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The Impact of Educator Empathetic Mindset on Expectations of Students and Perceptions of Student Performance

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THE IMPACT OF EDUCATOR EMPATHETIC MINDSET ON EXPECTATIONS OF STUDENTS AND PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT PERFORMANCE

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BY

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Abstract

The quality of student-teacher relationships is a predictor in classroom behavior, yet educators are not explicitly informed and trained regarding the positive impact that expressing empathy toward students has on student behavior and academic performance. The impact of educator empathetic mindsets on expectations of students and perceptions of student performance collective case study examined the empathetic mindsets of three middle school teachers within a large, public, middle school setting. This research specifically generated qualitative narratives regarding how educator mindsets of empathy impacted expectations and perceptions of middle school students following their return to in-person learning after more than a year of distance learning due to the COVID-19 virus.

Keywords: empathy, mindset, expectation, perception.

Chapter One: Introduction

“The most important question facing humanity is this: Can we reach global empathy and avoid the collapse of civilization in time to save the Earth,” Senator Barack Obama probed during a 2006 Northwestern University commencement address while conveying his opinion that the *empathy deficit* is more detrimental to our society than the federal deficit (Zaki, 2019, p.10). The prediction of the now former president of the United States aligns with research, as the average person in 2009 was 75% less empathetic than the average person in 1979 (Konrath et al., 2011; Zaki, 2019).

The word *empathy* refers to a concerned response to another person’s feelings according to the Making Caring Common Project, an initiative developed for educators (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2021). The Social Work Dictionary defines empathy as, "the act of perceiving, understanding, experiencing, and responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person" (Barker, 2008, p. 141; Gerdes et al., 2011, p. 110). If as adults we are increasingly choosing not to behave empathetically toward one another, are we providing and modeling empathy for our children? In childhood, before cognitive-control regions in the brain have fully matured, external resources like trusted teachers may be essential to guide children’s empathy development (Okonofua et al., 2016). Data indicate that as acts of empathy declined in the United States the suspension rate for students tripled, from 1.7 million students in 1974 to over 5 million in 2011 (Okonofau et al., 2016). One question that arises regarding empathy in the classroom is: do educators’ mindsets of empathy impact their expectations and perceptions of students?

National Context

In 2019, more than a decade beyond Senator Obama's speech, the global COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the world economy, including education, and stark division split the American electorate to the point that our democratic principals were significantly tested in the 2020 presidential election. New York University Stern School of Business professor and author of *Post Corona: from Crisis to Opportunity*, Galloway declared that American capitalism would collapse without a foundation of empathy (2020; Shapiro, 2020).

Although traditionally empathy has been viewed by researchers as an independent automatic response, Zaki, a professor of psychology at Stanford University, proposed that empathy is dependent on motive, mindset, context, interpersonal interaction, and can be selectively deactivated (Zaki et al., 2008; Schumann et al., 2014). Another researcher who agreed that empathy is based in interaction and is taking action to decrease the empathy deficit is University of California, Berkley Professor of Psychology, Okonofua, who developed a training for teachers in empathetic discipline to foster student empathy-mindset growth (Okonofua et al., 2016; Zaki, 2019).

The quality of student-teacher relationships is a predictor in classroom behavior; students are more likely to follow the rules of authority figures whom they respect, and more likely to show respect to those who give them respect (Okonofua et al., 2016). In fact, Okonofua and his colleagues found that suspension rates were cut in half over the course of one school year when middle school teachers received a brief intervention to encourage an empathetic mindset regarding discipline, which is promising for our society, educators, and students alike (Okonofua et al., 2016; Zaki, 2019).

Personal Context

I have worked as a special educator for more than a decade in the field of social and emotional learning (SEL), which is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, and establish and maintain positive relationships (casel.org, 2020). I hold a master's degree in special education and am pursuing an educational doctorate in high impact collaborative instruction. I have served students ranging from three to twenty years of age who qualified for special education services in two Midwestern states with a SEL component, incorporated into their Individual Education Plan (IEP), a plan or program developed to ensure that a child who has a disability identified under the law and is attending an elementary or secondary educational institution receives specialized instruction and related services (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). To qualify for services, each of my students failed to exhibit expected social-emotional behavior to the extent that academic progress was negatively impacted and a team of adults, including educators, psychologists, and parents/guardians, mandated that specialized instruction in SEL be provided at school.

Each of my students has one or more educational diagnoses, often based on a medical diagnosis. In my current role as the lead educator of an SEL program at a suburban, public middle school, some students whose cases I manage are designated as other health impaired (OHI), defined as limited alertness with respect to the educational environment due to a chronic or acute health problem (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 2004), for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), a common

neurodevelopmental disorder (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Frequently, my students are designated as emotionally disturbed (ED), based on various mental health disorders and/or phycological rating scale results (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Some have a secondary medical diagnosis of conduct disorder (CD), an ongoing pattern of aggression toward others, and serious violations of rules (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). A subset of students with CD are found to exhibit callous unemotional traits/ limited prosocial emotions (CU/LPE), such as a lack of remorse or guilt, a callous lack of empathy, unconcern about performance in important activities, and shallow affect (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). CU/LPE traits are linked to an empathy deficit (Milone et al., 2019).

During earlier years of my career, I worked exclusively with students diagnosed with autism (AU), a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). I implemented Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), a therapy based on the science of learning and behavior (autismspeaks.org, 2020), with early childhood students in an intensive behavior intervention program and worked one-on-one with elementary through high school students in a private, separate day treatment program for students with autism. An additional four years of my career was spent working in a private, separate day/residential treatment program serving middle and high school students designated as OHI and ED whose educational placement was changed from their general education public schools for behavioral reasons.

In the years that I have worked in my field, I have consistently noticed a common distinction that has allowed me to categorize most of my students with behavioral

concerns into one of two categories: those who are emotionally over reactive and those who appear emotionally callous or exhibit CU/LPE traits. In my experience, it has been students in the second category, those who exhibit CU/LPE traits, who tend to fail academically without regard, lack positive relationships with educators and peers, and are frequently suspended.

In researching CU/LPE traits, I became aware that CU/LPE are associated with a deficit in affective empathy, which is characterized by the recognition and expression of one's own emotions (Milone et al., 2019). I have taught emotional regulation strategies through a variety of evidence-based curricula, including *BrainWise* (2008), *Calm Classroom* (2015), *The Zones of Regulation* (2011), and *Why Try* (2021), as shown in Table 1, to all my students, yet began to question: must students recognize and express their emotions to regulate them, and if so, why teach emotional control strategies to students who do not recognize and express their emotions? This inquiry led to my further discovery of the complexity of empathy.

Table 1

Special Education Curricula

Material	Description
BrainWise for Grades 6 - 12	A guide to building thinking skills designed to teach students to "stop and think" based in brain research. (Barry, 2008).
Calm Classroom: Elementary and Middle School	A program that uses research-based mindfulness techniques to teach self-awareness (Luster, 2015)
The Zones of Regulation	A curriculum designed to foster self-regulation and emotional control (Kuypers, 2011).
Why Try	An online program to teach students the skills of resilience (The Why Try Organization, 2021)

I learned that in addition to affective empathy, there is another component, cognitive empathy, which is characterized by the recognition and understanding of the emotions of others (Milone et al., 2019). Although SEL curricula often emphasizes teaching cognitive empathy, research indicates that students with CU/LPE traits are proficient in this area (Milone et al., 2019). If students possess the skill to recognize and understand the emotions of others, yet do not care about others, what will cause them to care? As it turns out, feeling recognized and understood by teachers has been cited by student research participants as what inspires them to care, or in other words, to recognize and express their own emotions toward their teachers, which indicates that empathy is indeed transactional (Okonofua et al., 2016; Zaki, 2019). Given this knowledge, I decided to obtain information directly from general education teachers regarding how their mindsets of empathy impact their perceptions and expectations of students.

Situational Context: Introduction of the Study

Based on the problem of practice that educators are not being explicitly informed and trained regarding the positive impact that expressing empathy toward students has on student behavior and academic performance, the collective case study examined the impact of educator empathetic mindset on expectations of students and perceptions of student performance of middle school teachers within a large, public, middle school setting. This research specifically generated narratives, which contributed to an organizational improvement plan that will be detailed in Chapter Five, regarding how educator mindsets of empathy impacted expectations and perceptions of middle school

students following their return to in-person learning after more than a year of distance learning due to the COVID-19 virus.

The collective case study of educators took place at a midwestern 6th- 8th grade, public middle school with 791 students that returned to in-person learning following 100% virtual operation, March 2020 to April 2021 due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Most students remained virtual until August 2021, when the district stopped offering a virtual option and returned to 100% in-person instruction. Our societal empathy deficit directly impacted the organization while the collective case study was in progress, according to a public statement titled: A reflection from a resigning educator, by the school district's communication director regarding his mid-school year departure in February 2022, saying that society's post-COVID-19 "unrealistic expectations and a lack of empathy are to blame" (Kiekow, 2022).

Chapter One Conclusion

Empathy, or the recognition of one's own emotions and a concern for the feelings of others, is both a key component of a functional free society and significantly in decline (Galloway, 2020; Okonofau et al., 2016; Schumann et al., 2014; Shapiro, 2020; Zaki, 2019). The development of empathy in children is complex and appears to be guided by relationships with trusted adults (Okonofua et al., 2016). As empathy rates have decreased, societal conflicts and student suspension rates have increased, thus inspiring inquiry into empathy development (Schumann et al., 2014; Zaki et al., 2008) and educator mindsets of empathy (Okonofua et al., 2016). Chapter Two examines existing empathy literature.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Chapter One provided the national context of an empathy deficit within the United States, the personal context of teaching social emotional learning, and situational context of the problem of practice, educators within the organization not being explicitly informed and trained regarding the positive impact that expressing empathy toward students has on student behavior and academic performance (Galloway, 2020; Okonofua et al., 2016; Zaki, 2019). Chapter Two presents an overview of the theoretical framework, the extant literature reviewed to support the study of the impact of educator empathetic mindset on expectations of students and perceptions of student performance, as well as the methodological rationale.

Theoretical Frames

The chosen theoretical frames for the collective case study were social constructivism and transformative learning theory. Vygotsky, the founding father of social constructivism, believed that social interactions were integral to learning and that children learned more effectively when they had others to support them (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Social constructivism, or interpretivism, is the development of subjective meaning by understanding experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2014). These meanings are formed inductively by identifying patterns in social interactions, cultural practices, and historical events (Creswell & Poth, 2014). Research through the lens of social constructivism requires a focus on the specific context of participants' environments and researchers position themselves by identifying how their interpretations are derived from personal experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2014). The literature identified empathy as a social

interaction and the collective case study explored the experiences of educators in conjunction with their mindsets of empathy, perceptions, and expectations of students in the virtual and post-virtual learning environments, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Transformative learning theory framework goes beyond social constructivism by advocating for marginalized individuals through the recognition that knowledge is not neutral and reflects power within society (Creswell & Poth, 2014). Transformative learning theory was introduced by Mezirow and asserts that people use "their imaginations to redefine problems from a different perspective" (1997, p.10). The transformative process involves critical reflection to develop broader perspectives (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020). Transformative learning was selected as a theoretical frame because the purpose of the collective case study was to learn more about ways to improve society through social relationships between teachers and students by enhancing the mindsets of empathy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, transformative learning was selected based on the circumstances of a global pandemic, as opportunities to learn transformatively arise during times of crisis or disorientation (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020).

Educator Empathy Mindset

The context of the environment educators create in the classroom influences the mindsets and empathy skills of the students with whom they interact;
therefore, developing a malleable mindset to further advance individual empathy skills can increase collective empathy by empathizing with purpose (Schumann et al, 2014; Zaki, 2019). To guide educators to empathize with purpose in their
classroom environments, the *Making Caring Common Project* at the Harvard Graduate School of Education reviewed existing research on empathy and developed evidence-

based on-line resources for teachers (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2021; see Appendix C). As stated in Chapter One, Okonofua, a psychology professor at the University of California, Berkley, developed a training for teachers in empathetic mindsets designed to encourage teachers to value students' perspectives and sustain positive relationships while encouraging better behavior, given that research has consistently shown that empathy is interpersonal and contextual (Okonofau et al., 2016; Zaki, 2019; Zaki et al., 2008). Stanford University psychology professor and empathy researcher, Zaki, wrote regarding Okonofua's empathetic discipline program, in which suspension rates were cut in half over the course of one school year when middle school teachers received a brief intervention to encourage an empathetic mindset, that "people choose how to interpreter their environment, but we also create environments together," (2019, p.143; Okonofua et al., 2016). Based on the theory that educators and students share agency over their environment, the collective case study was designed to construct meaning negotiated socially through empathetic interactions between teachers and students in the classroom using the frame of social constructivism; and to improve society through transformative learning, because the intentional use of empathy in the classroom could lead to positive societal change (Creswell & Poth, 2014).

