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# Exploring High School Seniors' Lived Experience of Teacher Empathy: A Phenomenological Study

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EXPLORING HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS' LIVED EXPERIENCE OF  
TEACHER EMPATHY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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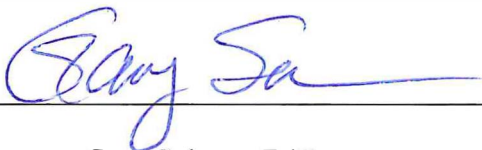


GEORGE FOX  
UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

“EXPLORING HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS’ LIVED EXPERIENCE OF TEACHER EMPATHY:  
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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study sought to explore the lived experiences of four high school seniors. Through the utilization of personal interviews, students offered their unique perspectives on the phenomenon of empathy and specifically empathy from a teacher. The study used questions inviting a retrospective analysis of students' K-12 experience, and students' stories provided rich details on the times they felt empathy from teachers. Three significant themes were identified through content analysis in this study and are known as The Trajectory of Empathy. These three themes were : (a) Creation of Personal Connection: teachers used a combination of humor, initiating conversations, personal stories, and universal treatment of all students to create personal connections with students; (b) Moments of Empathy: personal connection with teachers allowed moments of empathy to occur, primarily in one-on-one interactions, and either the teacher or student could initiate the moments of empathy; (c) Lasting Impact of Empathy: following the moments of empathy, students felt a stronger connection to their teacher, and in many cases still have lasting impacts from that experience. Implications for this study suggest a need for schools to move beyond a sole focus on academic curriculum to incorporate times for personal connection, a need for educators to advocate for changes in their schedules to have time to connect with students and engage in empathy, and a suggestion for administrators to prioritize students' emotional well-being in addition to academics. This study challenges others to continue seeking the student perspective regarding this much-needed topic.

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of you have helped me in ways I cannot begin to describe. I love each of you dearly. “But there is a friend who sticks closer than a [sister]” (Proverbs 18:24b, New International Version).

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“I wish he could really see me! I am so overwhelmed. I have pressures from my parents, my teachers, my friends...everybody!” As I sat across from David, I heard the familiar frustration from him I had also heard from other students. This was the third time in a week that David had been asked to take a break in my office, and it was only Tuesday. Diving into the root of why he frequently acted out in class, I discovered a young man who was feeling tired, overwhelmed, and stressed. I had heard these emotions, as well as the feeling of not being heard, expressed by many students over my years as an educator. I too have felt these emotions. Just recently I sat in a professor’s office, tears streaming down my face, saying, “I feel such a heaviness today and just need someone to talk to about it.” Just as I needed to be seen, heard, and have someone respond to me, I believe my students have this need as well. This realization and my interactions with others have motivated me to gain a deeper understanding of emotions, and more precisely the emotion of empathy, in my own work as a teacher. My desire to understand how students perceive empathy expressed by a classroom teacher has developed through all of these events and interactions.

The study of emotions in education has recently become a more valid and respected research focus (Nias, 1996; Uitto, Jokikokko, & Estola, 2015). Empathy is one of the emotions that has received significant attention from researchers. However, research on empathy can be traced back to the early 1900s, and emotions that would now be described as empathy can be found in literature as early as the eighteenth century. Empathy has been viewed in many different ways, including the idea that empathy is only a cognitive trait or only an affective trait. Cognitive empathy is the process of engaging by thought about what another may be thinking and feeling, whereas affective empathy is feeling alongside another with the same emotions that the other is

feeling (Davis, 2017; Hoffman, 2001; Roughley & Schramme, 2018). According to Davis (1983), “Recent years have seen increased movement toward an integration of these two hitherto separate research traditions” (p.113). This has led current research to view empathy as a combination of cognitive and affective components (Cooper, 2010; Demetriou, 2018; Preston & Hofelich, 2012).

Empathy constitutes an important part of individuals’ lives and is an important topic in a number of disciplines including social psychology (Davis, 2017), nursing (Ouzouni & Nakakis, 2012), and social neuroscience (Decety, Barta, Uzevsky, & Knafo-Noam, 2016). Each discipline has contributed to a better understanding of how to view, measure, and understand empathy. Educational research has primarily been centered on studying the effect of teacher empathy on students, with a smaller research focus studying the effects of an empathy curriculum. For example, lowered aggression (Batanova & Loukas, 2014; Lovett & Sheffield, 2007) and an increase of prosocial behaviors (Williams, 2014) are just two of the positive effects of teacher empathy and empathy-based curriculum found in educational research. While educational research on empathy identifies numerous factors that contribute to a positive educational experience, the most influential impact of empathy in education has been the positive effect of teacher empathy on the teacher-student relationship (Demetriou, 2018; Peck, Maude, & Brotherson, 2014). Empathy has been shown to have positive impacts on students’ behavior (Batanova & Loukas, 2014), academics (Bonner & Aspy, 1984; Waxman, 1983), and social relationships (Stephan & Finley, 1999; Tettegah & Anderson, 2007). These positive attributes of empathy cause this topic to be a necessary and needed research study in the field of education, including research on how participants in education both perceive and receive empathy.

To aid in the study of empathy, a clear definition is helpful, but gaining consensus on it has been a challenge for researchers. Empathy has been described as a “highly complex” (Cooper, 2004, p. 12) and an “enigmatic subject matter” (Warren, 2015, p. 156). As stated earlier, empathy is now seen as encompassing cognitive and affective aspects, thus the empathy definition chosen for this study needed to include these aspects. An additional aspect of empathy found in the literature is the concept of offering help to another (Demetriou, 2018; Davis, 2017). Since the definition of empathy selected for use in this study was used in the creation of interview questions, it needed to provide clear features that could be drawn from the definition to assist participants in discussing empathic interactions with teacher. Cooper’s (2004) definition of empathy contained a cognitive aspect of empathy, an affective aspect of empathy, a theme of helping others, and the ability to use the definition in creating interview questions, so it was chosen for use in this study.

Cooper (2004) defines empathy as:

A quality shown by individuals which enables them to accept others for who they are, to feel and perceive situations from their perspective and to take a constructive and long-term attitude towards the advancement of their situation by searching for solutions to meet their needs. (p. 14)

Three key features from Cooper’s (2004) definition were applied to the creation of interview questions for this study in order to assist students in describing their lived experience of teacher empathy. These three features are: a teacher accepting a student, a teacher feeling what a student is feeling, and a teacher finding a solution to a student’s needs. These features of empathy from Cooper’s definition guided the development of interview prompts that allowed participants to focus on their experiences, while not having to focus on the term of empathy.

## **Problem Statement**

Research has provided insight into empathy, and in the field of education, empathy has been explored as a part of the crucial teacher-student relationship. However, the research on empathy in all disciplines continues to be primarily centered on adult perceptions. While it is important to understand how teachers and other adults perceive empathy, it is just as important to include students' perspectives in the study of this topic. Students offer diverse and unique perspectives on the educational process (Cook-Sather, 2014). The current research on empathy featuring student voice is limited. This phenomenological study helped address this gap in the literature as it sought to understand students' perceptions about teacher empathy as experienced in classroom settings.

## **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore high school seniors' lived experience of empathy they received from classroom teachers during their K-12 experience. Through the use of personal interviews, students were able to add their voice and perspective to this important topic in education. During the study, students were asked to reflect on their interactions with teachers throughout their school experience from elementary school through high school. The main objective of the research study was to gather insights from students that can help educators further understand how their actions may or may not be perceived as empathic by students.

## **Research Questions**

Based on the purpose of this study, a primary and two secondary research questions emerged. The primary research question is a "grand tour" question, which is commonly used in phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The sub research questions helped participants go deeper into the primary research question.

