more of a social benefit than academic benefit to empathy development. Three quarters of the sample strongly believed empathy was a valuable skill, which may explain why half of the sample fully supported empathy development being

incorporated into the curriculum. With all of this said, at the end of the day the majority of

teachers *do not* feel it should be their responsibility to teach empathy to students. This study

helped highlight teachers' beliefs of empathy incorporation as it is reflected in recent research

Durlak et. al., (2011).

Introduction

Social theorists have been examining human responsiveness to others experiences for hundreds of years, recognized today as empathy (Davis, 1980). The foundation of empathy is interconnected with both moral and philosophical respects to human behavior. Empathy is a critical component to one's social and emotional behaviors (Allemand, 2015). Throughout time empathy has been seen and thought of variations, making it hard to create a concrete definition. Some common key components of empathy include collective understanding, emotional involvement, ethical equitability, and moralistic standing (Cogeil, 2008). Today, empathy is defined as "the ability to imagine oneself in another's place and understand the other's feelings, desires, ideas, and actions" (Empathy, n.d.). There was a time when empathy was closely linked to and even used interchangeably with sympathy. However, in more recent times, empathy and sympathy have been perceived to be different concepts. Empathy involves both identifying and sharing the emotions of another individual(s). While sympathy is a reaction to the plight of another individual(s), and may not involve a collective perspective, as empathy would (Burton, 2015).

The development of empathy is a learned process and relies on environmental modeling (Allemand, 2015). Parents and/or guardians as well as other individuals with frequent exposure to the child may be some of the most valuable tools to assist in empathy development because of increased investment to the child. Individuals such as teachers are great candidates to model and teach and ultimately increase empathetic capacity in children because they too are invested in the child on a social, emotional, and academic levels (Crowley & Saide, 2016). Teachers can model empathic practices to children to showcase their own capacity for empathy while creating a culture for the classroom.

Schools benefit children more than just academically, there are also social and emotional influences; positive or negative (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). One's emotional mindset can influence, positively and/or negatively, levels of commitment, work ethic, educational engagement, and overall academic success (Crowley & Saide, 2016, & Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). The students that lack social and emotional skills are at risk to become disconnected from their academic environment, which can have a negative impact on academics and behavior (Brown, Roderick, Lantieri & Aber, 2004). With the connection between emotions and academic success, there should be emphasis on scholastic processes which focus on social and emotional learning (SEL) such as empathy development in early years. Having increased levels of empathy in early life leads to increased levels of empathy in later adulthood (See Appendix A)(Allemand, 2015).

Teachers thoughts on empathy and the incorporation of into the curriculum have value when thinking about creating foundations of empathetic practices interconnected with standard everyday academic practices.

Aims and Objectives

This project surveyed elementary school teachers on their personal thoughts and viewpoints of empathy, empathy development and promotion, consequences of the lack of empathy, and empathy incorporation in the curriculum and classroom. Educational staff has exposure to the children on average six hours per day, and one hundred eighty days per year (Bush, Ryan & Rose, 2011). This opportune exposure can impact children in terms of positive empathy development. Children do not typically learn at school through autonomous efforts, rather a collaboration with teacher(s) and peers. Research suggests increased levels of positive social emotional learning (SEL) will decrease negative behaviors in elementary aged children

while increasing positive behaviors (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011, & Brown, Roderick, Lantieri & Aber, 2004). This study can develop the knowledge base of elementary teachers' principles as well as personal insight regarding empathy and empathy development in students.