The Dependency of Empathy on Context

Although empathy is often perceived as an automatic response, several studies indicated it is context dependent, perhaps because empathy is a motivated phenomenon in which people are automatically driven either to experience empathy or to avoid it, based on context (Markowitz et al, 2015; Marsh, 2013, 2017; Marsh et al., 2016; Zaki, 2020). It is such common practice for individuals to choose to avoid empathy to the

extent that moral disengagement, or separation from emotion, is an indication of expertise and professionalism in fields such as medicine and journalism (Zaki, 2014, 2020).

Research at Georgetown University identified diminished activity in the amygdala, the part of the brain responsible for tying emotional meaning to memories, of youth with CU/LPE traits though the use of Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), yet also indicated context influenced the behavioral expression of CU/LEP traits and that an identical lack of empathetic concern was mimicked by people who did not possess CU/LPE traits (Marsh, 2013, 2017; Marsh et al., 2016). Youth in low-income neighborhoods may exhibit the behaviors associated with CU/LPE traits without having the traits, due to environmental context, and the context of living in high-income neighborhoods may protect youth with CU/LPE traits against engaging in high levels of delinquency, based (Markowitz et al, 2015; Marsh, 2017).

An empathetic partnership is comprised of the role of target, or receiver of empathy, and the role of observer, or provider of empathy and a study that examined the impact of the target's level of expression on the observer's level of empathy found a correlation, which suggested empathy is product of a context based interpersonal interaction (Milone et al., 2019; Zaki et al., 2008). Consistent with these finding, another study revealed that 90% of seminary students who were instructed to report immediately to deliver a presentation on empathy without stopping for any reason, failed to assist a staged person in need of medical assistance, indicating that even those who hold societal positions associated with morality are subject to contextual moral disengagement (Marsh, 2017; Zaki, 2019).

Empathy as a Skill Set

Existing literature suggests that empathy is not a trait, but a skill set that can be developed (Okonofua et al., 2016; Schumann et al., 2014; Zaki, 2020). According to the motivated model of empathy, expressing empathy is a complex process that is subject to the observer's motives and comprised of three main actions: *experience sharing*, the empathetic observer's tendency to take on the sensory, motor, visceral, and affective states encountered in a target of empathy; *mentalizing*, the observer's capacity to draw explicit inferences about target's intentions, beliefs, and emotions, which sometimes requires the observer to mentalize unfamiliar experiences; and *mind perception*, the observer's detection of the target's internal states, and a precursor to the other two components (Zaki, 2020, 2014; Zaki & Ochsner, 2012).

Observers are motivated to employ yet another actionable skill, *empathetic shift*, or feeling varying levels of empathy for individuals based on context, such as rivalry when the target is an opposing team member; shared group membership if the target is a teammate; and a host of environmental factors, including socioeconomic status, and time constraints, such as the case of the seminarians (Markowitz et al., 2015; Marsh, 2017; Zaki, 2020, 2019, 2014). Multiple studies have found that people who held a malleable mindset regarding empathy expended greater empathic effort in challenging contexts than did people who held a fixed theory, believing empathy is a dispositional trait (Schumann et al, 2014; Zaki, 2019), which additionally inspired the collective case study to examine educator mindsets of empathy through the lenses of social constructivism and transformative learning (Creswell & Poth, 2014).

In a Georgetown University study, participants' proficiency in fear recognition, when observing photographs of targets, in various emotional states, directly correlated with the level of empathetic concern expressed by observers; however, responsibility for an observer's failure to recognize fear, or any emotion, may in part rest with the target's ability to express emotion, thus making empathy and "if-then" interactive process reliant on the skills of both people (Marsh, 2017; Zaki et al., 2008). This "if-then" process could also be a factor in discrepancies between cognitive empathy, which is the observer's understanding of what the target is experiencing, and affective empathy, which is the emotional reaction the observer feels and expresses in response to the target's experience (Marsh, 2017; Milone et al., 2019; Zaki et al., 2008). The takeaway from these data that informed the collective case study was that both partners, the observer and the target, had a skill-based role in a context dependent interaction of empathy.

Empathetic Thought Processes

Over the last few decades, neuroscientists have devoted a growing amount of attention to the neural bases of human empathy (Marsh, 2017; Zaki & Ochsner, 2012). Experience sharing and mentalizing represent two paths to the same goal of understanding and responding to another person's internal states but the neural activity accompanying these two processes seemed non-overlapping, although social contexts that affected empathy also modulated activity in the same neurological systems (Zaki & Ochsner, 2012). Early cognitive neuroscience research on empathy focused on how perceivers processed isolated 'pieces' of social information but left unclear how perceivers put those pieces together when cues combined, as they do in everyday social interactions (Zaki & Ochsner, 2012). Promisingly, empathy researchers

continued capitalizing on earlier insights yet advanced to the more nuanced interactionist approach and considered how empathic subprocesses interacted based on context, the relationship of the target and observer, and individual skillsets (Markowitz et al, 2015; Marsh, 2017; Zaki & Ochsner, 2012: Zaki et al., 2008).

Research data established a relationship between empathic concern and altruism, which is an other-oriented state experienced in response to another individual's distress that promotes behaviors aimed at relieving the distress (Marsh, 2016). This link between empathy and altruism inspired Marsh to contrast altruism with psychopathy, characterized by callousness, poor behavior control, and antisocial behaviors, and develop an empathy bell curve based on the theory that most people empathetically hover in the middle between selfless-hero and psychopath on a sliding empathy spectrum (2016, 2017; Marsh et al., 2013). The hypothesis was tested by using MRI to scan the brains of altruists as well as youth with CU/LPE traits, and it was determined that amygdala activity was indeed greater than average in the altruists and lower than average in the individuals with CU/LPE traits (Marsh, 2017; Marsh et al., 2013). In another study, researchers used whole-brain functional MRI to measure neural activation in 14 adolescents with CU/ LPE traits, as well as 21 healthy controls matched on age, gender, and intelligence (Marsh et al., 2013). The results indicated amygdala dysfunction to another's pain is progressively greater as the affective component of psychopathy, or callousness, becomes more pronounced and a 2018 study concurred, indicating lower levels of affective empathy in boys diagnosed with CD/LPE (Marsh et al., 2013; Schoorl et al., 2017).

Empathy and Callus Unemotional/ Limited Prosocial Emotions Traits

Children with CU/LPE traits show deficits in emotional reactivity, the personal feeling and expression of emotion, but not in emotional understanding, the comprehension of the emotions of others (Frick, 2012; Milone et al., 2019). Most studies on conduct disorder are conducted on boys yet one study examined thirty-six adolescent women and notes a correlation is found between empathy and conduct disorder (CD) (Arango et al., 2018). Affective empathy, as in previous studies on boys, was examined and it was determined that, for girls, feelings of guilt or embarrassment when their actions impact others play a key role, as does the ability to "read" the emotions of others by facial expressions (Arango et al., 2018). A deficit of affective empathy was found in the girls with CD as compared to the control group (Arango et al., 2018). This study was consistent with others and suggested that affective empathy, or feeling and expressing one's own feelings, is a key element in social adaptation for both male and female youth who exhibit CU/LPE traits (Arango et al., 2018; Marsh et al., 2013; Schoorl et al., 2017).

Methodological Rationale

The favorable results of the study titled, "Brief intervention to encourage empathetic discipline cuts suspension rates in half among adolescents," influenced the pilot study, which was a partial replication, and the collective case study of the impact of educator empathetic mindset on expectations of students and perceptions of student performance because the intervention required minimal educator time, yet benefited student outcomes (Okonofua et al., 2016; Zaki, 2019). An empathetic mindset "prioritizes valuing and understanding students' experiences and negative feelings that give rise to

misbehavior, sustaining positive relationships with misbehaving students, and working with students within trusting relationships to improve behavior" (Okonofua et. al., 2016, p. 5221). The 2016 study indicated that providing teachers with a one-time intervention, which gave educators tips for implementing empathetic discipline in the classroom, corresponded with significantly fewer disciplinary infractions (Okonofua et al., 2016; Zaki, 2019). Additionally, the consensus among researchers that empathy is an interpersonal skill set that can be increased based on context, provided promise pertaining to the impact of educator empathetic mindsets in the classroom (Marsh, 2017; Okonofua et al., 2016; Schumann et al, 2014; Zaki, 2019).

Chapter Two Conclusion

Empathy is a complex thought process involving experience sharing, mentalizing, and perception used in contextual, interpersonal exchanges, such as interactions between teachers and students in the classroom; therefore, it is reliant on the skill sets of both people (Okonofua et al., 2016; Schumann et al, 2014; Zaki, 2020; Zaki et al., 2008). Existing scholarship indicates deficits of empathy are associated with students exhibiting CU/LPE traits and difficulty adapting behaviorally in emotionally stressful environments (Arango et al., 2018; Marsh et al., 2013; Schoorl et al., 2017). In addition, the literature indicated that empathy exists on a spectrum and is not fixed, yet increases or decreases based on context (Marsh, 2018; Zaki, 2020). Educator growth mindsets of empathy were associated with improved student skill sets of empathy, student achievement, and positive disciplinary outcomes (Okonofua et al., 2016; Schoorl et al., 2017). Chapter Three examines the methods and analysis procedures for the collective case study of the impact of educator empathetic mindset on expectations of students and perceptions of

student performance. In addition, threats to dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability are addressed in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Analysis Procedures

Chapter Two presented an overview of the theoretical framework, the existing literature reviewed to support the study of the impact of educator empathetic mindset on expectations of students and perceptions of student performance, as well as the methodological rationale. Chapter Three examines the research study design, questions, and instruments. The data collection and analysis are addressed in this chapter, as well as threats to dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

Study Design and Permissions

The qualitative collective case study was designed to explore the impact of educator mindsets of empathy on expectations and perceptions of student academics performance and behavior. IRB approval (see Appendix F) was received from Fontbonne University and informed consent was received electronically via Google Forms from case study participants (see Appendix E). Spreng, author of the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ), provided written instruction regarding permissible uses, reproduction, distribution and referencing of the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) (see Appendices A & B). In addition, for the use of How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community page belonging to the Making Caring Common Project of Harvard Graduate School of Education as scaffolding to promote reflection in the collective case study, correspondence was exchanged with Harvard researchers, including Manning, Senior Project Manager (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2021). Permission for the use and citation of resources on the Making Caring Common

Project website has been received (see Appendix C). Permission was also obtained from the participating public school district.

Study Setting, Participants and Demographics

The case study setting was a suburban, midwestern middle school where 96% of the 791 students were Black and 49% were classified as lower income (Greats Schools Nonprofit, 2021). The study took place during the 2021-2022 school year, following the return to in-person learning after providing virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were four middle school general educators, three with English Language Arts (ELA) certification and one with Spanish certification. The purposive sample of participants was selected to support the case study research design, which typically employs small sample sizes (Burkholder et al., 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018). All participants were middle school, general educators within the same organization, who provided specific insight into the case phenomenon, which was the impact of a middle school educator mindset of empathy on the academic and behavioral perceptions and expectations of middle school students following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021 (Burkholder et al. 2020).

Participants initially took the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (see Appendix A) then responded to the first journal prompt, followed by the initial interview, as shown in Table Two. After the in-person interview, participants were provided a link to the How to build empathy and strengthen your school community webpage (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2021) and asked to respond electronically to two more journal prompts, as shown in Table Two. Participants completed the second interview electronically, as well as their second Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (see Appendix A),

as shown in Table 2. The demographic data were collected from participants upon completion of the case study by Google Forms and consisted of five multiple choice questions relating to the participants' gender identity, age range, racial identity, ethnic identity, education level, content area and grade level(s) taught, as shown in Table 2 (see Appendix D).