*Primary Research Question*

When reflecting on their K-12 schooling journey, what stories do high schoolers tell regarding empathetic interactions with their teachers? What do these stories reveal about their lived experience of empathy in school?

*Sub Research Question 1*

What is the nature of these experiences, in terms of the context, situation, or need pertaining to the empathy they experienced?

*Sub Research Question 2*

How do empathetic experiences appear to shape the students' opinions of their teachers, their learning, and their lives?

**Researcher Background**

As an educator for sixteen years, I have sought a holistic approach (mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual) to serving the students in my classes. This approach has influenced the coursework I have chosen to pursue as a graduate student. I made the decision to explore empathy after participating in an ethics course. After reading Belman and Flanagan's (2010) article, *Designing Games to Foster Empathy*, I began to wonder, "What is empathy and why does it matter?" It was from this course and article that I began my own research into understanding empathy. My initial research led me to write an article about incorporating empathy into everyday actions as an educator.

The research for my article allowed me to see a recurring theme in the literature. Adults, including in-service teacher, pre-service teachers, and researchers, were the main participants in

most of the research studies. Through this observation, I began to wonder what students thought about teacher empathy, and even how my own students judged my empathy. This began my initial investigation into student voice related to teacher empathy. I identified a great need to bring students into this important conversation, which brought me to this current research study.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The goal of this study was to explore high school seniors' lived experience of teacher empathy. I was able to interview four high school seniors about their experience of teacher empathy during their K-12 school years.

**Limitations.** One of the limitations of this study was the inability to generalize the findings from this study to a larger population of mainstream, public-school students. While similarities may be present between participants and other students, the limited sample size, which is common in qualitative research, prevents the results from being applied to the overall population. However, it is important to note that this type of qualitative research adds more in-depth and detailed insights into topics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). van Manen (2014) argues that the small population size of phenomenological studies is, in fact, a strength as researchers are able to uncover new and important information about the world in which we live.

Another limitation was the reliance on participants' memories of empathy across their K-12 journey. This created the possibility of eliciting inaccurate information on the particulars of the students' interactions with teachers, yet that does not negate the importance of gathering information about participants' lived experiences. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) remind researchers that an interviewee's "statements may still express the truth of the person's view of himself or herself" (p. 287). The use of a proper definition, articulation of a research question, and interview techniques (Hassan, 2005) helped in the process of recall. Ultimately,



phenomenology allows individuals to explore how past experiences have influenced them and how they now make meaning of those experiences (Crowther, Ironside, Spence, & Smythe, 2017). This reflection process is possible even with events and interactions that happened over a decade ago.

**Delimitations.** The greatest delimitation for this study involved the use of purposive sampling in the selection of participants. Through the use of purposive sampling, participants are selected based on qualities necessary to share lived experience (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2015). While the delimitations are listed in greater detail in chapter 3, the two most important were that the students be at least 18 years of age, and that students had the entirety of their K-12 school experience in a public school. The delimitation for age was to ensure that students were old enough to process the complexity of empathy, while also having a wide breadth of educational experiences to recall for the study. The delimitation for the K-12 school experience was to try and promote as much commonality, as possible, in the schooling experiences of the participants.

### **Organization of Study**

My desire was to explore students' lived experiences of teacher empathy through the use of a phenomenological research approach. Phenomenology seeks to explore and understand "the ordinary personal experience...the experience of the way we live situationally, [and] the way we are personal beings in space" (Kohák, 1989, p. 97). How students perceive teacher empathy is an ordinary personal experience that needs to be explored for the benefit of many in educational settings.

This research study was conducted with participants from a single high school located in the Pacific Northwest. From the population of seniors at this high school, four students were

chosen based on specific delimitations. A couple of these delimitations include that the student has attended a public school for the entirety of their K-12 school experience, and that the student was at least 18 years old at the time of the interviews.

I conducted multiple in-depth interviews as the means of data collection for this phenomenological study. Interview questions were centered on Cooper's (2004) definition of empathy, and focused on the high school seniors' lived experience of teacher empathy during their elementary, middle school, and high school years.

Each interview was transcribed by a third party. Initial content analysis was employed, which included priori coding and redundancy coding (Saldaña, 2016). Following initial and focused coding, thematic coding was utilized to identify themes across the participants' experiences of teacher empathy.

Empathy has been shown to be an important part of life, including education. However, student voice about this important topic continues to be limited in the research literature. Through this study, the underrepresented voices of students were explored and presented as a way to address this gap. The results of this study are presented as way of understanding how students perceive teacher empathy and any implications this may have for the teaching community.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A surge of interest in empathy in both mainstream media and research is evident through the volume of recent publications. An initial search of the term *empathy* in Google Scholar produced over a million results. There is merit to this research interest in empathy. Hoffman (2001) states that the ability to empathize is “the spark of human concern for others” and asserts that empathy is “the glue that makes social life possible” (p. 3). Empathy is also described as vital to human relationships, and assists in connecting individuals in meaningful relationships (Cooper, 2004; Peck, Maude, Brotherson, 2014). Empathy affects character traits such as caring, cooperation, and compassion (Dolby, 2012; Noddings, 1988).

Empathy has been studied in various fields, including the field of education (Demetriou, 2018). Educational researchers have learned that empathy can be a key component in helping raise students’ academic outcomes (Bonner & Aspy, 1984). In addition, it is a component in the establishment of student-teacher relationships (Warren, 2015). Thus, empathy is considered to be a crucial feature for many disciplines, but especially for the field of education and the relationships that occur within this setting. Understanding the importance of empathy in education and understanding what empathy is are two different objectives. The history of empathy must first be examined in order to fully understand how empathy is defined and how it impacts others.

**Looking back on the history of empathy.** Empathy is a word that has only been in existence for a little over 100 years. The word empathy first appeared in the English dictionary in 1909 and was based on the word *Einfühlung* developed by German philosopher Robert Vischer to describe “feeling into another” (Demetriou, 2018; Roughley, & Schramme, 2018). Vischer (1873) originally spoke of the concept of feeling into another while describing works of art and

based his definition off of a similar word used by his father at an even earlier point. While the concept of empathy, and the actual word, were not used until the late 1800's and early 1900's, the idea of fellow feeling can be traced back to 150 years earlier.

In the eighteenth century, Scottish philosopher David Hume published *A Treatise of Human Nature* in which he wrote about the concept of fellow feeling. At that time, the word empathy was not part of the vernacular to describe emotions. Drawing upon current psychological terms of the eighteenth century, Hume (1738/1978) substituted the word sympathy to describe emotions identified in current research as empathy (Agosta, n.d.). Specifically, the emotions described by Hume (1738/1978) are known as emotional or affective empathy (Demetriou, 2018), which is the experience of one feeling alongside another. Hume et al. (1738/1978) gives an example of emotional empathy by stating:

Upon the whole, there remains nothing, which can give us an esteem for power and riches, and a contempt for meanness and poverty, except the principle of sympathy, by which we enter into the sentiments of the rich and poor, and partake of their pleasure and uneasiness. (p. 362)

Hume et al. (1738/1978) wrote that by using empathy, individuals can experience both the highs and lows of another person.

Twenty years later, in 1759, Adam Smith also wrote about the emotion of empathy in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, through the use of the word sympathy. However, there is a distinct difference between Hume's and Smith's usage of the term sympathy. While Hume spoke about empathy through the understanding of emotions felt with another, Smith focused more on the cognitive aspect of empathy. He wrote, "...by the imagination, we place ourselves in [the other's] situation, [and] we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments" (Smith, 1759,

p. 258). While future researchers would later explore the cognitive focus on empathy, research for the next century focused primarily on the emotional, or affective, aspect of empathy.