Method

Participants

The study population was composed of those teaching at an elementary level (kindergarten through sixth grade) within the Portland Metro area. All subjects remained anonymous throughout the entire research process. The mean age of responders was 27 years old; 77.27% percent female and 22.73% percent male. There were 18.18% Kindergarten teachers, 22.72% were first grade teachers, 18.18% were second grade teachers, 13.63% were third grade teachers, 9.09% were fourth grade teachers, 9.09% were fifth grade teachers, and 9.09% were sixth grade teachers. Of this sample, 19.05% taught in urban communities, 66.67% in suburban communities, and 14.29% in rural communities. Within said communities, 13.64% had between 0%-14% of students receiving free lunch, 18.18% had between 15%-19%, 18.18% had between 30%-44%, 9.09% had between 45%-59%, 18.18% had between 60%-74%, 13.64% had between 75%-89%, and 9.09% had anything over 90% of students receiving free lunch.

Measures

The thoughts and viewpoints of elementary school teachers on empathy and empathy development were measured with a 45-item survey which was broken down into two parts: (1) demographics; including age, sex, grade taught, years taught, type of school district, and the percentage of children receiving free lunch, (2) five sets of seven-point Likert type questions (strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, neutral, somewhat disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree) to measure teachers' beliefs towards empathy. Sets included beliefs of empathy, empathy promotion, consequences of the lack of empathy in children, empathy in the curriculum, and empathy in the classroom. Each set included a range of 5-10 questions. The survey took between 10-15 to complete. The subjects were not compensated for their participation.

Research Design

      This research design was a cross-sectional descriptive study and was quantitative in nature. Methodology for data collection included an online self-administered questionnaire survey. Focusing in on elementary school teachers (K-6) specifically as the sample population. Success in this study is reliant on the representativeness of the participating subject population. This type of data collection tool can reach a large number of potential respondents due to the technological availability of this time (Rubin & Babbie, 2014).

Procedure

      Researcher contacted elementary principals within the Portland Metro area to discuss the content of the study, with hopes of obtaining permission to provide a link to be forwarded to teachers to participate in an anonymous survey. The survey was also been made available on Craigslist within this region.

      Willing respondents participated in a self-administered online survey, which was serviced by research software company, Qualtrics. Survey began by providing key information about study, such as the purpose of study, study information, research team, confidentiality, and voluntary participation statement. Other than typical demographics, no identifying information was solicited from the subject; all data was anonymous. Researcher then compiled and analyzed the data to describe elementary teachers' thoughts on the concept of empathy and empathy development in children.

Results

The sample consisted of 33 elementary school teachers. Table 1 summarized some of the demographics found during this study (See Appendix B).   The average age of participants was 36.14 years; 25.81% were males, and 74.19 were female; 19.35% taught kindergarten, 25.81% taught 1st grade, 16.13% taught 2nd grade, 12.90% taught 3rd grade, 9.68% taught 4th grade, 9.68% taught 5th grade, and 6.45% taught 6th grade; 20% taught in urban school districts, 60% taught in suburban school districts, and 20% taught in rural school districts; with a combined 253 years teaching experience, 16.13% taught less than 3 years, 41.93 taught between 3-6 years, 6.45% taught 7-9 years, 19.35% taught 10-14 years, 9.68% 15-19 years, and 6.45% taught for 20+ years.

A seven-point Likert type questions (strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, neutral, somewhat disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree) was used to measure teachers' beliefs towards empathy. When asked if empathy is a trait that is learned, 21.43% strongly agree, 35.71% agree, 25.00% somewhat agree, 14.29% somewhat disagree, 3.57% disagree, and 0% strongly disagrees. When asked if empathy is a trait that is genetically obtained, 3.57% strongly agree, 25.00% agree, 28.57% somewhat agree, 10.71% are neutral, 14.29% somewhat disagree, 17.86% disagree, and 0% strongly disagrees. What asked if the ability to have empathy was valuable, 75.00% strongly agree, 14.29% agree, 10.71% somewhat agree, 0% were neutral, or disagreed to any extent. In regards to personal opinion, if one considers themselves to be empathetic in a professional setting, 32.14% strongly agree, 46.43% agree, 14.29% somewhat agree, 3.57% were neutral, 3.57% somewhat disagree, 0% disagree, and 0% strongly disagree. On the contrary, when asked the same question in regards to one's personal life, 28.57% strongly

agree, 42.86% agree, 17.86% somewhat agree, 0% were neutral, 10.71% somewhat disagree, 0% disagree, and 0% strongly disagree.