Table 2

Collective Case Study Procedures

Protocol/ Method	Questions/Content
Toronto Empathy Questionnaire/ Electronic	See Appendix A
Journal Prompt 1/ Electronic	Prompt 1. Compare and contrast your expectations of students prior to virtual learning with your expectations during virtual learning.
First Interview/ In Person	See Appendix G
How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community (Make Caring Common Project, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University)/ Electronic	https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-educators/how-build-empathy-strengthen-school-community
Journal Prompts 2-3/ Electronic	Prompt 2. Which of the intervention strategies on the How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community webpage would you advise another teacher to use and why? Prompt 3. Explain how your *perception* of your students' academic performance has changed following virtual learning. Provide an example.
Second Interview/ Electronic	See Appendix G
Toronto Empathy Questionnaire/ Electronic	See Appendix A
Demographic Questionnaire/ Electronic	See Appendix D

Research Questions

The Impact of Educator Empathetic Mindset on Perceptions of Students and Expectations of Student Performance study included two overarching themes, as shown in Tables Three & Four. Overarching Theme A: Middle School Educator *Perceptions*, covered the first two of four research questions, as shown in Table 3. Research question one was: how does a middle school educator mindset of empathy impact *perceptions of middle school student academic performance*, following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021? Research question two was: how does a middle school educator mindset of empathy impact *perceptions of middle school student behavior,* following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021?

Overarching Theme B: Middle School Educator *Expectations*, included the final two of four research questions, as shown in Table 4. Research question three was: how does a middle school educator mindset of empathy impact *expectations of middle school student academic performance*, following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021? Research question four was: how does a middle school educator's mindset of empathy impact *expectations of middle school student behavior*, following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021?

Table 3

Overarching Theme A: Middle School Educator Perceptions

	Research Question 1. How does a middle school educator mindset of empathy impact perceptions of middle school student academic performance, following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021?	Research Question 2. How does a middle school educator mindset of empathy impact perceptions of middle school student behavior, following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021?
Journal Prompt 2 (Empathy Mindset)	Which of the intervention strategies on the How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community webpage would you advise another teacher to use and why?	Which of the intervention strategies on the How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community webpage would you advise another teacher to use and why?
Journal Prompt 3 (Academic Perception)	Explain how your *perception* of your students' academic performance has changed following virtual learning. Provide an example.	
Interview 1: Question 1 (Empathy Mindset)	In this study, an empathetic mindset prioritizes valuing and understanding students' experiences and negative feelings. Provide an example of how you prioritized these things during virtual learning.	In this study, an empathetic mindset prioritizes valuing and understanding students' experiences and negative feelings. Provide an example of how you prioritized these things during virtual learning.
Interview 1: Question 2 (Empathy Mindset)	Provide another example of how you prioritize these things now.	Provide another example of how you prioritize these things now.
Interview 1: Question 3 (Academic Perception)	Describe your current perception of your students' academic capabilities following virtual learning?	
Interview 1: Question 4 (Behavior Perception)		Describe your current perception of your students' behavior following virtual learning?

	Research Question 1. How does a middle school educator mindset of empathy impact perceptions of middle school student academic performance, following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021?	Research Question 2. How does a middle school educator mindset of empathy impact perceptions of middle school student behavior, following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021?
Interview 1: Question 7	Is there anything else you would like to add?	Is there anything else you would like to add?
Interview 2: Question 1 (Empathy Mindset)	As the first trimester comes to an end, give an example of your use of an empathetic mindset (defined as: prioritizes valuing and understanding students' experiences and negative feelings)?	As the first trimester comes to an end, give an example of your use of an empathetic mindset (defined as: prioritizes valuing and understanding students' experiences and negative feelings)?
Interview 2: Question 2 (Empathy Mindset)	How have you incorporated the resources provided on the "How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community" webpage into your classroom?	How have you incorporated the resources provided on the "How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community" webpage into your classroom?
Interview 2: Question 3 (Empathy Mindset)	What piece of empathetic mindset advice would you give to a new teacher?	What piece of empathetic mindset advice would you give to a new teacher?
Interview 2: Question 4 (Academic Perception)	Describe your current perception of your students' academic performance?	
Interview 2: Question 5 (Behavior Perception)		Describe your current perception of your students' behavior?
Interview 2: Question 8	What else would you like me to know?	What else would you like me to know?

Table 4

Overarching Theme B: Middle School Educator Expectations

	Research Question 3. How does a middle school educator mindset of empathy impact expectations of middle school student academic performance, following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021?	Research Question 4. How does a middle school educator mindset of empathy impact expectations of middle school student behavior, following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021?
Journal Prompt 1 (General Expectations)	Compare and contrast your expectations of students prior to virtual learning with your expectations during virtual learning.	Compare and contrast your expectations of students prior to virtual learning with your expectations during virtual learning.
Journal Prompt 2 (Empathy Mindset)	Which of the intervention strategies on the How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community webpage would you advise another teacher to use and why?	Which of the intervention strategies on the How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community webpage would you advise another teacher to use and why?
Interview 1: Question 1 (Empathy Mindset)	In this study, an empathetic mindset prioritizes valuing and understanding students' experiences and negative feelings. Provide an example of how you prioritized these things during virtual learning.	In this study, an empathetic mindset prioritizes valuing and understanding students' experiences and negative feelings. Provide an example of how you prioritized these things during virtual learning.
Interview 1: Question 2 (Empathy Mindset)	Provide another example of how you prioritize these things now.	Provide another example of how you prioritize these things now.
Interview 1: Question 5 (Academic Expectations)	What are your current expectations of your students' academic performance following virtual learning?	

	Research Question 3. How does a middle school educator mindset of empathy impact expectations of middle school student academic performance, following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021?	Research Question 4. How does a middle school educator mindset of empathy impact expectations of middle school student behavior, following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021?
Interview 1: Question 6 Behavior Expectations)		What are your current expectations of your students' behavior following virtual learning?
Interview 1: Question 7	Is there anything else you want to add?	Is there anything else you want to add?
Interview 2: Question 1 (Empathy Mindset)	As the second trimester comes to an end, give an example of your use of an empathetic mindset (defined as: prioritizes valuing and understanding students' experiences and negative feelings)?	As the second trimester comes to an end, give an example of your use of an empathetic mindset (defined as: prioritizes valuing and understanding students' experiences and negative feelings)?
	How have you incorporated the resources provided on the "How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community" webpage into your classroom?	How have you incorporated the resources provided on the "How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community" webpage into your classroom?
Interview 2: Question 3 (Empathy Mindset)	What piece of empathetic mindset advice would you give to a new teacher?	What piece of empathetic mindset advice would you give to a new teacher?
Interview 2: Question 6 (Academic Expectations)	What are your current expectations of your students' academic performance?	
Interview 2: Question 7 (Behavior Expectations)		What are your current expectations of your students' behavior?
Interview 2: Question 8	What else would you like me to know?	What else would you like me to know?

Instruments

The first instrument, the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ), is a brief, reliable, and valid instrument for the assessment of empathy consisting of sixteen questions, with an equal number of negatively and positively worded questions that, when answered together, represent a wide variety of empathy behaviors (Spreng et al. 2009; see Appendix A). "Item-remainder coefficients for the TEQ were sound, ensuring that all the items assess the same construct, ranging from .37 - .71, and internal consistency was good, Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$" (Spreng et al. 2009, p. 71). For the collective case study, TEQ results served as descriptive statistics for data triangulation (Burkholder et al., 2020). Participants completed the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire electronically at the beginning of the case study immediately upon providing informed consent, and again at the end of the case study, prior to providing demographic information.

How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community from the Making Caring Common Project of Harvard University Graduate School of Education website acted as scaffolding for case study participants to reflect on educator empathetic mindsets and incorporate empathy strategies in the classroom (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2021). The mission behind the development of the resource was to provide educators with strategies to build empathy among their school communities; therefore, the Making Caring Common Project team members reviewed existing research on empathy and the strategies of evidence-based programs that promote it, then identified steps to building empathy. The How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community webpage overview stated the resource was specifically designed to provide steps to build empathy in the school environment to educators of K-12 students (Harvard

Graduate School of Education, 2021; see Appendix C), and all case study participants fit the intended category of website users.

Two interview scripts, the first containing seven questions and the final interview containing eight questions, were used to conduct in-person and electronic interviews of participants, as shown in Tables Two, Three & Four. Three journal prompts were responded to by participants via email periodically at pre-determined intervals during the case study, as shown in Tables Two, Three & Four. Demographic Information was collected at the completion of the study to avoid participant subconscious self- bias and hesitancy to answer truthfully based the anxiety that one will confirm a negative stereotype about one's social group, including but not limited to gender, age, and race (Casad & Bryant, 2016).

Data Collection Procedures

In the case study, The Impact of Educator Empathetic Mindset on Perceptions of Students and Expectations of Student Performance, triangulation took place by collecting demographic information, data from two empathy rating scale submissions, two interviews and three journal entries per participant. Recruitment of participants and consent was obtained via email (see Appendix E), by completing the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ), a brief, reliable, and valid instrument for the assessment of empathy (Spreng et al. 2010). An initial journal entry was submitted electronically prior to the first interview, as shown in Table Two.

The first interview for each participant was conducted in person and recorded by iPhone Voice Memo and Google Doc speech to text. Journal instructions and access to the Making Caring Common Project resource, How to Build Empathy and Strengthen

Your School Community (Harvard School of Education, 2021; see Appendix C), were provided electronically following the initial interview. Each participant completed two additional journal entries electronically after being provided the Making Caring Common Project resources (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2021; see Appendix C). Interview Two was conducted electronically for all participants individually following the completion of three journal entries. The TEQ was answered by each participant a second time and final TEQ scores were submitted via Google Forms along with a demographic survey. Upon case study completion, each participant received a $50 Amazon Gift Card via email.

Data Analysis Procedures

The Impact of Educator Empathetic Mindset on Perceptions of Students and Expectations of Student Performance data analysis procedures included phases of describing, interpreting, drawing conclusions and determining themes through the process of integrated qualitative analysis, emerging patterns, themes, and categories were identified and compared (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Threats to Dependability, Credibility, Transferability, and Confirmability

Dependability is consistency in data collection, analysis and reporting in qualitative research (Burkholder et al., 2020). Consistency was maintained by utilizing uniform data collection, analysis, and reporting procedures with all participants. Transcripts were member-checked, and triangulation occurred by conducting and comparing multiple interviews and journal entries. Participants took the TEQ both at the beginning and the end of the study to support dependability. Credibility refers to the believability of the data presented (Burkholder et al., 2020). Prolonged engagement

(Burkholder et al., 2020) of participants over several months established credibility. Direct quotes from transcripts, provided in Chapter Four, along with cross-case comparison in conjunction with themes, addressed in Chapter Five, contributed to credibility. Transferability relates to external validity and was supported by the presentation of protocol and instruments, in addition to detailed descriptions of data collection, analysis and results (Burkholder et al., 2020). Confirmability requires that other researchers arrive at the same conclusions when examining the data (Burkholder et al., 2020). The researcher's bias based on professional relationships with participants may have presented a threat to confirmability.

Chapter Three Conclusion

Chapter Three addressed the research study design, questions, and instruments. The data collection and analysis procedures were presented in this chapter, as well as the identification of threats to dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Chapter Four will examine the case study data analysis and results.

Chapter Four: Findings

Chapter Three addressed the collective case study design, the research questions, and instruments. The qualitative data collection and analysis procedures were presented, as well as the purposive selection of teachers as participants, and threats to dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Chapter Four describes the integrated analysis of triangulated data and the reliability of the chosen qualitative measures. The collective case study findings are presented case by case in this chapter, in relation to four research questions under two overarching themes of middle school educator perceptions and middle school educator expectations.

1. Overarching Theme A: Middle School Educator Perceptions: How does a middle school educator mindset of empathy impact perceptions of *middle school student academic performance,* following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021?
2. Overarching Theme A: Middle School Educator Perceptions: How does a middle school educator mindset of empathy impact perceptions of *middle school student behavior,* following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021?
3. Overarching Theme B: Middle School Educator Expectations: How does a middle school educator mindset of empathy impact expectations of *middle school student academic performance,* following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021?
4. Overarching Theme B: Middle School Educator Expectations: How does a middle school educator mindset of empathy impact expectations of *middle school student behavior,* following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021?