For 150 years, the concept of empathy was analyzed through the idea of feeling the same emotion as another or emotional empathy. In 1929, Köhler published *Gestalt Psychology: An Introduction to New Concepts in Modern Psychology*. Many new ideas and concepts were part of this publication, but the significance of this piece was Köhler's view of empathy. Drawing upon Adam Smith's work, Köhler proposed that empathy should be viewed more as a cognitive action versus a fellow feeling or emotional response. This idea of focusing on the cognitive aspect of empathy directly influenced Piaget's (1932) work on perspective-taking and Stotland's (1969) work on role-taking scenarios. Both perspective-taking and role-taking scenarios would later be included as ways to research cognitive empathy. Through Köhler's work, cognitive empathy was reintroduced as a vital way to both explore and understand empathy. This is critical since most researchers in the field of empathy today have come to believe that both the cognitive and emotional components of empathy are needed if empathy is to occur (Davis, 2004; Davis, 2017). Preston and Hofelich (2012) wrote, "after at least a century of discussion...most agree upon the existence of multiple overlapping but distinguishable empathic phenomena" (p. 24).

**Defining empathy.** Understanding the history of empathy is the first step in trying to define this concept. Finding one definition accepted throughout research and by all empathy researchers has not been possible. Researchers have taken different, and at times, opposing views on how to describe empathy. This next section will look at three distinct themes found in the literature when describing empathy.

The first theme found in addressing the concept of empathy is the need to perceive another's situation, which is also known as the cognitive function of empathy (Van Dijke, Van

Nistelrooij, Bos, & Duyndam, 2018; Warren, 2018). There are many different ways to describe the idea of perceiving another's situation. The cognitive aspect of empathy is defined in a number of ways. One is to "see the world as others see it" (Wiseman, 1996, p. 1165). Another is to step into the other's shoes through an imaginative process (Krznaric, 2014). An additional way is to comprehend another's state (Eisenburg & Liew, 2009). Platsidou and Agaliotis (2017) describe these concepts as "cognitive processes (such as perception, matching, labeling of emotions, and perspective-taking) [that] underlie the drive to identify another's mental state and/or experience" (p. 58). While the cognitive aspect of empathy was previously viewed as the sole mechanism for empathy, today's empathy researchers tend to believe this cognitive function is but one aspect of what happens when empathy occurs.

The second definitional theme found in empathy literature is the concept of feeling what another person may be feeling. This concept has come to be known as emotional or affective empathy and dates back to David Hume's work from the eighteenth century. Similar to the cognitive aspect of empathy, emotional empathy was researched as the primary mechanism of empathy for many years but is now seen as one facet of a more complex concept. Unlike cognitive empathy, which has several variations to describe the experience, emotional empathy is consistently described as feeling alongside another (Peck, Maude, & Brotherson, 2014; Roughley & Schramme, 2018; Tettegah & Anderson, 2007). Feelings of sadness, anger, and anxiety are just a few of the emotions one can feel alongside another. Ultimately, it is by recognizing another's emotional state that one can choose to engage in affective empathy and experience similar feelings in oneself (Hoffman, 2001). It is through the use of affective empathy that an individual can weep with another while they weep, and laugh with another while they laugh.

The last definitional theme found in the literature for empathy is the ability to respond with action to another. Peck, Maude, and Brotherson (2014) describe this as a response to another in a way that meets their needs. Giving empathic feedback (Wender, 2014) and expressing understanding to others (Lam, Kolomitro, Alamparambil, 2011) are ways one can respond to another as part of empathy. Through a response, an individual is able to perceive empathy from another (Wiseman, 1996). Lastly, Warren (2018) also believes a response is a necessary part of empathy, but adds another condition that empathy is only truly achieved when “the individual on the receiving end of an empathetic response confirms that the observer’s actions effectively alleviate their personal distress” (p. 171). In the end, it is not enough to think about what another may be feeling or to feel alongside another; one must communicate a response in order to allow the recipient to experience empathy.

Perceiving another, feeling alongside another, and responding to another have been common themes found throughout current empathy literature when defining the concept. Cooper’s definition of empathy, which incorporates these three definitional themes, was used in this study. As referenced earlier, Cooper’s (2004) definition states that empathy is:

A quality shown by individuals which enables them to accept others for who they are, to feel and perceive situations from their perspective and to take a constructive and long-term attitude towards the advancement of their situation by searching for solutions to meet their needs. (p. 14)

With an understanding of the history of empathy, as well as the three definitional themes found in the empathy literature, this next section will review research on empathy and explore the student-teacher relationship.

## **Empathy in Education**

Most of the research on teachers and empathy has an ultimate focus on how students are affected. In education, “Empathy occurs when teachers suspend their single-minded focus of attention, and instead adopt a double-minded focus of attention...When empathy is switched on, [teachers] focus on other people’s interests” (Baron-Cohen, 2011, p. 10). Research on empathy in education can be classified into two categories: the use of empathy as part of a curriculum and the use of empathy as a way of connection. This section begins by exploring the ways empathy has been incorporated into school curriculums and the effect this had on students. The rest of the section is an examination of the ways empathy can be used to connect, either between students or between teacher and student.

**Empathy as part of Curriculum.** There are many aspects of empathy that have been studied in education. This makes sense as empathy impacts relationships, behavior, and learning (Cooper, 2004), and the classroom is an ideal place to experience and learn empathy (Spiro, 1996). Empathy as part of a curriculum has been shown to impact students’ interpersonal relationships. Empathy among friends engenders prosocial behaviors like sharing and cooperation (Davis, 2017; Decety et al., 2016). Williams (2014) conducted a study asking three-, five-, and six-year-old children to watch either a video vignette about a girl who had lost her dog or a video vignette about a girl getting ready for a garage sale. After watching these videos, they distributed stickers to themselves and others. The results found that children who watched the video vignette of the girl losing her dog showed an increase in prosocial behavior by giving more stickers to other students than they gave to themselves. Children who viewed the garage sale vignette tended to give themselves more stickers than to other students. Williams (2014) concluded that an increase in empathetic feelings and concern for others occurred for the



students who had watched the video vignette of the girl losing her dog, which led to the increase in sticker distribution.

Friendships and prosocial behavior are not the only interpersonal impacts that an empathy curriculum has on students. Aggression in children is impacted by empathy. Lovett and Sheffield (2007) review of seventeen studies looked at the effect of empathy on aggression. Their findings reported a decrease in bullying for adolescents who engaged in empathy. These results align with the research results of decreased bullying due to empathy by Batanova and Loukas (2014), and, more recently, in a study by Rey et al. (2016). Giannopoulou, Makri-Botsari, and Allison (2016) also looked at aggression and empathy by studying the effects of empathy as part of a music program. The researchers found a direct correlation between decreased rates of aggression and students who had been engaged in a music program with an emphasis on empathy. This result happened most when the school implemented empathy information programs as part of a school curriculum, as well as modeling by teachers.

The study of empathy has found positive benefits to students' relationships. However, empathy can also impact a student's learning. One of the main benefits of empathy for students is improved academic achievement. In education, the importance of students' academic success is a constant theme. Many decisions and initiatives come from a desire to increase student grades and/or test scores. Bonner and Aspy's (1984) found that a student's empathetic abilities had a positive correlation on his or her grade point average. These results were supported by Wentzel (2003) who also found a correlation between empathy and prosocial behaviors and student's grade point average. Lastly, as recently as 2015, Faisal and Zuri Bin Ghani's mixed-methods study used surveys and interviews to discover that "there is a positive influence of empathy on academic achievement among gifted students" (p. 68).

