Chapter 85
Exploring the Impact of Service-Learning on Literacy Teachers' Self-Reported Empathy

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ABSTRACT

Although (1) literacy teacher education research and professional practice standards highlight the significance of empathy as a central tenant of teachers' professional dispositions, and (2) developing deeper and more empathetic understanding of others is a frequently cited rationale for utilizing service-learning as a critical pedagogy for in-service and pre-service teacher preparation, little quantitative research exists measuring in-service teachers' empathy or empathy development. The purpose of this chapter is to explore how a course-embedded, self-selected, and community-based service-learning experience effected participating literacy teachers' self-reported empathy. While participants scores increased in the pre-post condition, results of a paired sample t-test indicated no significant difference in teachers' self-reported empathy across the pre-post condition. Implications for practice and program administration as well as suggestions for future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy teacher education research and professional practice standards highlight the significance of empathy as a central tenant of teachers' professional dispositions. In tandem, developing deeper and more empathetic understanding of others is a frequently cited rationale for utilizing service-learning as a critical pedagogy for in-service and pre-service teacher preparation. However, little quantitative research exists measuring in-service teachers' empathy or empathy development. This chapter explores how a course-embedded, self-selected, and community-based service-learning experience effected participating literacy teachers' self-reported empathy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Investigating the impact of service-learning on in-service teachers' self-reported empathy holds particular promise. Understanding how teachers at the forefront of demographic shifts in education internalize the perceptions and differing world views of the students in their classrooms is imperative.

Empathy, Public School Demographic Shifts, and Graduate Literacy Teacher Education

Empathy is vital to the human emotional experience and social interaction. The capacity to understand the affect of loved ones and outsiders alike (Batson, 2009; Hoffman, 2000) gives individuals the insight to "predict and understand [others] feelings, motivations, and actions" (Bernhardt, & Singer, 2012, p. 2). While there is no universally developed or accepted definition of empathy (Batson, 2009; Bernhardt & Singer, 2012), the term should be differentiated from terms like sympathy or compassion. While a sympathetic or compassionate response to the experiences of another involves "a feeling of concern for the other's suffering that induces a motivation to alleviate the suffering" (Bernhardt & Singer, 2012, p. 3), this response does not include the sharing of feelings required for an empathetic (shared) response. While compassion is a positive trait for many helping professions (like nursing for example), in education, it presupposes a hierarchical stance of deficit perspective on experiences. Understanding how to facilitate the development of empathy over compassion in teachers and teacher candidates is pressing. Teasing out the impact of curricular experiences on literacy teachers' empathy is warranted and necessary at this decisive epoch in the fabric and demographics of public education.

As recently as 2016, the United States (U.S.) Department of Education's Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development released the report, *The State of Diversity in the Educational Workforce.* In this report, the Department outlines that, by 2024, students of Color will represent 56% of the population in U.S. public schools (United States Department of Education [USDE], 2016, p.1). Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander students are projected to have the largest increases in enrollment by percentage (USDE, 2016, p.5). Particularly, Hispanic students will represent 29% of public school enrollment while Black student enrollment is expected to fall to 15% by 2024 (USDE, 2016, p.5). Juxtaposed to these statistics, teachers and administrators in public schools are "not as diverse as the population at large or the students" they serve (USDE, 2016, p.6). In fact, according to the 2016 USDE report, 82% of public school teachers are White, 7% are Black, and only 8% are Hispanic (p.6). The statics point to significant discrepancy in experience between a largely homogenous workforce and an increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse student body (Nieto, 2009). These differences in ontological perspectives, language ideologies, and experiences can prohibit empathetic and asset-based understandings otherwise propagated by shared understandings and contexts – particularly in the largely community-based and contextualized setting of education (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007).

As a result, Warren & Hotchkins (2015) pinpoint how "the U.S.'s increasingly diverse public school population precipitates a need to explore the significance of empathy as a professional disposition of K-12 public school teachers" (p. 123). Understanding the experiences and assets of others with an empathic versus sympathetic lens and allowing these insights to drive individualized and differentiated learning opportunities grounded in the students' sociocultural worlds is at the forefront of culturally relevant and multicultural educational practices (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Larkin & Sleeter, 1995, Lu, Dane, & Gellman, 2005; Nieto, 2000).

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