Analysis Introduction

Findings were obtained through the triangulation of data collected between November 2021 to March 2022 from the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) self-rating scale, electronic opened-ended journal entries, in-person and electronic open-ended interviews, and self-reported demographic information. Experienced middle school teachers who taught prior to, during, and following a period of virtual learning corresponding to the COVID-19 pandemic were recruited electronically.

Four educators who met the inclusion criteria responded and initiated participation in the study. One educator completed one TEQ, three journal entries, and one face to face interview, but did not finish the study and was excluded from data analysis. The three educators included in data analysis, participated in the study to completion, each contributing two TEQ self-ratings, three journal entries, one in-person interview, one electronic interview, and demographic information. The instruments introduced in Chapter Three are reviewed in this chapter.

Toronto Empathy Questionnaire

Participating teachers responded to a recruitment email (see Appendix E) by clicking a link to the TEQ, answering the 16-question empathy rating scale (see Appendix A), then submitting their overall score via a Google Form. The TEQ, as outlined in Chapter Three, is a brief, reliable, and valid instrument for the assessment of empathy consisting of sixteen questions, with an equal number of negatively and positively worded questions that, when answered together, represent a wide variety of empathy behaviors (Spreng et al. 2009; See Appendix A). For the purposes of this collective case study and due to the small sample size (n=3), the TEQ results served as

descriptive statistics, obtained at two intervals from each participant to capture snapshots of educator mindsets throughout the case study, as extant literature indicates empathy is not constant but context dependent (Zaki, 2020). Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) scores are automatically calculated upon submission and range from 0 to 64, with 45 being average, which is stated at the time of scoring. The submission of each participant's first TEQ score via Google Form initiated case study participation, as stated in the informed consent email (see Appendix E).

Journal Prompts

Open-ended prompts were provided during the case study to guide the reflective process. Following the initial Google Form submission, the first journal prompt, please *compare your expectations of students prior to virtual learning with your expectations during virtual learning,* was provided to participants. A choice of email or voicemail responses to journal prompts was given and all participants chose to provide written electronic responses to journal prompts. During the collective case study, each participant submitted electronic responses for two more journal prompts. The second prompt was, W*hich of the intervention strategies on the How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community webpage would you advise another teacher to use and why?* The final prompt was, E*xplain how your perception of your students' academic performance has changed following virtual learning (*see Appendix C). *Provide an example.*

Interviews

Upon the receipt of the first journal entry, participants were provided an option of conducting the first interview in-person or in a synchronous electronic environment. All participants selected in-person initial interviews. Two participants requested to conduct

the in-person interviews in their own professional workspaces/ classrooms and one asked to be interviewed in the researcher's professional workspace/ classroom. During the in-person interview, which was recorded simultaneously using Voice Memo on a password protected iPhone and text to speech in Google Docs on a password protected laptop, the researcher followed a script containing 7 open-ended questions:

At the beginning of this school year the entire student body returned to in-person learning after an extended period of virtual learning…

1. In this study, an empathetic mindset prioritizes valuing and understanding students' experiences and negative feelings. Provide an example of how you prioritized these things during virtual learning.
2. Provide another example of how you prioritize these things now.
3. Describe your current perception of your students' academic capabilities following virtual learning?
4. Describe your current perception of your students' behavior following virtual learning?
5. What are your current expectations of your students' academic performance following virtual learning?
6. What are your current expectations of your students' behavior following virtual learning?
7. Is there anything else you want to add?

The second interviews were conducted using an asynchronous electronic format and asked these 8 questions:

1. As the first trimester comes to an end, give an example of your use of an empathetic mindset (defined as: prioritizes valuing and understanding students' experiences and negative feelings)?
2. How have you incorporated the resources provided on the "How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community" webpage into your classroom?
3. What piece of empathetic mindset advice would you give to a new teacher?
4. Describe your current perception of your students' academic performance?
5. Describe your current perception of your students' behavior?
6. What are your current expectations of your students' academic performance?
7. What are your current expectations of your students' behavior?
8. What else would you like me to know?

How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community

After the initial face-to-face interviews, a link to the webpage How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community (Making Caring Common Project, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University) was provided to participants as scaffolding to support the educator empathetic mindset reflection process. The Making Caring Common Project is a resource for K-12 educators that offers strategies of evidence-based programs that promote empathy and identified five steps to building it in the educational environment (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2021; see Appendix C).

Sample Demographics

As the final submission of the study, participants completed a multiple-choice demographic questionnaire by Google Form. Demographics were collected at the end of the collective case study as a strategy to limit stereotype threat, the hesitancy to answer truthfully based the anxiety that one will confirm a negative stereotype about one's social group, including but not limited to gender, age, and race (Casad & Bryant, 2016). Participants provided gender identity, age range, racial identity, education level, content area and teaching grade level(s). All participants (n=3) identified themselves as female, two age 40-49 and one age 50-59. At the time of the collective case study, the participants taught in the same suburban, public middle school serving 791 6^{th}-8^{th} grade students, 96% of whom were Black, and 49% of whom were classified as lower income (Greats Schools Nonprofit, 2021).

The first teacher identified herself as *bi-racial or multi-racial*, the second identified herself as *white* and *Hispanic*, and the third identified herself as *white*. Two participants reported their highest level of education completed as *MA or MS* (master's degree) and the third selected *BA or BS* (bachelor's degree). At the time of the case study, one participant taught 6^{th} grade English Language Arts (ELA), one taught 8^{th} grade ELA, and one taught 6^{th} through 8^{th} grade Spanish.

Reliability of Qualitative Measures

A case study involves a real-life, contemporary context bounded by place and time (Burkholder et al., 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018). In order to draw generalized conclusions and show different perspectives, the inquirer utilized a collective case study design, selecting three practicing middle school educators, teaching in-person at the same

suburban middle school, from November 2021 to March 2022, following a period of virtual learning, defined as interactive online learning, that took place form March 2020 to April 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Missouri Course Access and Virtual School Program, 2021) The impact of educator mindsets of empathy on perceptions and expectations of student academic performance and behavior was selected for study across the three representative comparison cases and procedures were replicated for each case (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Qualitative Data Analysis

Four themes were identified by means of line-by-line, categorical aggregation aided by NVivo software, cross-case analysis and comparisons, and consultation with a dissertation committee auditor (Burkholder et al., 2020). The themes of *1. empathetic mindsets, 2. perceptions and expectations of student academic performance,* and *3. perceptions and expectations of student behavior,* were deductively constructed in conjunction with the research questions as guiding points to capture comparable features of educators' individual teaching practices. An additional theme of *4. environment* was constructed inductively from open, line-by-line, qualitative analysis of informants' stories, under which patterns of *a. home environment, b. school environment,* and *c. virtual environment* emerged.

Findings/ Individual Case Presentations

In this chapter, the unique story of each educator informant is told separately by presenting cases in individual participation chronological order.

Marie

Marie began study participation in November 2021 and identified herself as a bi-racial/multi-racial woman in her forties with a bachelor's degree. At the time of the collective case study, Marie taught 6th grade English Language Arts (ELA).

First Empathy Questionnaire. Her initial TEQ score was 57 out of 64, which placed her 12 points above the normed average empathy score of 45 (Spreng et al., 2009).

First Journal Response. When responding to the initial journal prompt, *Please compare your expectations of students prior to virtual learning with your expectations during virtual learning,* her responses were strictly procedural, such as "sit in assigned seat" in person and "add your name daily to the chat for attendance" during virtual learning.

Interview One. In the initial face-to-face interview, upon being provided a definition of empathetic mindset as *prioritizes valuing and understanding students' experiences and negative feelings,* then being asked to provide an example of how she did this during virtual learning, her responses shifted from general and procedural to specific and personal:

> I did have a student last year during virtual that tried to commit suicide and it was because she had negative feelings about herself. She didn't think she was pretty. She didn't think she was smart... we were at home and not being around other kids and not being social.

Marie went on to describe how during virtual learning she encouraged "mindfulness" yet did not go "too deep" into asking students to write about negative feelings because she was not able to be with them. She explained:

> I'm not at the point of me being able to be face-to-face with the kid and know why they're not feeling, why they were not thinking positive thoughts... with it being on the computer, with us being virtual and me not being able to see always kids' body language, or get like eye contact and things like that, it will be kind of hard to gauge whether or not they're having healthy thoughts. So I would not go too deeply into the mindset...

When asked how she prioritizes understanding students' experiences and negative feelings in- person, Marie raved about school-wide Social Emotional Learning (SEL) lessons that "encourage mindfulness and having a growth mindset," for which she has the flexibility to teach in a variety of ways, such as whole-group, small-group, or during a private conference with a student. In describing her perception of students' academic performance post-virtual, she responded positively:

> So, I have actually high expectations of them to complete a lot of work online because they've been exposed to it since the time...I teach 6th grade... they've been exposed to it probably since 4th grade and have extremely high potential for them to complete a lot of their assignments and work and activities and learning on new technology.

Marie, in her first year with the organization, noted that she taught in a "lower economic" school district prior to and during virtual learning, so it was difficult to compare her perceptions of her current students' academic performance to her previous students; however, her current students demonstrated active engaged:

> I have a lot more kids that are willing to wait to share their thoughts. They want to contribute to the to the discussions... With your family, different things are

> going on online, so now in school, in person, I feel like a lot of kids want to have their voices heard. A lot of them are a lot more patient, a lot of them do want their thoughts and ideas to be validated and, if need be, I take the time to do so. I encourage them to constantly share out thoughts so that they can, you know, build on their thinking.

At the conclusion of the first interview, Marie was asked to express any additional thoughts. She expresses dismay at schools returning to traditional methods of instruction and not being more innovative with technology in the classroom. In addition, Marie expected more emphasis on the social emotional impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic:

> I would have thought with all of the death that has gone on recently that there would be more support for families and friends. More time being taken out to have kids talk with people if they're having issues with death, or worrying about catching coronavirus, or anxiety or anything like that. I would, I would have thought at this point within the school systems, as hard as they push for kids to return to school, as hard as they push for adults to come back to school, that they would have done more to support and to encourage kids to be healthy.

Second Journal Response. In response to Journal Prompt 2, Marie identified How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community strategy *4. Set Clear Ethical Expectations,* as the one she would most recommend to new teachers (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2021). “The more the teacher is able to support ‘good decision making’ the more students will trust the teacher with dealing with difficult situations,” she said.

Third Journal Response. Journal Prompt 3 asks the teachers to describe their perceptions of changes in student academic behavior post-virtual learning and Marie optimistically replied, “I think my students appreciate education more now than ever. Many of them are more than willing to try anything new versus before many were afraid to take chances and be wrong.”

Interview Two. For her final interview, Marie described her classroom as a place where she continuously practices sharing her feelings about things that make her uncomfortable and talks to students about her own problem-solving thought process. As an example of her application of an empathetic mindset in her classroom, Marie tells the story of a student who struggles socially:

> I have a student who lives with his great aunt. He is not sure of where his mother, father, or grandparents are, nor why he is not with any of them, and he has expressed this during class discussions in the past. He is sort of an awkward student compared to his peers. His haircuts are old fashioned, he does not wear brand shoes, and he proudly admits he plays with Legos and other toys. He is very studious and always completes his work. He often makes comments to other students that make some feel uncomfortable or that make others react negatively. I have made it perfectly clear to his peers/classmates that his opinion matters and is valid in our class discussion as well as in their small group conversations. He often shares with me his feelings of not being liked by others and how he wishes others would just accept him for who he is. Lately, he has struggled with getting along with others on the bus on the way to school but each morning when he enters my room for Academic Excellence, he says things like "Finally I am here

> where I can be myself" or "My favorite class/teacher, how are you today, Ms. Marie?" and these comments just let me know that something I am doing allows him to be himself and that he is accepted and an equal like the rest of the students in my eyes.

When asked to provide concluding thoughts at the end of her final interview, Marie added:

> I have a special place (compassion) in my heart for students who do not have a mother. A mother's love is kind, patient, and everlasting. Students without mothers have to go through life without a "shield" to protect them or build them back up when the world is harsh. These students need special exceptions.

Second Empathy Questionnaire. Marie completed the case study in March 2022, and her final TEQ score was 53, still above the normed average of 45 (Spreng et al., 2009).

Anne

Anne began participation in the collective case study in November 2021 and identified herself as a white, Hispanic woman in her fifties with a master's degree teaching Spanish to 6^{th}-8^{th} graders.

First Empathy Questionnaire. Anne's initial TEQ score was 58, 13 points above the normed average TEQ empathy score (Spreng et al., 2009).