The impact of using empathy curriculum can also be seen in classrooms among students of diverse cultural backgrounds (McAllister & Irvine, 2002; Milner, 2010). Being a global citizen means being able to interact with those with backgrounds and cultures different from one's own. Within the classroom and other settings, there is a need to decrease conflict that may arise from social interactions with others from diverse cultures and empathy can assist in this process (Stephan & Finley, 1999). Keskin (2014) used 131 activities centered on empathy with 10 and 11-year-olds, and his results showed a decrease in conflict. Empathy occurred when students were able to think about what another student might be thinking, while also feeling what another student might be feeling, despite cultural differences.

The study of empathy has had both direct and indirect impacts on students, as shown in the literature. Empathy can increase prosocial behaviors, help decrease aggression, and improve academic achievement. In addition, research also shows that empathy can affect personal connections with other students and the teacher. The next two sections will address research about how empathy connects students to other students, followed by a discussion of how teacher empathy connects teachers to students.

**Empathy and Connection: Students and Peers.** One of the first ways researchers have seen the impact of students choosing to engage in empathy has been in the area of social relationships in students. In a quantitative study of 146 tenth-grade students regarding their same-sex friendships, Chow, Ruhl, and Buhrmester (2013) discovered that empathy was positively related to the intimacy of the friendship. Conflict management between individuals was also shown to be positively related to empathy. This study highlighted the significance of empathy in adolescent relationships within a school setting.

The benefit of empathy when creating connections with peers is found in the positive correlation between a student's empathic ability and their ability to engage in self-control or self-regulation (Lizarraga et al., 2003). This is seen when a student uses the cognitive aspect of empathy. By engaging in a perspective-taking activity, students can recognize how their actions will ultimately affect another and make decisions regarding their conduct through the use of self-control (Faisal & Zuri Bin Ghani, 2015). The use of self-control helps to create a more positive learning environment for other students that enables connections to occur.

This section has explored how empathy enables students to connect with their peers in school settings. This next section examines the influence of teacher empathy on students, and how it creates connections between the teacher and the student.

**Empathy and Connection: Teacher and Students.** The climate and learning environment in which students learn is directly impacted by the teacher's response to concerns and needs of students (Cooper, 2010). To be able to respond both appropriately and effectively to these needs, the teacher must display empathy (Demetriou, Wilson, & Winterbottom, 2009). A large portion of literature speaks to the influence of teacher empathy in creating personal connections with students.

Within the diverse classrooms of the United States, the ability to interact with a multitude of cultures is a necessary component of teaching. Warren (2015, 2018) has spent a significant amount of his career exploring the interactions of white, female teachers with students of color. His findings have discovered empathy to be the critical component that connects white female teachers to their non-white students (Warren, 2015; Warren, 2018). Warren builds upon earlier research that found empathy necessary for quality interactions with both students of color and families of color (McAllister & Irvine, 2002). Cartledge and Kourea's (2008) research found that

empathy enabled teachers to create connections with diverse students, including students with disabilities and students struggling academically. Empathy not only helps teachers create quality connections and interactions with students of different races and ethnicities, when teachers model appropriate interactions with students of color, students also emulate this behavior towards others (McAllister & Irvine, 2002; Stephan & Finley, 1999).

Students of color are not the only students who benefit from teacher empathy. Milner (2010) found that empathy created teacher-student connections with students of different races, genders, and socioeconomic statuses. By choosing to engage in the perspective-taking process of what students may be feeling and thinking, teachers can have positive and successful interactions with all types of students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Tettegah & Anderson, 2007).

In 1982, Albert Bandura published his work on the social-cognitive theory, stating that self-efficacy, or the belief in oneself, affected the actions one took towards reaching goals and success. A more recent discovery about the benefit of empathy is that teacher empathy can both shape and increase students' self-esteem and self-worth (Cooper, 2004). Cooper (2004) also states that students' motivation to learn is increased due to the teacher's empathy. Understanding that student motivation is impacted by teacher empathy may also help explain why earlier research showed a correlation between teacher empathy and students' academic achievement.

The last significant impact of teacher empathy on students is related to a student's sense of belonging. Schutz and Decuir (2002) found that teachers who engaged in empathy with their students not only had stronger relationships with students but that students felt a heightened sense of belonging to the school as a whole. It is through the teacher's empathy that students felt both understood and cared for by their teacher (McAllister & Irvine, 2002; Milner, 2010).

A sense of belonging is also found in Cooper's (2004, 2010) research, which has predominately focused on teacher empathy. Cooper has identified two distinct types of empathy used in educational settings by teachers. One of these is *functional empathy* and is employed by teachers who view and treat a class as one. Functional empathy leads students to feel both a sense of belonging in the classroom and group cohesion. The second type of empathy identified by Cooper (2004, 2010) is *profound empathy*, which reflected the personal impact on students. The use of profound empathy results in "deeper understanding and higher quality relationships where teachers demonstrate personal levels of care and concern" (Cooper, 2010, p.87). Later, Cooper (2010) added that profound empathy leads to emotional closeness between a teacher and students, which leads "empathic teachers [to] care deeply for students [and] seek solutions to their needs" (p. 88).

Research shows teacher empathy to be a powerful force in the classroom for students of all backgrounds. When teachers choose to engage with empathy, students feel cared for in a way that allows them to succeed academically as well as socially with others in the classroom. With all the benefits of empathy, it is no wonder that empathy has become a focus of educational research. From studying both pre-service and in-service teachers, researchers have attempted to understand the experiences of empathy with students, and teacher empathy as a whole. However, there is a need to understand the experiences and perspectives of students regarding empathy. Yet the research available from this perspective has been limited. The last section of this literature review will explore the need for more student voice in research as a whole, along with recent research on student voice and empathy. I will conclude with the kind of research still needed in the important discussion of empathy.

## Research on Teacher Empathy and Student Voice in Education

Researchers have found that empathy has a direct impact on education, and specifically students. The study of teacher empathy has become an important focus in research. More current research in this area has explored the teacher perspective. While it is important to access the teacher's voice regarding empathy, there is an equal need to understand and include student voice. Cook-Sather (2014) argues for a student's perspective in stating that "more recent publications have student voices fill the pages of published studies not to 'prove' or support researcher claims but rather to create space for students to make claims of their own" (p. 141). In this next section I explore student voice: what it is, how it has been included in the research on empathy, and in what ways it is still missing in this critical aspect of education.

**Defining student voice.** To understand how student voice has been explored in the empathy research, one must understand how student voice is described in the literature. Student voice is not a new phenomenon. One of the earliest proponents of student voice was John Dewey. From Dewey's first publication of *Democracy and Education* in 1916 to his later publications, Dewey believed students brought a unique perspective and interests to the educational process. Dewey (2013) insisted that "education, therefore, must begin with a psychological insight into the child's capacities, interests, and habits. It must be controlled at every point by reference to these same considerations" (p. 34). This active participation of the learner has become the hallmark of student voice. Quaglia and Corso (2014) support this belief about student voice and the power it brings when learners can express their beliefs and feelings, as well as share aspirations and knowledge.

More recent research into student voice has helped to clarify and define the philosophy around student voice outlined in Dewey's early writings. Student voice is best defined by Conner

(2015) who wrote that student voice is “a strategy that engages students in sharing their views on their school or classroom experiences in order to promote meaningful change in educational practice or policy and alter the positioning of students in educational settings” (p. 3). This strategy recognizes the unique perspective and insight students bring as experts in classroom activities (Cook-Sather, 2002). Student voice elevates students to the role of experts who can act as change agents within the educational system (Demetriou, 2018). It is through student voice that the areas of concern in education can be understood from a different perspective.