When considering what may play a role in empathy development, given the options of home, peers, teachers, books, film, social media, culture, or religion/spirituality, teachers ranked, from most significant to least significant, (1) home, (2) culture, (3), teachers, (4) religion, (5) peers, (6) film, (7) social media, (8) books. When considering what may be a consequences of the lack of empathy in children, given the options of poor academic achievement, bullying, easily distressed, lack of emotional control, aggressive behaviors, defiance, lack of remorse, or unresponsive to punishment, teachers ranked, from most significant to least significant, (1) lack of remorse, (2) bullying, (3) defiance, (4) easily distressed, (5) aggressive behaviors, (6) poor academic achievement, (7) unresponsive to punishment, and (8) lack of emotional control.   With regards to teachers' personal opinions, if there is a *social* benefit to promoting empathy in the curriculum, 65.38% strongly agree, 19.23% agree, 11.54% somewhat agree, 3.85 were neutral, and 0% disagree to any extent. When asked if there is an *academic* benefit to promoting empathy in the curriculum, 34.62% strongly agree, 23.08% agree, 23.08% somewhat agree, 0% were neutral, 15.38% somewhat disagree, 3.85% disagree, and 0% strongly disagree.

In regards to the *school district* the participant is employed in, 8.00% strongly agree their school district promotes empathy development with the children, 28.00 agree, 20% somewhat agree, 4.00 were natural, 0% somewhat agree, 40% disagree, and 0% strongly disagreed. In regards to the actual *school* the participant is employed in, 8.00% strongly agree their school promotes empathy development in the children, 28.00 agree, 24% somewhat agree, 8.00% were neutral, 20.00 somewhat disagree, 12.00% disagree, and 0% strongly disagreed.

Teachers were asked if they believed empathy development should be incorporated into the curriculum, 50% strongly agree, 19.23% agree, 11.54% somewhat agree, 0% were neutral, 3.85% somewhat disagree, 11.54% disagree, and 3.85% strongly disagree. When asked if it was the teachers responsibility to teach empathy development, 3.85% strongly agreed, 7.69% agreed, 3.85% somewhat agreed, 0% were neutral, 30.77 somewhat disagree, 23.08% disagree, and 30.7% strongly disagree. When considering the ways in which the participants currently model empathy, given the options of modeling positive behavior, showing you care, teaching to befriend others, offering a different perspective, practicing/modeling emotional literacy, encouraging teamwork activities, acts of kindness, validating students equally, practicing trust, and encouraging students to be change makers, teachers ranked, from most used technique to least used technique, (1) modeling positive behavior and showing you care, (2) offering a different perspective and acts of kindness, (3) teaching to befriend others and encouraging students to be change makers, (4)encouraging teamwork activities, and (5) validating students equally.

Discussion

Based on the research findings, it was not surprising to see that the majority of elementary school teacher participants were female over male, as this was expected. It was also not surprising that the majority of participants were employed within a suburban setting. In regards to empathy development being attributed more to nature than nurture, teachers believed empathy development to be of more learned behavior. Which may explain why the top three reasons teachers believe empathy is developed is, home, culture, and teachers; all of which are human contact. On the other end of the spectrum, the top three consequences teachers believe are from the lack of empathy in children all affect others around them, lack of remorse, bullying, and defiance. Therefore, it is understandable that 65.38% of teachers do see a direct social benefit to empathy promotion and development. When only half of this number believe there to be an academic benefit.