First Journal Response. When asked to compare her expectations prior to and during virtual learning, Ann replied:

> My expectations were higher prior to virtual learning. When we started virtual learning, I saw that parents often weren't providing an optimal learning

> environment at home or prioritizing their children getting their schoolwork done, so my expectations decreased.

Interview One. Anne explained how she prioritized understanding students' experiences and negative feelings during virtual learning:

> ... it was some of the strongest empathy. I felt like I was growing or like what prioritized to me was what was going on for them by watching some of the interactions I saw behind the scenes and that came into play for me.

She described a defining moment for her was virtually witnessing a failing student's mother using harsh language with her son in their home:

> It made me think a lot about all of my students and what's going on at home now that they're home all day instead of being in school and is it better or worse for them being home, watching how this mom talked to her kid.

Anne went on to say that was the moment she stopped taking grades at face value and started trying to figure out what else might be going on in the lives of her students. When in-person school resumed, Anne carried this philosophy into the classroom:

> Whether it's about success or about behavior in class, if something seems to be going wrong or like the grades are dropping or their behavior is dropping, however we want to call it, the first thought I have is what's going on for you at home? As opposed to why are you acting this way or just why are you, why can't you behave? I think instead, what's going on for this kid at home maybe, or what's going on with this child outside of my classroom? I know there's a lot more history going on behind the scenes for my students.

According to Anne, not only did she change her attitude during virtual learning, but her students also changed. She explained:

> I'm concerned because I feel like they're capable of less than before we went virtual... their level of frustration is like, like the zero tolerance for frustration. If they don't get something right away, they want to drop it. They don't have any kind of stick with it.

When asked about her perception of her current students' behavior, Anne replied:

> It takes a lot to calm the kids down and not just fly off the handle and, and I think that all has to do with maturity. Really, it's like, it's like they've been stuck in a time capsule, and nobody has helped them figure out how to deal with stuff. It's just been like in their own bubbles, or something, and now they're here and it's like they haven't been around anybody, and their maturity is gone.

When prompted to describe her expectations of academic performance, Anne said she had expected students to be more excited to be together and that willingness to participate impacts academic achievement. She reiterated her students' lack of excitement a few times and says:

> I think a lot of kids are like more jaded about the knowledge and they feel like 'why do I need to bother doing this?' I think they feel like they got along just fine for the last year-and-a-half, and they got to do what they felt like doing at home.

Realizing she had not identified her expectations of academic performance post-virtual learning; Anne shifted the conversation to behavior:

> Okay let's try again. My expectations of behaviors are a lot more on target because I knew they'd be out of practice with how to behave in the classroom, but

> even so, I think I also didn't realize the extent of being able to be in the classroom environment. Or being in the group environment, like in the hallway or being in the cafeteria. So behaviors are actually, they are worse than I would have expected them to be and I think right now it's throwing me so much...

Anne pointed out that she knows the behavior guidelines, she posts them on her wall and restates them, yet finds it "confounding" that at the time of this December 2021 interview, behavior has not improved.

When asked at the end of her first interview what additional thoughts she would like to share, Anne noted that as she works on empathy, relationships with students are improving. She admits she does not know if it is a direct correlation, "they're so many factors that can go into those relationships that I've developed with these students, but I do feel like I'm better at asking what's going on."

Second Journal Response. In response to journal prompt 2, *Which of the intervention strategies on the How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community webpage would you advise another teacher to use and why?* Anne said she would encourage other teachers to model, practice, and teach empathy across all content areas and lessons. The webpage reminded her to do this not only during lessons designated for social emotional learning. She stated it is important to know, as the teacher, that "not all inappropriate behavior or body language is not about me." When Anne notices something different about a student she asks what she can do and often what can be done is to provide the student with time and space. Providing it presents an opportunity to model, practice, and teach empathy to class, so it is not time lost.

Third Journal Response. In response to journal prompt 3, *Explain how your perception of your students' academic performance has changed following virtual learning,* Anne said:

> After virtual learning, some of my expectations for performance decreased simply because I noticed that some parents were not very mindful of their students' needs during the school day, and that even the environment they had was not really optimal for learning. Seeing that students have such a variety of home lives, and not always in a good way, opened my eyes...

As an example, Anne explained:

> When we first started teaching virtually, I was thinking students should have plenty of time to do their work, and we could just count on them to get it done. Then as virtual education continued, I realized that really less and less students were getting their work done, when in theory, they should have been in a quiet, contained, non-distracting environment... Then I saw students who sat all day in the dark in their basement bedrooms, or up on a shelf space in a closet, or outside while others around them played in the grass and did cartwheels. The list goes on. The number of distractions that students have now including phones, and gaming systems are really out of control and no wonder that students could not get much work done for us. As the students have returned to school in person, they are still incredibly tied to their cellphones, like they will have a part die if the phone is taken away. Other students can't stop gaming on the Chromebooks, no matter how many times I check on all of the students and get them re-directed. My empathy has really grown as a teacher such that when I am annoyed at students for not

> having work done, I don't immediately jump on them, but instead ask in a more measured way what is going on and can I help them.

Interview Two. Upon completion of her final interview electronically in March 2022, Anne indicated that students:

> ...are starting to settle down and maybe behave better in the classroom for me. As a whole, however, and when the students are in a group setting like in the cafeteria or between classes, it seems that students are really over the top a lot of the time and quickly get caught up in excitement or fights.

Anne described her current academic expectations, "I try to have strong or high expectations for my students, but I am aware that the work that students are willing to do has decreased..." When it comes to current behavior expectations, Anne said:

> I still expect students to behave appropriately in class and follow the school guidelines. One thing that has changed for me over the last 2 years has been that I try to check on the student's situation if he/she misbehaves or there are constant problems with a particular student. I ask students if they are alright or if there is anything I can do for them before I ask about why their head is down or why they appear out of sorts.

Second Empathy Questionnaire. Anne's final TEQ score is 49, which is 9 points below her previous November 2021 score, yet still 4 points above the normed average of 45 (Spreng et al., 2009).

Lily

Lily described herself as a white woman in her forties with a master's degree, teaching 8th grade ELA.

First Empathy Questionnaire. Upon beginning study participation in December 2021, her initial TEQ score was 49, which is 4 points above average (Spreng et al., 2009).

First Journal Response.

Lily continued, "I responded by slowing down, modeling by sharing my screen and working with the students on the assignments in the new learning platform and offering guided instruction with writing organizers and scaffolds." Lily's first journal entry explained that within a week of virtual learning, it was clear her students could not meet her prior expectations. "...I was stressing the students out and they were not able to work at the pace that I had planned. They did not have the skills coming into the year that I expected them to have." She also eliminated homework and incorporated a "joke of the day" in her daily presentations to "draw students in and give them a fun routine." Although Lily's expectations were higher prior to virtual learning, she added:

> As is the case for any learning year, students that put in the most effort gained the most in achievement, and those that did not made little improvement. I did not see regression, and I count it a success that students were able to maintain achievement levels.

Interview One. In reference to her expectations of students during virtual learning, Lily said during her first interview, "I also had to kind of readjust some of my expectations of them and they had to readjust some of their expectations of me." Upon returning to in-person learning, Lily kept in mind that:

> It was pretty clear that a lot of students were not fully attending their classes when they were virtual and so they missed out on a lot of learning, and they missed out

> on a lot of social opportunities that even virtual would have given them had they been attending.

She said that since returning in-person:

> They have demonstrated kind of stagnation of social skills and so using some social emotional learning, including some of those kind of things in our lessons throughout the day, has been kind of crucial to helping them develop and get onto back on track of progress as far as their social interactions with each other.

As for Lily's perception of her students' academics post-virtual learning, she explained:

> I feel as if academically that students didn't really go backwards but they didn't make much progress over that virtual year, so I had the opportunity to pick them up... nobody goes backwards in their reading skills, really. They just were not using them so as we kind of warmed up and started to use them they were able to pick up and make progress again.

She went on to say:

> I'm expecting them to be able to work at grade level. At the beginning of the year maybe those expectations were a little bit lower but then, as they've gotten some instruction, I'm expecting them to be able to progress about as much as the 8th graders that were virtual were progressing; do the same. Where their skills seem to lack is in getting along with each other and solving conflict in appropriate ways and so we're really having to teach, reteach, and use every opportunity where they're not using peaceable manners to solve conflict as a way to teach solving conflict with appropriate measures, and it's been a struggle all year.

When asked her behavior expectations post-virtual learning, Lily stressed that they are the same as any "normal" year. She pointed out that the school district's behavior guide did not change because of the pandemic. She said students are expected to "solve problems with words and in other ways that are not physical and learn how to ignore some things. Learning that not everything requires a response for every individual and so all of those expectations are still on them."

When asked what she would like to add to her first interview responses, she again stressed that she does not believe in falling behind. According to Lily, students who made an effort during virtual learning experienced growth like any other school year and those who did not make an effort remained stagnant. The difference was a lower number of students were putting forth effort, yet she does not fault them for that:

> They could have not been able to make it right because I had students that were, if they had their camera on, there were kids jumping on them and they were, you know, interrupted to go change diapers and all kinds of things that would happen to interrupt them from their learning environment during virtual learning. So, I am empathetic with that but also know that it prevented them from attending fully, right? ...so I don't think that they really went behind or fell behind. I think that they just need some support to get on track now.

Second Journal Response. In response to Journal Prompt 2, *which of the intervention strategies on the How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community webpage would you advise another teacher to use and why,* Lily said all five strategies, but most importantly setting clear expectations (see Appendix C). "Giving students a clear expectation is always a good idea and providing ways for students to

practice being empathetic on fictional narratives when the stakes are low will help students use empathy in daily interactions."

Third Journal Response. She answered Journal Prompt 3, *explain how your perception of your students' academic performance has changed following virtual learning,* by saying she no longer measures growth by "high stakes" state grade level exams, but pays attention to her students' ability to process and synthesize information. "In other words," Lily said, "I am not interested in what the student can memorize and parrot back, but more focused on what a student can do with information to make it their own."

Interview Two. In her final interview in March 2022, Lily gave an example of how she prioritizes valuing and understanding students' experiences and negative feelings. When students complain about having to take end of term exams, Lily validates their feelings by offering breaks and saying, "I know, I wish I didn't have to give so many tests either." She said she sets clear guidelines about the use of verbal put-downs in her classroom, "My standard response is 'that word needs to leave your vocabulary' for words like gay, fruity, or the n-word.'" As an ELA teacher, she ensures that she provides frequent opportunities for students to put themselves in the shoes of the characters they read about in books and stories. When asked what empathetic mindset advice she would give a new teacher, Lily said, "The time spent on encouraging empathy is not wasted. It allows learning to happen at a much more rapid pace later so you will gain time, not lose."

Upon being asked to revisit her perceptions of both academics and behavior three months after her initial responses in December, Lily was positive, "My students are

growing in confidence and in ability. Some still have far to go, but many will be ready to go on and be successful in high school next year." She described her behavioral perceptions as follows:

> Students' behaviors have become more relaxed as routines have been put in place and expectations are clear. There are occasional outliers, but even when serious incidents have happened in class such as a student bringing a weapon or a student having a urinary accident in the classroom, it has been met with empathy and reassurance that the adults will take care of the issue. That comes with trust that we have developed all year.

By March 2022, Lily's expectations were that students "can and will" overcome academic obstacles, and behaviorally that students "choose kindness over all other choices, always. They may have a good reason for not following every rule, but there is no excuse for being unkind." Her parting words upon her completion of the collective case study were, "kids don't learn from people they don't like, and they think don't like them Showing empathy helps kids know you like them and like you back."

Second Empathy Questionnaire. Lily's final TEQ score was 54, which is 5 points higher than her December score and 9 points above average (Spreng et al., 2009).

Chapter Four Conclusion

Chapter Four presented qualitative data analysis procedures, introduced themes, addressed the reliability of qualitative measures, and shared findings that told the stories of educator participants, case by case. Chapter Five will offer a naturalistic, generalized, cross-case interpretation of what was learned from the collective case study regarding the

impact of educator empathetic mindset on perceptions and expectations of student academic performance and behavior (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A relationship to extant literature and theoretical frameworks will be examined, along with study limitations, and implications for practice. Finally, based on general interpretations of the collective case study findings, Organizational Improvement Plan suggestions will be presented.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Chapter Four presented qualitative data analysis procedures, introduced themes, addressed the reliability of qualitative measures, and shared the findings of the collective case study, case by case. Chapter Five will provide a study overview, a comparison of collective case study findings and examine the relationship to extant literature and theoretical frameworks. Study limitations will be addressed, implications for practice will be considered, and an organizational improvement plan will be presented.