Student voice results when students are invited to offer their unique perspective and insights into a variety of educational processes. These processes can include curriculum design, school policies, and interactions between students and teachers. At times students’ perspectives may differ from educators or other adults in the education system, but it is this difference that makes the inclusion of student voice a necessity (Fielding, 2010). Students have legitimate opinions and perspectives and as a result have a right to have their opinions both respected and heard (Cook-Sather, 2006). Ultimately, students have a viewpoint that needs to be included in all research, but especially within educational research. However, student voice has been accessed only on a limited basis in the study of empathy in education.

**Student voice and empathy research.** With an understanding of the importance of student voice, this section explores the ways student voice and empathy has been accessed in educational research. Due to the limited number of studies on this topic, unpublished dissertations, as well as research published in academic journals, are included.

Waxman (1983) explored the effect of teacher empathy on student motivation. Waxman explored the question of whether or not teacher empathy towards students had any impact on motivation. The quantitative study used a teacher empathy questionnaire and a multi-dimensional

motivational instrument to determine student motivation based on teacher empathy. There were 83 students from grades 3 to 8 included in the study, and Waxman (1983) found that student's perceptions of their teachers' empathy did affect their motivation to do well in the classroom setting.

A more recent dissertation (Williams, 2010) used an exploratory mixed method study to better understand what correlation, if any, existed between teacher empathy and students' perception of care. Similar to Waxman (1983), a quantitative method was used to gather information on student perspectives. Survey answers and teacher interviews were then compared to show a positive correlation between teachers who perceived themselves as more empathetic and students feeling a greater sense of care in the classroom.

An even more recent study by Bockmier-Sommers, Chen, and Martsch (2017) examined student perceptions of teacher empathy in online classes. Using two surveys, the researchers concluded that instructors should implement more ways to access empathy in their teaching since empathy was related to stronger teacher-student relationships. Bockmier et al. (2017) also found a statistically significant correlation between teacher empathy and students' perception of teacher skill, interaction, and performance, which resulted in a stronger teacher-student relationship, overall.

The next two studies included in this literature review have incorporated student voice to better understand the relationship dynamics between a teacher and a student. Though empathy was not the primary focus of the research studies, teacher empathy did come out in the participants' answers. The first of these studies is the work of McHugh, Horner, Colditz, and Wallace (2013) who utilized focus groups to gain student perspectives and better understand how the teacher relationship impacted student learning. Mechanical, conceptual, and structural codes



were used to analyze the students' words, and the results of this study showed that students were able to perceive teachers' actions, and that teacher empathy and care was seen as an indirect contributor to students' well-being (McHugh et al., 2013).

The second study to utilize student voice, and show that teacher empathy had an indirect impact on teacher-student relationship, was the work of Downer, Stuhlman, Schweig, Martinez, and Ruzek (2014) who used the *Classroom Assessment Scoring System-Student Report* to understand classroom interactions between teachers and students. Downer et al., (2014) argue that accessing student voice is necessary for educational research because "student reporters, who experience interactions in their classrooms every day of the school year, have the potential to add a unique perspective to our understanding of how teacher-student interactions unfold in the classroom" (p. 726). The results of this study showed that in regards to emotional support, the teacher's ability to understand student needs and respond to these needs, a key component of empathy as defined earlier, led to students feeling a greater sense of community and connection. Overall, the conclusion from these studies led researchers to believe that empathy is an important aspect of the teacher-student relationship.

The last study to be included in this section describes teacher empathy as a byproduct when giving students motivational support in a classroom setting. O'Connell Schmakel's (2008) use of student essays, focus groups, and individual interviews as part of a qualitative research study, showed that these methods of accessing student voice are a different and valuable process. The results from this study found that students were able to articulate their needs, their perspectives, and their insights into what they believed to be effective instruction.

**The missing piece.** Educational researchers have found immense benefits from empathy, and specifically teacher empathy. As research on student voice has increased, many researchers

have come to believe that it is important to include student voice (Cook-Sather, 2014). While research around teacher empathy is plentiful, and research around student voice is growing, the research literature combining student voice and teacher empathy continues to be lacking.

Most of the limited amount of available research exploring student perspectives of teacher empathy has been quantitative, utilizing surveys or questionnaires. While quantitative research is valuable and offers some insight into the unique phenomenon of teacher empathy, there is also a need to explore student's stories, opinions, thoughts and feelings around the concept of teacher empathy. This type of exploration can only be done in a qualitative approach that seeks student's own words. Recently, Van Dijke, Van Nistelrooij, Bos, and Duyndam (2018) published a journal article on understanding empathy as part of the ethic of care. While they did not speak directly to teacher empathy, the researchers argue for "more qualitative research into [the] lived experiences of empathy" (p. 8). This dissertation research study adds to the limited research around student voice and teacher empathy by use of a qualitative research method exploring students' lived experiences of empathy.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research study was to explore high school seniors' lived experiences of empathy from their K-12 classroom teachers. Insights from students' experiences with what they perceived to be teacher empathy has the potential to further enhance research on empathy in educational settings. In this chapter, I outline the methodology for this study, including the plans for selecting participants, data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations for research such as this. The research question and sub research questions for this study were:

#### *Primary Research Question*

When reflecting on their K-12 schooling journey, what stories do high schoolers tell regarding empathetic interactions with their teachers? What do these stories reveal about their lived experience of empathy in school?

#### *Sub Research Question 1*

What is the nature of these experiences, in terms of the context, situation, or need pertaining to the empathy they experienced?

#### *Sub Research Question 2*

How do empathetic experiences appear to shape the students' opinions of their teachers, their learning, and their lives?

### **Phenomenology**

I chose the phenomenological approach to this exploration of high school seniors' lived experiences of teacher empathy. Phenomenology is a research design that explores the perspectives of a particular group's lived experience, and helps the researcher discover how the participants made meaning of these experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith, 2011). Van Manen (2017) states, "Phenomenology, if practiced well, enthralls us with insights into the

enigma of life as we experience it—the world as it gives and reveals itself to the wondering gaze” (p. 779). It is through phenomenology that complicated matters, such as teacher empathy, can begin to be explored, revealed, and appreciated.

Carpenter (2007) asserts that “lived experience of the world of everyday life is the central focus of phenomenological inquiry” (p. 77). Lived experience can be defined as how one perceives a situation an individual has experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Langdridge, 2008). In the end, phenomenology gives space to both explore and share participants’ perceptions on important matters. Student perceptions of teacher empathy are a lived experience of everyday life that needs to be studied and fits well within this methodology. Lastly, phenomenology as a research method is not a new approach in the study of empathy. Edith Stein, a student of pioneer phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, used phenomenology to explore this complicated topic (Stein & Stein, 1970). Continuing in that tradition, I explored empathy from the viewpoint of students.

### **Bracketing**

At the beginning of Chapter One, I shared a story about my interaction with a student. My time with students has drawn me to an interest in the concept of empathy. I have often wondered what my students might say about me if I were to ask them to describe their experiences in my classroom. This question and the overall lack of empathy research from students’ perspectives drove me to pursue this study. However, like any researcher, I needed to realize that my own experiences and knowledge bias how I received and processed information. In phenomenology, part of the bracketing process was to recognize my experiences and knowledge, while also being open to new and different viewpoints regarding the phenomenon studied (Carpenter, 2007).

