



The impact of educator empathetic mindset on student expectations

A Pilot Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this pilot study was to explore teachers' mindsets of empathy and how they relate to their expectations of students. The study was inspired by a study completed by Okonofua, Paunesku, and Walton (2016), "Brief intervention to encourage empathetic discipline cuts suspension rates in half among adolescents."

In the pilot study, public, urban, middle school teachers were electronically surveyed regarding their demographics, empathy mindsets, and expectations of students. Half of the teachers surveyed were provided a brief intervention on incorporating empathy in the classroom prior to taking the survey. This study used a mixed methods research approach, gathering both qualitative and quantitative data. Intervention and control group data was analyzed in relation to the research question.

Preliminary findings suggest similar outcomes to the partially replicated study.

Mindset: A mental attitude (Merriam-Webster, 2020)

Empathy: the capacity and action of awareness, understanding, and sensitivity to the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of another person (Merriam-Webster).

Introduction

National Context: Research indicates that empathy declined by more than 75% in the United States between 1979 and 2000 (Zaki, 2019). President Obama declared that our empathy deficit is more significant than our federal deficit (Zaki, 2019), and it has been theorized by economic scholar Scott Galloway of NYU that American capitalism will collapse without a foundation of empathy (Galloway, 2020).

Personal Context: I have worked in the field of social emotional learning (SEL) as a special educator for more than a decade serving students ranging from 3 to 20 year of age who have qualified for special education services in Missouri and Illinois with SEL goals in their Individual Education Plan (IEP).

I began to question if the emotional regulation lessons I lead are missing a key component for student with limited pro-social emotions. This question led me to further research into my discovery of the complexity of empathy.

Methodology

A convergent parallel/mixed methods research approach was employed, using both qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell & Poth, 2014). Half of the participants were randomly assigned to read Teaching with Empathy: Why It's Important by Amanda Morin prior to taking the survey.

Instruments:

The electronic survey included teacher demographic information, as well as ten questions from the Building Equity Audit, Staff Version in the areas of social-emotional engagement, opportunities to learn, instructional excellence, and engaged and inspired learners (Smith, et al, 2017. See Appendix A). Half of the participants were randomly assigned to read "Teaching with Empathy: Why It's Important" by Amanda Morin, which was written as an educator's guide for the implantation of empathy in the classroom, prior to taking the survey

Data Analysis:

Descriptive statistics were used for quantitative data to determine demographic frequency and central tendency in relation to the Building Equity Audit, Staff Version questions in the intervention and in the control group (Smith, et al, 2017). Qualitative phenomenological data were analyzed by deductively coding to identify educator empathetic mindset and expectation themes in both groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Literature

Jamil Zaki, a professor of psychology at Stanford University, believes that people have frequent choices to either experience empathy engagement or implement empathy reducing strategies and proposes that empathy is dependent on motive, mindset, context, interpersonal interaction, and can be selectively deactivated (Schumann, et al., 2014; Zaki, 2008).

Key Issues Raised in the Literature:

- Youth in low-income neighborhoods may exhibit the behaviors associated with LPE/CU traits without having the traits, due to environmental context, and are misdiagnosed based on rating scales (Marsh, 2018).
- It is such a common practice for observers to choose to avoid empathy to the extent that moral disengagement is an indication of expertise and professionalism in fields such as medicine and journalism (Zaki, 2014, 2020).

Research Question

If I survey educators regarding their mindset of empathy and expectations of students, in what way, if any, will the mindset survey responses of the educators who receive a brief intervention to encourage empathy in the classroom relate to the mindset survey responses of the educators who do not receive the intervention?

Empathy Mindset Results

Question	Intervention Group	Control Group
Teachers and staff show they care.	2 Strongly Agree 1 Agree	1 Strongly Agree 2 Agree
Students have at least one adult in school who cares about, supports, and mentors them.	2 Strongly Agree 1 Agree	1 Strongly Agree 2 Agree
Student value their relationships with teachers.	3 Strongly Agree	2 Strongly Agree 1 Agree

Theoretical Frames

Social constructivism was a chosen frame because this study is intended to construct meaning negotiated socially and historically through interactions with others (Creswell & Poth, 2014)..

Transformative was a chosen frame because the purpose of the pilot study is to aid people to improve society and the power of social relationships within society is reflected (Creswell & Poth, 2014).

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