Study Overview

The qualitative collective case study was designed to explore the impact of educator mindsets of empathy on expectations and perceptions of student academics performance and behavior. The three participants were middle school general educators within a suburban public school district, who provided specific insight into the case phenomenon (Burkholder et al. 2020), which was the impact of a middle school educator mindset of empathy on the academic and behavioral perceptions and expectations of middle school students following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021. Findings have been obtained through the triangulation of data collected between November 2021 to March 2022 from the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) self-rating scale, electronic opened-ended journal entries, in-person and electronic open-ended interviews, and self-reported demographic information.

Study Findings

Individual case study findings were presented on behalf of each participant in Chapter Four. Through an abductive approach, the integration of deductive and inductive reasoning was applied to data analysis (Burkholder et al. 2020) to identify and compare

the meaning of data in conjunction with existing themes and emerging patterns. These cross-case interpretations will be presented in this chapter along with this study's research questions to generate an understanding of the impact of empathetic mindsets in real-life classrooms (Burkholder et al. 2020).

Themes and Research Questions

Data were aligned with four themes through an abductive analysis approach (Burkholder et al. 2020), aided by NVivo software. Case by case, line by line analysis was used to deductively assign data obtained in the collective case study to three themes predetermined by the research questions. In addition, to be open to the nuances of school closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Jones et al. 2021), case by case, line by line analysis was also used to inductively construct a fourth theme.

The first two research questions were developed to examine *overarching Theme A: educator perceptions*:

1. How does a middle school educator mindset of empathy impact *perceptions* of middle school student academic performance, following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021?

2. How does a middle school educator mindset of empathy impact *perceptions of* middle school student behavior, following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021?

The final two research questions were developed to explore *overarching Theme B: educator expectations*:

3. How does a middle school educator mindset of empathy impact *expectations* of middle school student academic performance, following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021?

4.. How does a middle school educator mindset of empathy impact *expectations* of middle school student behavior, following virtual learning from March 2020 to April 2021?

The third pre-existing theme derived from existing research, *educator mindset of empathy* (Okonofua et al., 2016), aligned with each of the four research questions. The fourth theme, *environment*, was inductively constructed and divided into three sub-categories, including *home*, *virtual*, and *school*.

Cross-Case Comparisons

Educator Perceptions of Middle School Student Academic Performance.

Select responses of each participant were contrasted in conjunction with each theme. In describing her perceptions of student academic performance following virtual learning, Marie took a positive stance, believing that her students were "capable of doing a lot online due to them being virtual."

Anne said, "it's not that anybody is less intelligent, it's just that they don't care," but also noted that "if you have a kid that buys into what you're teaching and they are excited about it, they are a lot more likely to try, and do well, and apply, and try again. "

Lily stressed throughout the study that her students did not regress during the pandemic, "I feel as if academically that students didn't really go backwards but they didn't make much progress over that virtual year, so I had the opportunity to pick them

up." Regarding her perception of student academic performance, she considered her expectations as part of the equation:

> My perception of students' academic performance has changed following virtual learning in that I am less focused on growth as measured by specific tests (especially high-stakes yearly assessments) and more focused on growth of skills in processing information and synthesizing information with the student's thoughts.

Educator Perceptions of Middle School Student Behavior. Yet again, Marie described a positive point of view, this time in reference to student behavior, "I feel like a lot of kids want to have their voices heard. A lot of them are a lot more patient, a lot of them do want their thoughts and ideas to be validated."

Anne said students are now "two years behind in behavior easily, or a year and a half." Her perception was that her middle school students "... have no patience to talk anything out..." Anne indicated that behavior post-virtual learning was worse than she expected and questioned, "Why are they still not fitting some of the behavior expectations that we would want them to do in general?"

Although participants did not have access to each other's responses, Lily's pragmatic responses regarding her perception of student behavior seemingly addressed Anne's why question regarding behavior:

> So, it was pretty clear that a lot of students were not fully attending their classes when they were virtual and so they missed out on a lot of learning, and they missed out on a lot of social opportunities that even virtual would have given them had they been attending. Where their skills seem to lack is in getting along

> with each other and solving conflict and appropriate ways and so we're really having to teach, reteach and use every opportunity where they're not using peaceable manners to resolve self-conflict in a way to teach solving conflict with appropriate measures and it's been a struggle all year.

Educator Expectations of Middle School Student Academic Performance. Marie, once again, emphasized the novel benefits of virtual learning that emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, “So I have actually high expectations of them to complete a lot of work online because they've been exposed to it.” She said she maintained her expectation that her students would do their best academically under all circumstances and added, “I also expect them to be honest with me about things they do not understand or have misconceptions about.”

Anne admitted her academic expectations of students were higher prior to virtual learning and attributed that to her virtual vantage point, “When we started virtual learning, I saw that parents often weren’t providing an optimal learning environment at home or prioritizing their children getting their schoolwork done, so my expectations decreased.”

Lily expressed that, due to school closure for the COVID-19 pandemic, “I also had to kind of readjust some of my expectations of them and they had to readjust some of their expectations of me.” As with her perceptions, she indicated that her academic expectations were student centered, rather than assessment centered, “I will sometimes disregard benchmark assessments to focus on the end goal, which is a student that can communicate effectively in many ways about many topics.” Overall, Lily indicated that her academic expectations remained flexible yet high, “Many of my students have

academic delays and despite those obstacles, they can perform and will learn as much as those students that do not have those obstacles. They have already demonstrated that they can, and I insist that they will."

Educator Expectations of Middle School Student Behavior. "I see my students' behaviors as reflections of my expectations of them," Marie had said of her perceptions of student behavior. In describing those expectations, she explained, "I expect all of my students to treat each other with respect, as they would want to be treated and know that everyone deserves 2nd chances."

Of her behavior expectations post-virtual learning, Anne said in December 2021, "My expectations were that they'd be a lot more excited to be back to be around people." In comparison to her academic expectations, Anne stated:

> My expectations of behavior are a lot more on target because I knew they'd be out of practice with how to behave in the classroom, but even so, I think I also didn't realize the extent of being able to be in the classroom environment.

By March 2022, Anne pondered, "I would have understood more the problems at the beginning, but what I can't understand, or what I'm having a hard time with as far as their behaviors goes is why they're still so bad in so many ways." She went on to say, "we all restate our expectations, but it's just not sticking..."

Lily admitted there was an initial learning curve to setting behavior expectations virtually, but acknowledged the reciprocal nature of it, "I also had to kind of readjust some of my expectations of them and they had to readjust some of their expectations of me." Upon returning to school in-person, Lily said her behavior expectations returned to the same as they had been prior to virtual learning, "my expectations of them have to still

be what they should be doing on any normal year pandemic or no because of safety reasons...” She went on to explain:

> The expectations of behavior are still the same and the district has not lowered their expectations of behavior either. Their behavior guide did not change or were not, was not different because of the pandemic. It continued the same from before, after.

Mindsets of Empathy. Marie said she did “not go deeply into the mindset” of empathy virtually because it was difficult for her to gauge if students were having healthy thoughts:

> I'm not at the point of me being able to be face-to-face with the kid and know why they're not feeling, why they were not thinking positive thoughts about the stuff. I was trying to encourage them to explain, you know, how they could turn their negative thoughts about themselves positive...

In describing her mindset of empathy in the physical classroom, Marie said, “assume that all students have someone at home that loves them, wants the best for them, and expects them to do well in school. If they don't then you, the teacher, should.”

Anne expressed that virtual learning strengthened her mindset of empathy:

> ... it was some of the strongest empathy I felt like I was growing, or like what prioritized to me was what was going on for them by watching some of the interactions I saw behind the scenes, and that came into play for me.

She went on to elaborate, “I feel like it really made me think a lot more about the whole child instead of just how they behave in class.”

Lily indicated that her empathetic mindset kicked in immediately during virtual learning, "within the first week, it was clear that I was stressing the students out..." She explained that she adjusted academic expectations, yet felt the need to balance empathy with pragmatism regarding the circumstances of the COVID-19 Pandemic during virtual learning, "so I am empathetic with that but also know that it prevented them from attending fully, right?"

She explained that she strategically incorporated empathy into her English Language Arts (ELA) lesson plans, "giving students a clear expectation is always a good idea and providing ways for students to practice being empathetic on fictional narratives when the stakes are low will help students use empathy in daily interactions." In addition, Lily stressed that she wanted new teachers to know, "the time spent on encouraging empathy is not wasted. It allows learning to happen at a much more rapid pace later so you will gain time, not lose."

Environment. A fourth theme constructed inductively during cross-case comparisons was *Environment*. Each participant referenced environmental differences as factors that impacted their perceptions and expectations of academics and behavior, and their mindsets of empathy. The three categories of environments that emerged were *home, virtual*, and *school*.

Home. Although virtual learning was synchronous, teachers and students were in individual physical environments simultaneously during school and each educator mentioned the conflicting environments. "With your family, different things are going on...," Marie pointed out during her initial interview.

“Seeing that students have such a variety of home lives, and not always in a good way, opened my eyes to the difference in family "buy in" to their students' education,” Anne explained.

Lily described her students' home lives:

> ...I had students that were, if they had their camera on, there were kids jumping on them and they were, you know, interrupted to go change diapers and all kinds of things that would happen to interrupt them from their, from their learning environment during virtual learning.

Virtual. While teachers lacked control of students’ physical environments; they were able to set the tone in the virtual environment. Marie pointed out that in her virtual classroom, she exercised restraint when activating her empathetic mindset. “I would try to be cautious over going too deep into if a kid is having negative feelings and why they're having those negative feelings because I wasn't there with them,” she said.

Marie described her virtual teaching mindset, “So I tried to be a lot more verbal with the kids, I guess, instead of just assuming or just watching or taking everything at face value.”

Lily allowed time for students to express their feelings in her virtual classroom environment, “So understanding students’ experiences and negative feelings, there were, there were difficulties in frustrations that we would acknowledge in our virtual setting, so students were free to bring that up.” She said she did not sugarcoat the downfalls of virtual learning and, “...would acknowledge that sometimes this wasn't maybe the best way to learn...”

School. During the collective case study, each participant referenced the school environment following the return to in person learning as a relevant factor. “You would think they would have more counselors in the building to kind of have conversations with kids, with a lot of families having been broken up by COVID,” observed Marie in November 2021. She also pointed out that the school environment continued to be disrupted by COVID protocols:

> Wearing masks, not having the freedom to sit with their friends regularly on the bus or in the cafe, not being able to put things away in lockers, being told to walk only on certain sides of the hallways.

In December 2021, Anne said her students struggled to reintegrate into the physical classroom, “The students are also distracted by their classmates who in many cases have forgotten how to behave in a physical classroom.” She referenced student resistance to giving up freedoms they gained while attending school virtually, “as the students have returned to school in person, they are still incredibly tied to their cellphones, like they will have a part die if the phone is taken away.”

Lily indicated that, upon returning to the in person learning environment, conflict resolution was more of a struggle for students than it had been prior to school closure for COVID-19; however, in March 2022, she stated that, “students' behaviors have become more relaxed as routines have been put in place and expectations are clear.”

Relationship to Extant Literature

Existing literature suggests that empathy is not a trait, but a skill set that can be developed (Okonofua et al., 2016; Schumann et al, 2014; Zaki, 2020). Throughout the collective case study, Anne described her empathetic transformation, “...it was some of

the strongest empathy. I felt like I was growing...” Multiple studies found that a malleable mindset regarding empathy, the belief that empathy can be developed, was associated with enhanced empathic effort in challenging contexts, while the belief that empathy is a dispositional trait was linked to lower empathetic effort (Schumann et al, 2014; Zaki, 2019). Anne revealed her empathetic mindset as malleable.

Yet another actionable skill, empathetic shift, or feeling varying levels of empathy for individuals based on context, such as environmental factors (Markowitz et al, 2015; Zaki, 2020, 2019, 2014), was demonstrated by Marie when she described how she chose “not go deeply into the mindset” of empathy virtually because it was difficult for her to gauge if students were having healthy thoughts. Marie’s recognition of this indicated that she understood that empathy is a motivated phenomenon in which people are driven either to experience it or to avoid it, based on context (Zaki, 2020).