Though I have been a classroom teacher committed to empathy, I recognized my ways of expressing empathy were not necessarily congruent with participants' experience of it. I listened for their experiences, being careful not to interject my own experience with teacher empathy from my own experiences as a student.

Peshkin (1988) writes that a researcher's personal qualities, such as one's knowledge and experience, have the "capacity to filter, skew, shape, block, transform, construe, and misconstrue what transpires from the outset of a research project to its culmination in a written statement" (p. 17). In order to stay open to participants' viewpoints, and appropriately bracket my knowledge and experience, I used Chan, Fung, and Chien's (2013) recommendation of a reflexive diary throughout the research process. I have found a reflexive diary to be critical in past writing projects, and incorporated this process once again. A reflexive diary allows researchers to record any thoughts, feelings, or perceptions that may occur during the data collection process. Through the use of the reflexive diary I was able to process initial perceptions and thoughts I had regarding information students shared during their interviews.

Finally, it is important to note that "we cannot really put all our experience and understanding of the world to one side and see the phenomenon as if for the first time. This is a valid aim but something that is always imperfect" (Langdridge, 2008, p. 1129). Although I have gathered much information about how teachers view empathy, it was important to not allow my views of teacher empathy to override or negate my participants' perceptions. The bracketing process, including a reflexive diary, allowed me to hear and process my participants' lived experiences in as unbiased way as possible.

## **Pilot Study**

I conducted a pilot study with three students prior to the formal interviews for this study, in order to ascertain the usefulness of my interview questions for probing into empathy experiences. I conducted two interviews with each of the pilot study participants and a copy of the interview questions was sent via email before each interview (Appendix A). During the interviews, I used a research guide that included information to help students with recall of events during the participants' elementary and middle school years (Appendix B). The goal of the pilot study was to gather insight into the planned question format and procedures to help me refine my final interview protocol before conducting interviews with my study participants. From the pilot study, I determined that the interview questions worked well in exploring students' experiences. As such, no adjustments were made to the interview questions or interview format for the research study. Lastly, experiences of empathy shared by pilot participants were not used in the data analysis component of this study.

## **Setting**

The research for this study was conducted at North Side High School (pseudonym), which is a public high school located in the Pacific Northwest. Over 1,000 students attend this high school and its graduation rate is over 90% compared to the current state graduation rate of 77% (Cansler & Hammond, 2018). The principal of the school attributes the high graduation rate to the implementation of a new course that targets struggling juniors and seniors. Through this course, struggling students are given more one-on-one assistance with a teacher in order to assist them with both academic and personal support.

One of the reasons I chose to approach this school was that last year, as a substitute teacher in the same district, I learned that the whole school district would be completing in-class

activities around social emotional learning. My knowledge of these district efforts led me to believe that the school leaders would be interested in the partnering with me in this potential study to reveal insights about teacher empathy, which is part of (and impacts) social emotional learning.

The other reason for choosing this school was that this school offered a convenience sample for meeting with students around the concept of empathy, due to my relationship with the principal there. She granted me access and a willing teacher offered to let me visit with her students about the possibility of participating.

The diversity in student population for North Side High School is as follows: the majority of the student population (78%) identify as being Caucasian. The other demographics for the school include 12% of students identifying as Hispanic or Latino, and 7% of students identifying as multiracial. American Indian, Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander populations are listed as being at or under 1% (Oregon Department of Education, n.d.).

## **Participants**

For this study, I chose four high school seniors as participants. Empathy can be complex; this study required students who could comprehend and speak to this level of complexity. High school seniors have more than twelve years' experience in school, which provided them a greater resource of experiences from which to draw, as well as the mental and emotional maturity for this complicated topic. I also sought participants who were 18 years old at the time of the study, which allowed the scheduling of interviews with students to happen directly after the roundtable discussion as participants were of legal age. Additional IRB requirements and paperwork were also not required due to the participants' age.

The last of the participant criteria for this study was that students had to have been part of a public school for their entire K-12 school experience. While there will be a variety of teachers, teaching methods, and experiences within a public school, the aim of this study was to describe students' experiences with empathy with their public-school teachers in face-to-face classroom settings. As such, students who had a variety of educational experiences in online or private school settings were not included in this study.

### **Participant Selection**

As a result of informal contact with North Side High School, one of the senior level teachers agreed to grant me access to her classroom. Of the teachers that the principal approached on my behalf, this teacher was the only one that agreed to give me direct access to her multiple sessions of seniors.

For this phenomenological study, a roundtable discussion was used as part of the participant selection process. The teacher at North Side, who had volunteered to assist the study, gave announcements to several of her classes announcing that 18-year-old students were invited to a roundtable to talk about their school experiences. Another teacher, having heard about the study, also made an announcement in her classroom that students who were interested in sharing about their school experiences were invited to the roundtable. The roundtable took place in an empty classroom on the campus of North Side. As it was during a work period built into the school day, students had the choice to come to the roundtable or attend a study hall session.

On the day of the roundtable, twelve students came to the classroom for the discussion. After a brief introduction to the research project, two students immediately decided not to stay for the roundtable. The first student cited a busy schedule, and the second student cited (privately) that his parents were undocumented immigrants and he did not feel comfortable



signing the informed consent. The remaining participants signed a consent form (Appendix D) before participating. An error with the recording device meant the roundtable discussion was not recorded as planned, but I took detailed notes during and after the discussion. This conversation enabled me to identify students who could both recall and speak freely about their educational experiences. Students were asked where they had gone to school, and to describe a favorite memory for their elementary, middle school years, and high school years (Appendix C).

At the end of the roundtable discussion, students were encouraged to fill out a sheet stating what level of interest they had in participating (Appendix G). Three students indicated they were not interested in participating. Two additional students filled out the sheet indicating that they might be interested in interviewing, and five students expressed that they were interested in participating in the study.

Of the five students who expressed interest, I had noticed how four of the students openly and freely shared about their school experience, which was one of the characteristics I was looking for in potential participants. Purposeful sampling was used to narrow down the interested participant list to five students for the interview process. Purposeful sampling enables a researcher to look for specific and appropriate traits in participants within the context of a specific topic or phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015).

After reaching out in person and via email, four participants scheduled their first interview to take place the week after the roundtable discussion. The fifth student who expressed interest, along with the two students who were uncertain, never returned follow-up text messages or emails and thus were not included in the study.

## **Data Collection**

Following the conclusion of the pilot study, the roundtable discussion, and the selection of participants for this research study, interviews began. I conducted at least two in-depth interviews with each participant, each one lasting approximately 60 minutes. I emailed participants the interview questions prior to meeting with them and requested that students look at any mementos (notes, yearbooks, etc.) from their elementary or middle school years prior to the first interview in hopes of helping with recall. At the conclusion of the first interview, I emailed questions for the second interview.

The interviews were structured around a modified version of Seidman's (2013) interview model. Seidman's (2013) model is divided into three distinct interviews with the first interview focused on life history and context, the second interview focused on details of the experience, and the third interview focused on a reflection of the experience. While Seidman's protocol of life history, details, and reflection as separate interviews is useful for adults, a modification for busy high-school students seemed appropriate. Therefore, I reformatted interview one to encompass life history, context, and details of experience, while the second interview was devoted to reflection on the experience (Appendix A). If students seemed uncomfortable or unwilling to interview for the entire hour, I modified the questions to only talk about one or two school experiences instead of all three (Elementary, Middle, and High School), to accommodate the situation. During both interviews, I used a research guide that included information to help students with recall of events during the participants' elementary and middle school years (Appendix B).

During the second interview, I had time set aside for students to communicate anything they remembered between the first and second interview regarding context and details of their K-

12 experience. I was willing to conduct a third interview with students if they had additional thoughts to share following the conclusion of the second interview, but none of the participants needed a third interview.