At this point in time, teachers agreed the school they are employed in promotes empathy development more than the entire school district does. Three quarters of the sample strongly believed empathy is a valuable skill, which may explain why half of the sample fully supports empathy development being incorporated into the curriculum. With all of this said, at the end of the day the majority of teachers *do not* feel it should be their responsibility to teach empathy to students. This may be due to the fact a lot of teachers already feel like there is a lack of teacher support as is. However, teachers do continue to model empathy to their students mainly by modeling positive behavior and showing they care. Until empathy development can be officially incorporated into the curriculum, modeling empathy is a good start.

Limitations

The findings of this study should be thought about within the context of apparent limitations. The study population was of a small sample size (n=33), therefore the findings cannot generalize all teacher's thoughts about the importance of empathy development being incorporated into the curriculum. The small sample size also made it increasingly difficult to find significant statistical relationships from the data.

Summary

Findings highlight the beliefs that teachers feel (1) empathy development is important and beneficial to children, (2) there is a social benefit from developing empathy, and (3) empathy development should be incorporated into the curriculum. The current results are important because they show that elementary teachers, individuals with a lot of exposure to children and their behaviors, feel there are social benefits to incorporating empathy development into the curriculum, and social repercussions if empathy development is not considered. Additionally, the findings from this study can help others understand the perspective of elementary teachers and empathy development.

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Authors Name	Date	What Was Examined	Results
Allemand	2015	Does the early development of empathy impact social competencies and outcomes in adulthood? Is gender related to empathy development?	Increased levels of empathy in early life led to increased levels in adulthood. Females show higher levels of initial empathy.
Brown, Roderick, Lantieri & Aber	2004	Evaluate the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP) and discuss the impact on children's trajectories of social and emotional learning (SEL)	Teachers self-reports show a decline in aggressive behavior and an increased rates of growth in positive outcomes
Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schdellinger	2011	Is there a positive correlation between universal social and emotional (SEL) programs and increased social and academic achievement?	There is a positive impact between SEL programs and social behaviors, emotional skills, and academic achievement.
Williford, Boulton, Forrest-Bank, Bender, Dieterich & Jensen	2016	How is victimization and bullying related to cognitive empathy development during the transition to middle school?	Cognitive empathy decreased over time for both bullies and victims; lesser degree for victims.
Work & Olsen	1990	Identify apparent differences between two control groups; one trained with a social problem solving (SPS) curriculum	The quality of problem solving solutions was significantly related to ones empathy level.

Table 1

Demographics

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(N= 33)	Overall	Urban (N=6)	Suburban (N=18)	Rural (N=6)
Gender N (%)				
Male	8 (25.81)	3 (50)	2 (11.11)	3 (50)
Female	23 (74.19)	3 (50)	16 (88.88)	3 (50)
Grade Taught N (%)				
K	6 (19.35)	0 (00)	5 (27.77)	0 (00)
1st	8 (25.81)	1 (14.28)	6 (33.33)	1 (16.66)
2nd	5 (16.13)	0 (00)	4 (22.22)	1 (16.66)
3rd	4 (12.90)	2 (28.57)	2 (11.11)	0 (00)
4th	3 (9.68)	2 (28.57)	0 (00)	2 (33.33)
5th	3 (9.68)	2 (28.57)	0 (00)	1 (16.66)
6th	2 (6.45)	0 (00)	1 (5.55)	1 (16.66)
Years Taught N (%)				
< 3	5 (16.13)	1 (16.66)	10 (*37.04*)	2 (*20*)
3-6	13 (41.93)	1 (16.66)	11 (*40.74*)	5 (*50*)
7-9	2 (6.45)	1 (16.66)	*0 (00)*	1 (*10*)
10-14	6 (19.35)	3 (*50*)	3 (*11.11*)	0 (*00*)
15-19	3 (9.68)	0 (*00*)	3 (*11.11*)	0 (*00*)
20-25	0 (0.00)	*0 (00)*	*0 (00)*	0 (*00*)
> 25	2 (6.45)	*0 (00)*	*0 (00)*	2 (*20*)

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