Empathy is a partnership, a product of interpersonal interaction, comprised of two roles: the role of target, or receiver of empathy, and the role of observer, or provider of empathy (Zaki et al., 2008). Lily frequently referenced her understanding of this partnership by acknowledging an exchange with her students. One example of this was when Lily stated, “I also had to kind of readjust some of my expectations of them and they had to readjust some of their expectations of me.” Another example was her comment that even the most challenging situations, including a student bringing a weapon into her classroom, were “... met with empathy and reassurance that the adults will take care of the issue. That comes with trust that we have developed all year.”

Empathy is comprised of three main actions, mind perception, mentalizing, and experience sharing, which are all subject to the observer’s motives, according to the

motivated model of empathy (Zaki, 2020, 2014). Based on the assumption that an educator's motive is student learning, Marie emphasized the significance of an educator's mindset of empathy in her parting thoughts, "kids don't learn from people they don't like, and they think don't like them. Showing empathy helps kids know you like them and like you back."

Relationship to Theoretical Framework

The chosen theoretical frames for this case study were social constructivism and transformative learning. Lev Vygotsky, the founding father of social constructivism, believed that social interactions were integral to learning and that children learned more effectively when they had others to support them (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Research through the lens of social constructivism requires a focus on the specific context of participants' environments and researchers position themselves by identifying how their interpretations are derived from personal experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2014). The literature identified empathy as a social interaction and the collective case study explored the firsthand experiences of educators in conjunction with their mindsets of empathy, perceptions, and expectations of students in the virtual and post-virtual learning environments, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Transformative learning theory was introduced by Jack Mezirow and asserts that people use "their imaginations to redefine problems from a different perspective" (1997, p.10). The transformative process involves critical reflection to develop broader perspectives (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020). Transformative learning was selected as a theoretical frame because the purpose of the collective case study was to aid individual

students and to improve society through social relationships between teachers and students, by enhancing the mindsets of educator empathy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, transformative learning was also selected based on the circumstances of a global pandemic, as "the opportunity to learn transformatively arises out of the experience of crisis or disorientation. In the light of COVID-19, pre-pandemic mindsets are dysfunctional" (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020, p.660).

Study Limitations

The qualitative collective case study examined the impact of middle school educator mindsets of empathy on perceptions and expectations of student academic performance and behavior. The three participants were educators in the same middle school, yet it would have been beneficial to also examine student perspectives. The use of a mixed methods design and incorporating the triangulation of quantitative student academic and behavioral data would have contributed to validity. Increasing the number of participants and including educators from more middle schools would have improved reliability by broadening the scope to include participants with perspectives from different school environments.

The time requirements for interviews and journaling were additional limitations. The fourth participant, who did not complete the study, stated a desire to continue but cited time constraints as a factor. Study participation required educators to reflect and respond regarding their mindsets of empathy on their perceptions and expectations of students outside of contracted work hours and infringed upon personal time. On three occasions, study participants requested to reschedule interviews out of necessity to extend their work hours to complete unfinished obligations, such as lesson plans. During a

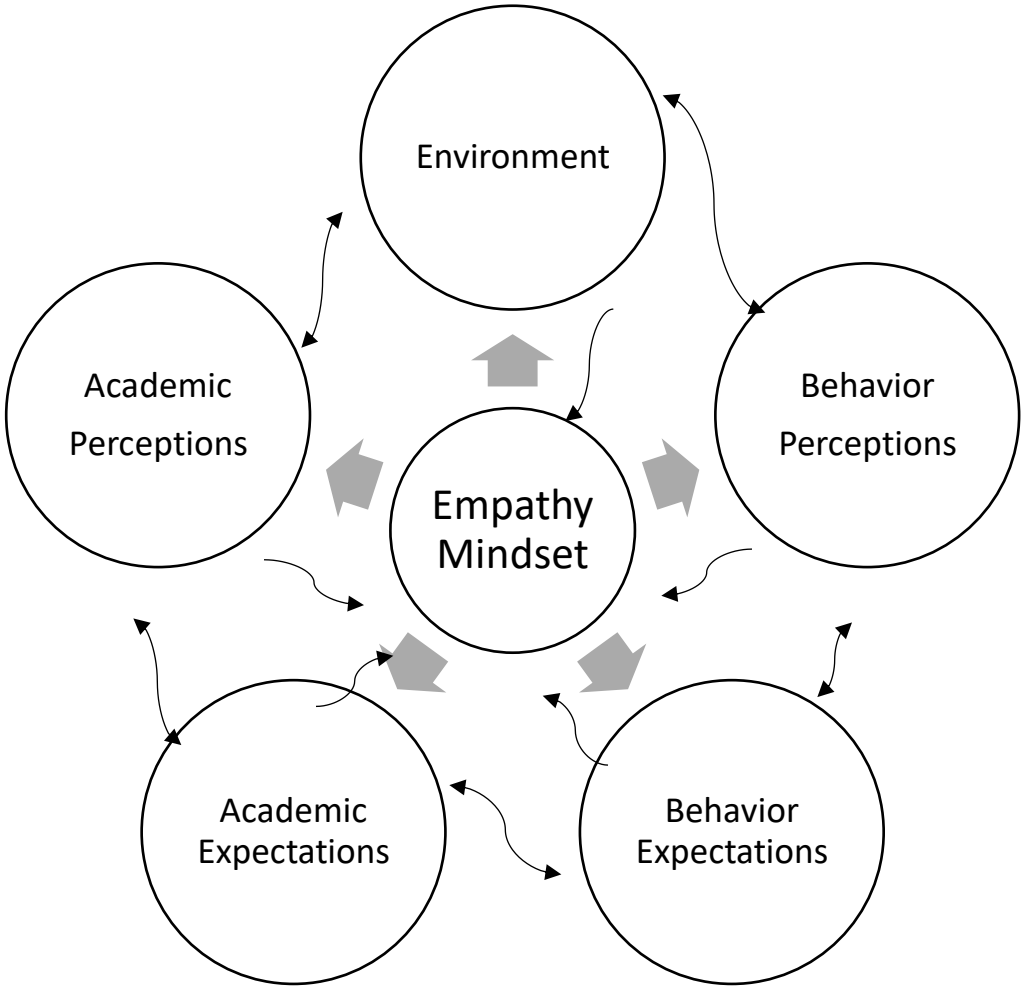
challenging school year, participation in the collective case study was an additional obligation for educators.

Implications for Practice

Case study research "allows others to apply the principles and lessons learned in a case to other cases or situations and leads to transferability..." (Burkholder et al., 2020, p. 246). Participants indicated that continued reflection on their perceptions and expectations of student academic performance and behavior during the collective case study contributed to the transformation of their mindsets of empathy. While the study was designed to observe how educator mindsets of empathy impact perceptions and expectations of student academic performance and behavior, perhaps a lesson learned is that the process is cyclical and reflection on perceptions and expectations of student academic performance and behavior also impacts educator mindsets of empathy (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Empathy Mindset Cycle



Organizational Improvement Plan

Problem of Practice

While educators within the organization are provided curriculum and assessment criteria by the school district, they are not explicitly informed and trained regarding the positive impact that expressing empathy toward students has on student behavior and academic performance, nor is this taught in pre-service teacher education. The lack of resources for educators, as part of a preparatory program and within the organization, regarding the application of empathy in the educational setting is the problem of practice for which this organizational improvement plan has been proposed.

Perspectives

Organizational Theories. The organization had existing theories that relate to the expression of empathy in the classroom. The school district trained staff on cultural competency and diversity, equity, and inclusion. The organization encouraged educators to utilize restorative justice, or restorative practices, in the classroom. While each of these practices involves empathy to be successful, the benefits of and expression of empathy were not explicitly taught to educators by the organization.

Academic Literature. Research suggests that empathy is not a trait, but a skill set that can be developed (Zaki, 2020). As empathy rates have decreased, societal conflicts and student suspension rates have increased, thus inspiring inquiry into empathy development (Okonofua et al., 2016; Schumann et al., 2014; Zaki et al., 2008). The promising results of the study titled, “Brief intervention to encourage empathetic

discipline cuts suspension rates in half among adolescents," highlighted the significant impact of educator empathetic mindset on expectations of students and perceptions of student performance (Okonofua et al., 2016; Zaki, 2019). University of California, Berkely Professor of Psychology, Okonofua, developed a training for teachers in empathetic discipline, to foster student mindset growth given that research has consistently shown that empathy is interpersonal and contextual (Okonofua et al. 2016; Zaki, 2019: Zaki et al., 2008). Harvard Graduate School of Education developed the Making Caring Common Project's Caring Schools Network and established research-based resources for educators, How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community (2021, see Appendix C).

Relevant Data. This researcher conducted a 2021 pilot study within the organization also entitled, "The impact of educator empathetic mindset on expectations of students and perceptions of student performance" (Demsko, 2021), which was a partial replication of "Brief intervention to encourage empathetic discipline cuts suspension rates in half among adolescents" (Okonofua et al., 2016). In the pilot study, an empathetic mindset intervention was provided to half the teachers surveyed, while the other half received no intervention prior to completing a survey on their mindset of empathy (Demsko, 2021). This pilot study was small in scale and intended to compare the mindset survey responses of participants who received a brief, one-time, self-administered intervention on teacher empathy to the responses of middle school educators in a control group (Demsko, 2021). While the original study compared the suspension rates of students who had intervention teachers compared to the students of control group educators (Okonofua et al., 2016), the focus of the pilot study was the comparison of

intervention educator responses on a *mindsets of empathy* survey to control group responses (Demsko, 2021).

The action research pilot study took place virtually by electronic survey in a suburban public middle school setting and participants were six practicing middle school educators with master's degrees (Demsko, 2021). This pilot study used a convergent parallel/mixed methods research approach to collect both qualitative and quantitative data, employing a phenomenological research design as qualitative measures (Burkholder et al., 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participant qualitative and quantitative data were collected electronically via the one-time submission of an electronic survey (Demsko, 2021).

Quantitative data collected and analyzed during the pilot study showed that the empathetic mindsets and student expectations of intervention group participants were collectively more positive on the Likert scale than control group participants, while quantitative data were less conclusive (Demsko, 2021). The 2021 action research study indicated that continued research into if and how educator mindsets of empathy relate to their perceptions and expectations of students was warranted and led to the collective case study.

Political, Social, and Environmental Perspectives. The expression of empathy does not only impact classrooms, but society in general is also impacted. Data indicate that as acts of empathy declined in the United States the suspension rate for students tripled, from 1.7 million students in 1974 to over 5 million in 2011 and NYU Stern School of Business professor Galloway predicted that American capitalism would collapse without a foundation of empathy (Galloway, 2020; Okonofua et al., 2016;

Shapiro, 2020; Zaki, 2019). The quality of student-teacher relationships is a predictor in classroom behavior; students are more likely to follow the rules of authority figures whom they respect, and more likely to show respect to those who give them respect (Okonofua et al., 2016; Zaki, 2019).

Vision for Change

The vision for change for the organization is that educators will be explicitly informed about the positive impact of empathy on student behavior and academic performance by incorporation into monthly, teacher-lead, in-service professional development. Educators will be encouraged to engage in reflection to enhance empathetic mindsets, as identified by this study's participants, in the *Implication for Practice* section. The organization will provide strategies for educators to express empathy and encourage educators to implement those strategies with students.

Tools for Identifying Change Readiness

Frame. Existing organizational theories of diversity, equity, and inclusion; becoming trauma informed; and restorative practices, are indications that the organization is ready for the proposed change of enhancing educator mindsets of empathy. In 2020, when this researcher conducted a survey on empathy, the then assistant principal/current building principal of the organization indicated that educator empathy is a top predicator for student behavior and academic performance. These are indicators that the administration will welcome the proposed emphasis on an empathetic mindset among educators.