In order to help ascertain students' perspectives of teacher empathy there was a need to create a shared understanding about such a complex topic. As a result, I structured the interview questions on the three features of empathy identified by research and incorporated into Cooper's (2004) definition: thinking, feeling, and responding. These questions were used to assist students in describing how and why they perceived empathy had been expressed by an educator by removing the need to define empathy directly, or directly using the word empathy in any of the interview questions.

I asked participants to choose a meeting place either at the school or at a public place, such as a restaurant or coffee shop. All of the participants chose to meet at a local coffee shop. A digital recorder was used during every interview.

Phenomenologists disagree on the use of triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, I included field notes as a supplement to the interviews as they included basic information such as context and quick observations of the interview process, along with notes from student' comments during the roundtable discussion. Some of my notes gave me ideas for prompts I could use later on during the interviews. In addition to field notes, a field journal was used to track dates, pseudonyms, locations of interviews, and notes on my interviewing techniques to help guide the future interviews.

Seidman (2013) states that the spacing of interviews should be "from three days to a week apart...this allows time for participants to mull over the preceding interview but not enough time to lose the connection between the two" (p. 24). Following these recommendations,

each interview was conducted between three to seven days apart. The timing allowed me to conduct the first set of interviews within one week of the roundtable discussion. This timing allowed any thoughts or feelings brought up during the roundtable discussion to stay fresh in students' minds.

### **Data Analysis**

After the interviews were completed, the interviews were transcribed by a third party. Using a process of content analysis, I coded the data in the following three steps: initial, focused, and thematic. Initial coding is conducted by reading and reviewing all of the transcripts and field notes with the goal of identifying patterns or ideas in the participants' responses (Saldaña, 2016). Taylor-Powell and Renner's (2003) work on content analysis and their recommended steps of coding were also incorporated into the process of initial coding.

Creswell and Poth (2018) state that priori coding and redundancy coding can be used during the initial coding phase. The process of priori coding was looking for phrases and ideas that can be tied to the literature on empathy. Redundancy coding searches for phrases that were repeated often by participants. Initial coding allows the researcher to begin to identify common participant responses, while also eliminating superfluous information, which helps to reduce the overall amount of data to be processed (Hahn, 2008).

Focused coding followed initial coding, and was the process of searching for significant or the most frequent codes found in the interview transcripts (Charmaz, 2014). According to Saldaña (2016), "Focused coding enables you to compare newly constructed codes during this cycle across other participants' data to assess comparability and transferability" (p. 243). Through the process of focused coding themes began to appear in the data. While word choice varied among participants, the themes that emerged were consistent across the interviews. It is

important to note that some of the participants' responses did not align into a theme. In those cases, I tried to connect a participant's response to "events, structures, roles, and social forces operating in people's lives" (Seidman, 2013, p. 131). Thus, even non-themed responses were included for valuable insight into the phenomenon of teacher empathy.

Ultimately, the process of coding is to move the researcher from a list of many codes to five to seven themes across all the participant interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The themes that emerged during focused coding lead into the last step of coding, called thematic coding. Themes are consistent phrases or ideas that are found across multiple participants' responses (Kvale, 2007). Through the themes and individual insights from the data, I captured insights for the field of education around the concept of empathy. Specifically, I added student perceptions and lived experiences of teacher empathy to the research on teacher empathy in educational settings.

## **Validation**

Validation is a process that seeks to ensure that results from a study are sound and justified (Whittemore, Chase, Mandel, 2001). There are a variety of techniques a researcher can use to increase the validation of a study. I chose two processes, credibility and vividness, for this study.

Credibility is at the heart of validation. Credibility is described as method to ensure that any interpretations from participants are accurate and truthfully reflect their experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). One way to ensure credibility is through the use of member checking by seeking participant feedback (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All interpretations and conclusions were shared with the participants to verify that the students' voices had been accurately represented. Member

checks were conducted in person when possible. If a face-to-face meeting was not possible, communication was conducted through email or text messaging.

The second method of validation was through the use of vividness, or the detailed account of participants' experiences. Vividness allows readers "to personally experience and understand the phenomenon or context described" (Whittemore et al., 2001, p.531). This was done through detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences as well as direct quotes (Merriam, 2002). In the end, vividness allows readers to discern themes revealing students' experience of what they perceived to be teacher empathy.

### **Research Ethics**

An aspect of research ethics that mattered greatly to me during this study was my own code of conduct. Following the guidelines outlined by the American Psychological Association (n.d), I strived to hold myself to the high standards of a quality researcher. I viewed this as informing the ways I interacted with the literature, with participants, and with coding and analysis of participants' experiences. This also included asking non-leading questions of my participants in order to not bias my participant's perspectives or responses (Seidman, 2013).

The second area of research ethics of particular importance to me was informed consent. Each participant in the study was given a copy of the letter of informed consent (Appendix D) before the first interview. This helped to clearly communicate the expectations for the study. The informed consent letter included details about the intent of the study and the approximate amount of time necessary for each interview. The letter also contained information on how data would be gathered, stored, and distributed.

I confirmed that I had a signed letter of consent before beginning the interview process, and I also gave time for guardians to contact me if they had questions. I went over the informed

consent form with the participants and answered any questions they had before asking them to sign. I also articulated the benefits of participating in this study, which included the opportunity to share their school experiences in a one-on-one setting with an interested adult. One risk of participating in the study was the possibility of a participant's identity becoming known by deciphering the research study. I helped participants understand how confidentiality was handled, as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any time with no repercussions.

An informational letter (Appendix E) was also made available to any parent or guardian if requested. As the students were all 18-years-old, informed consent was only required of the student. However, I understand that even though students were of legal age by the time of the interview, including guardians in the recruitment process was a way to avoid potential conflict. If a guardian or parent had contacted me with concerns about their student's participation in the study, that student would have been replaced by another qualified candidate using the same purposeful sampling procedures detailed previously.

The last area of research ethics that were of concern to me was the confidentiality of my participants. Keeping my participants' identities confidential was of the utmost importance. I asked participants to choose suitable pseudonyms for the study, and I have taken great care to present the findings in such a way that individual identities can be kept confidential. Pseudonyms were also assigned to any educational settings referenced by students. Specific teacher's names were also removed from the study to protect both teacher and participant identities.

All research documents were secured on a password-protected computer and paper copies kept in a locked file box. All raw data from my study will be stored in a secured location for four years, after which time I will personally shred the documents. Lastly, I obtained permission to

conduct this study from the George University International Review Board before beginning data collection (Appendix F).

## **Conclusion**

Through this phenomenological study, I added to the current literature on teacher empathy by including student perspectives and lived experiences of this important phenomenon. Current research has shown that empathy is an important part of the educational system (Cooper, 2010; Demetriou, 2018; Warren, 2018). Students' perspectives are both needed and wanted in this area of educational research, and that this study helps to meet this need.



## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

This study examined the lived experiences of four high school seniors with teacher empathy over their K-12 school career, as revealed through the stories study participants told and what these stories revealed about the participants' lived experiences. Through the use of personal interviews, participants shared both their experiences and perceptions of the impact empathy shown by a teacher had on their lives. This chapter introduces the participants in this study and identifies the themes identified through data analysis.

### **Description of Participants**

All participants in this study were eighteen years of age at the outset of the interviews. While there are similarities among the study participants, given that they all attended North Side High School for the entirety of their high school education, there were also substantial differences among them. These differences include the schools they attended throughout their K-8 education, their family dynamics, and their plans after high school. This chapter begins with a description of each participant. Each participant individually selected a pseudonym for use throughout this document.