Diagnosis and Analysis of Problems. Students were not in the school building for more than one year. While synchronous virtual instruction was provided, students had

full discretion to join calls, activate microphones and turn on their cameras, thus impeding educators' ability to experience empathy, which is contextual and based in interpersonal interactions (Schumann et al., 2014; Zaki, 2019; Zaki et al., 2008). In addition, students had limited behavioral expectations to meet during virtual instructions, and upon returning to in-person learning had more expectations than before the pandemic, due to compliance with Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines. It is the opinion of this researcher that educator empathy is a crucial component of the re-establishment of successful in-person learning following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Explanation of Approaches

Tools for Measurement. The John Kotter Web, known as the Eight Step Process for Leading Change, is a useful guiding tool for shifting the emphasis to an educator mindset of empathy within the organization, a public middle school. The steps include: 1. create a sense of urgency, build a guiding coalition, 3. form a strategic vision and initiative, 4. enlist a volunteer army, 5. enable actions by removing barriers, 6. generate short term wins, 7. sustain acceleration, and 8. institute change. The eminent need for the development of post-COVID-19 virtual learning protocols provides the right environment for creating a sense of urgency, removing barriers, generating short-term wins, acceleration, and instituting change.

Options. It is feasible that aspects of the collective case study protocol could be utilized organization-wide by providing access to the webpage How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2021; see Appendix C). In response to the researcher's request for permission to use the web-based resources in the collective case study, the organization received an invitation to

join The Making Caring Common Project's Caring Schools Network (See Appendix C). Participation in the Caring School's Network could serve to enhance empathetic mindsets of educators within the organization. In addition, guided empathy mindset reflection for all educational staff, based on the process study participants underwent, could be facilitated by the organization.

Maintaining the Status Quo. It is an option to continue without providing empathy resources and facilitating empathy mindset reflection as the organization continues to develop a new status quo post-virtual learning based on the existing organizational theories of diversity, equity, and inclusion; trauma informed education; and restorative practices. This option would perhaps be the closest to maintaining the status quo post-virtual learning, yet less likely to shift the emphasis to an educator mindset of empathy due to the lack of an explicit empathy mindset intervention.

Closing Words

Empathy is dependent on motive, mindset, context, interpersonal interaction, and can be selectively deactivated (Schumann et al., 2014; Zaki et al., 2008). In childhood, before cognitive-control regions in the brain have fully matured, external resources like trusted teachers may be essential to guide children's empathy development (Okonofua et al., 2016). The impact of educator empathetic mindset on expectations of students and perceptions of student performance collective case study examined how educator mindsets of empathy impacted expectations and perceptions of middle school students returning to in-person learning after more than a year of distance learning during the global COVID-19 pandemic that disrupted the education globally. Three educators participated in the collective case study between November 2021 and March 2022. The

transferable lessons shared by participants contributed to the development of a proposed improvement plan to enhance empathy within the school community.

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Appendix A

The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire

Below is a list of statements. Please read each statement carefully and rate how frequently you feel or act in the manner described. Circle your answer on the response form. There are no right or wrong answers or trick questions. Please answer each question as honestly as you can.

Answers: Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

1. When someone else is feeling excited, I tend to get excited too.
2. Other people's misfortunes do not disturb me a great deal.
3. It upsets me to see someone being treated disrespectfully.
4. I remain unaffected when someone close to me is happy.
5. I enjoy making other people feel better.
6. I have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.
7. When a friend starts to talk about his\her problems, I try to steer the conversation towards something else.
8. I can tell when others are sad even when they do not say anything.
9. I find that I am "in tune" with other people's moods.
10. I do not feel sympathy for people who cause their own serious illnesses.
11. I become irritated when someone cries.
12. I am not really interested in how other people feel.
13. I get a strong urge to help when I see someone who is upset.
14. When I see someone being treated unfairly, I do not feel very much pity for them.
15. I find it silly for people to cry out of happiness.

16. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards him\her.

Appendix B

Toronto Empathy Questionnaire Permission

Nathan Spreng <nathan.spreng@gmail.com>

Tue 8/17/2021 11:29 PM

To: Demsko, Julie

[EXTERNAL EMAIL]: This email originated from outside of the organization. DO NOT CLICK links or open attachments unless you trust the sender and know the content is safe.

Thank you for your interest.

You are welcome to use and reproduce the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire for non-commercial research and educational purposes without seeking my written permission. Distribution must be controlled, meaning only to the participants engaged in the research or enrolled in the educational activity. Any other type of reproduction or distribution of the TEQ is not authorized without my written permission. The original Journal of Personality Assessment paper should be referenced in any resulting publication or report.

Best,

Nathan Spreng

Appendix C

How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community Strategies

Five Essential Steps for Schools

1. MODEL EMPATHY

- When frustrated with students, pause and take a deep breath and try to see the situation from their perspective before responding.
- When a student is upset, reflect back his feelings or the rationale for his behavior before redirecting the behavior.
- Be aware of students' non-verbal cues and follow up on them. For example, if a student is slumping in her chair and appearing withdrawn or angry, say something like "I noticed that you are quieter than usual today. Is something bothering you?" rather than immediately reprimanding her.
- Ask for students' input when appropriate and feasible (for example, when establishing classroom rules or generating ideas for group projects) – and really listen. Find opportunities to incorporate their feedback and respond to their needs.

2. TEACH WHAT EMPATHY IS AND WHY IT MATTERS

- Clearly explain that empathy means understanding and caring about another person's feelings and taking action to help. Explain how it improves the classroom and school community.
- Stress the importance of noticing and having empathy for people beyond immediate friends, including those who are different or who are too often invisible.

- Give examples of how to act on empathy, such as helping, showing kindness, or even simply listening.

3. PRACTICE

- Create opportunities to practice taking another's perspective and imagining what others are thinking. Play charades and do role plays, read and discuss books, and use "what would you do" style vignettes or case studies.
- Name the barriers to empathy, like stereotypes, stress, or fears of social consequences for helping an unpopular peer. Share specific strategies to overcome them. For example, encourage students to privately offer kind and supportive words to a student who was bullied.
- Foster emotional and social skills, like dealing with anger and frustration and solving conflicts. Use an evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) program and teach specific routines for calming down and resolving disputes. Use advisories and guidance counseling to develop social and ethical skills.

4. SET CLEAR ETHICAL EXPECTATIONS

- Be clear that you expect students to care about one another and the entire school community. Don't just put it in the mission statement or on a poster – talk about it, model it, praise it, and hold students to it.
- Do an exercise with students to help them reflect on who is inside and outside their circle. Discuss why and how they can expand the circle of who they care about.

- Establish specific guidelines for unacceptable language and behaviors. Ban slurs or hurtful language like “that’s retarded” or “he’s so gay,” even when said ironically or in jest — and step in if you hear them. Encourage students to think about why these words can be hurtful.
- Enlist students in establishing rules and holding each other accountable.
- Use restorative justice practices and peer mediation when conflicts arise.

5. MAKE SCHOOL CULTURE AND CLIMATE A PRIORITY

- Collect data from students and staff at least once a year about whether they feel safe, respected, and cared about at school.
- Take time to examine the data and make efforts to address problem areas identified by students and staff.
- Avoid over-emphasizing comparative evaluation, getting ahead by beating others, or other pressures that can erode trust and undermine empathy.

Authored by: Stephanie Jones, Rick Weissbourd, Suzanne Bouffard, Jennifer Kahn, and Trisha Ross Anderson of the Making Caring Common Project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. This resource is based on a research and program review supported by the Ashoka Empathy Initiative. Last reviewed October 2018.

Permissions
Dear Julie,

Thank you for reaching out and of course you can use any of our resources! Please just make sure to provide Making Caring Common as a reference and if you could link to our website that would be wonderful.

Take care,

Jamie

Welcome Julie,

I hope this email finds you well!

We're grateful for your interest in our work at Making Caring Common and we would love to have you join our Caring Schools Network in the 2021-2022 school year.

Our work with schools next year will focus on the following:

Building secure relationships in the classroom;

Learning and practicing skills that young people need to care for others; and

Challenging students to develop and practice skills that are foundational to understanding and pursuing justice.

We offer schools three levels of support:

- **Essential -** a flexible, out-of-the-box package (If your school receives Title I funding, you may be able to join this level of support at **no cost**);
- **Essential Plus -** includes additional collaboration with the CSN team; and
- **Comprehensive -** in which you'll receive individualized sessions tailored to your school's needs, additional professional development opportunities, as well as a 75-minute virtual, interactive session for families or staff with MCC Faculty Director Rick Weissbourd.

For more information or if you are ready to register, please visit our website, and feel free to **book a call** with me directly. Looking forward to connecting soon!

Best,

Glenn Manning

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_____

Glenn Manning

Senior Project Manager | Making Caring Common

Harvard Graduate School of Education

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Appendix E

Recruitment Letter

You are invited to participate in a study of "The impact of educator empathetic mindset on perception of students and expectations of student performance" (FBUIRB11012022-JD). I hope to develop a better understanding of how a mindset of empathy relates to a teacher's perceptions and expectations of students. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are currently teaching middle school students in-person and previously taught middle school students virtually.

If you volunteer to participate, you will receive a $50 Amazon gift card upon completion of study requirements. Requirements include the completion of The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire at the beginning and end of the study, which will take approximately 10-minutes each time. In addition, you will participate in two 20-minute recorded virtual interviews outside of school hours, and submit six 10-minute journal entries, either in writing, by video, or voice recording. During the study, you will be asked to review How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community (Make Caring Common Project, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University) for approximately 20 minutes at your convenience and implement one or more of the simple classroom empathy strategies provided. Total participation time is estimated to be less than two and a half hours, in 10 to 20-minute increments, during Fall 2021.

All data collected will be confidential and will be stored on a password protected computer. Data will be reviewed and analyzed to develop a better understanding of how a mindset of empathy relates to a teacher's perceptions and expectations of students.

There are certain potential benefits and risks associated with your participation in this research. The benefits are contributing to emerging research on the mindset of empathy in the education and gaining useful empathy strategies to use with students. The risks may include the inconvenience of time or feeling uncomfortable answering questions.

Any information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. In any written reports or publications, you will not be identified or identifiable.

If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time. If you have any further questions, please contact Julie Demsko at jdemsk01924@fontbonne.edu or Jamie Doronkin at jdoronkin@fontbonne.edu, and we will be happy to answer them.

By submitting the form below, you are hereby confirming that you have read the above information, agree to the terms of consent, and have decided to participate.

https://forms.gle/HSkK1piGm7xjdr4j9

Thank you for your consideration,

Julie Demsko, M.A.T.

Appendix F

IRB Approval

October 5, 2021

Dear Julie Demsko:

The Fontbonne University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has conditionally approved your study proposal entitled, "The Impact of Educator Empathetic Mindset on Perceptions of Students and Expectations of Student Performance." The condition of this approval is that you also obtain approval from the *(redacted*) School District in (*redacted*), Missouri. Please let this letter serve as notice to the (*redacted*) School District that you have our conditional approval.

Once the (redacted) School District has approved your study, please ask for a letter of approval and submit it to Fontbonne University. You will receive an approval number at that time and a notice of full approval.

Your approval will expire one year from the full approval date. If you need an extension or the protocols of your study change, please contact Dr. Joanne Fish, the IRB Chairperson, at jfish@fontbonne.edu or submit a revision via the online process.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns. Also, please feel free to share my contact information with anyone from the school district if they should need to contact me.

Sincerely,

Dr. Joanne Fish, IRB Chairperson

Assistant Professor of Education/Special Education East Building 225

Fontbonne University 6800 Wydown Blvd.

Clayton, MO 63105

Appendix G

Interview Questions

Interview One

1. At the beginning of this school year the entire student body returned to in-person learning after an extended period of virtual learning. In this study, an empathetic mindset prioritizes valuing and understanding students' experiences and negative feelings. Provide an example of how you prioritized these things during virtual learning.
2. Provide another example of how you prioritize these things now.
3. Describe your current perception of your students' academic capabilities following virtual learning?
4. Describe your current perception of your students' behavior following virtual learning?
5. What are your current expectations of your students' academic performance following virtual learning?
6. What are your current expectations of your students' behavior following virtual learning?
7. Is there anything else you want to add?

Interview Two

1. As the first trimester comes to an end, give an example of your use of an empathetic mindset (defined as: prioritizes valuing and understanding students' experiences and negative feelings)?

2. How have you incorporated the resources provided on the "How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community" webpage into your classroom?
3. What piece of empathetic mindset advice would you give to a new teacher?
4. Describe your current perception of your students' academic performance?
5. Describe your current perception of your students' behavior?
6. What are your current expectations of your students' academic performance?
7. What are your current expectations of your students' behavior?
8. What else would you like me to know?