All participant quotes in this chapter and the following chapter have been kept verbatim. I chose not to edit grammatical errors or remove words such as “umm” or “like” from the quotes. My intention was to present the students' voices as authentically as possible. I also wanted to convey that the answers provided were not rote responses, but thoughtful answers.

### **Blaire**

When I first met Blaire at the coffee shop, she had just finished school for the day. She was nicely dressed and looked as if she was going to a job interview. Blaire spoke easily about her family and personal life. When speaking about her school experiences her answers tended to

be short and to the point. Blaire did not elaborate on her own about her school experiences, but when prompted with follow-up questions would give a little more detail. She was not overly gregarious, but was courteous throughout both interviews, and was the first participant to respond to text messages and emails.

Blair attended the same elementary school for all six years, the same middle school for all three years, and the same high school for all four years. She maintained a 3.86 GPA while taking AP classes and was involved in the Leadership program at North Side. Blair stated, "I've always been really focused on school, like that's my number one priority" (Blair, 3-15-2019). Blair also worked two jobs: one at a restaurant and one at a boutique. While she admitted that she does not need to work, she liked the independence and freedom that she earned from working. Blair's parents were divorced, so she and her sibling split their time between their mother's house during the week and their father's house on the weekends. Blair admitted that her school load and work schedule kept her pretty busy, but with any downtime she had, she liked to be with her friends. After high school, Blair planned on attending a university to study business administration with an emphasis in international business. She hoped to participate in a study abroad program while at university and live overseas at some point in her life after college.

### **Daisy**

Daisy came straight from school for both of her interviews. Her long hair was pulled up in a floppy ponytail and her backpack was stuffed full of school books the first time we met. Daisy spoke easily about her family, personal life, and school experiences. Throughout the interview Daisy laughed and smiled a lot. Daisy didn't need prompts in sharing. At the end of the first interview, Daisy expressed she was excited to meet again. At the end of

the second interview she spent a couple minutes talking about how amazing the interview experience had been and how grateful she was to be chosen to be part of it.

Daisy attended a preschool in Mexico before moving to the United States and attending a bilingual elementary school for kindergarten and first grade. Daisy's family then moved, and she attended a monolingual school for second through fifth grade. Daisy attended the same middle school for all three years and the same high school for all four years. Daisy's dream was to be an elementary school teacher, so she had chosen to continue taking AP classes during her senior year to help prepare her for the rigor of university. Besides her course schedule, Daisy was a cadet teacher at an elementary school where she assisted the teacher (grading, working with small groups, and preparing materials for lessons) while learning about a career in education. Daisy also babysat two or three times a week. Daisy's parents divorced when she was little, so she lived primarily with her mom and stepdad, but tried to visit her biological father as often as she could. Daisy described her blended family as a "very open and loud family. I am very close to all of them" (Daisy, 3-13-19). Outside of work and school, Daisy could be found spending time with either her family or friends. For fun, Daisy enjoyed making YouTube videos or going on adventures with her friends, which included day trips to nearby towns.

### **Serena**

Serena's small stature and quiet voice give a first impression that she may struggle to openly share. However, my experience while interviewing her proved otherwise. Serena easily shared about her family, personal life, and school experiences. At times Serena got off track while talking, but with a little bit of re-directing, she would always come back to the original question. Serena expressed at the end of the interviews that the interview process had been an enjoyable experience.

Serena attended the same elementary school for all six years, the same middle school for all three years, and the same high school for all four years. Serena worked four days a week at a local beauty salon as a receptionist. The job taught Serena a lot about how to deal with disgruntled customers, as well as how to make people feel welcomed. One of the things Serena looked forward to was getting to be home on Sundays where she could clean her room and get organized for the next week. Serena was feeling both excited and nervous about life after high school but was aware that the university track was not her goal. She was considering cosmetology school after working at the salon, and might take a business class at a community college to help her with this career. Serena described herself as being “really good at [doing social media]. I’m good at marketing and things like that” (Serena, 3-11-19). Serena’s parents were divorced, so she lived primarily with her mom, her mom’s boyfriend, her sibling, and her mom’s boyfriend’s children. She also regularly visited her father who is remarried and has two stepchildren. Serena both viewed and treated her stepsiblings as full biological siblings.

### **Wade**

Wade seemed nervous when we first sat down together. He fiddled with his watch and looked around the coffee shop constantly. However, once the interview started, he settled into a comfortable conversation with me. Wade spoke easily about his family, personal life, and school experiences, and would sometimes take five to ten minutes to answer one question. He tended to stay on point and didn’t need a lot of follow-up questions. At one point in the interview process, Wade expressed that getting to share some of his experiences felt almost like a therapy session (Wade, 3-8-19). After the second interview, Wade articulated that he was glad he had participated in this study and that he thought this was an important topic.

Wade attended three elementary schools for his first six years but had been able to attend the same middle school for all three years, and the same high school for all four years. Wade finished his high school classes at the beginning of March but chose to participate in the commencement ceremony in June. Between March and June, Wade planned to take a full course load at a community college to help start his college studies. Wade was a self-made businessman who took his hobby of owning shoes and created a “shoe flip” business, in which he bought, fixed up, and resold shoes. On top of this, Wade also worked at an animal shelter. Wade was getting ready for a significant change as his family was in the process of buying a bed and breakfast (B&B) on the East Coast. After his commencement ceremony, Wade moved and helped with the B&B for a while. He planned to eventually return to the area and attend a university to study business and marketing. Because of his passion for shoes, Wade’s dream internship and job would be to work for an organization like Nike because “It’s kind of a win-win, cause I [get to] work at a place that I really have liked for a long time and I get kind of benefits that are associated with, like, my hobby” (Wade, 3-8-19). Wade’s parents were married, and he had one older sibling. When Wade was not working, he could be found at his friend’s house after school. As Wade had to commute 35 minutes for school, it worked well to stay in town at his friends before making the drive home.

### **Data Analysis and Identification of Themes**

Following the roundtable discussion and after the selection process was completed, each participant was interviewed twice over the period of two weeks, with the first interview happening within one week of the roundtable discussion. At the conclusion of each interview, an audio file of the interview was sent to a professional transcription service. A written transcript of each interview was used for analysis purposes.

Using Saldaña's (2016) research on coding, as well as Taylor-Powell and Renner's (2003) research, I started the process of initial coding using content analysis. My first reading of each interview transcript was done while simultaneously listening to the audio recording in order to both read the transcripts and verify that the transcripts were accurate. I then re-read the transcript, and made notes on similar word usage, as well as any beginning themes, that stood out to me in my researcher's journal. During my third read, I began initial coding by incorporating both priori coding and redundancy coding. This was done by highlighting significant phrases, ideas, statements, or quotes that stood out to me either because they either could be tied to the literature on empathy or because they were repeated often by participants (Appendix H). In the initial coding, I identified over 400 phrases, ideas, statements, or quotes as being significant. Following the initial coding, I began the process of focused coding by generating a table (Appendix I) listing all the codes from each participant in its own column. Duplicate codes for the same participant were only entered into the table once. Codes from each participant were compared to each other, while also comparing codes to the original text in the transcriptions. Through this process, multiple themes emerged. The last process of coding incorporated thematic coding where I combined codes, ideas, and concepts into themes. This process took place over multiple days, with different variations of themes being both created and discarded. Finally, I was able to identify the following three themes:

- Creation of Personal Connection: teachers used a combination of humor, initiating conversations, personal stories, and universal treatment of all students to create personal connections with students

- Moments of Empathy: personal connection with teachers allowed moments of empathy to occur, primarily in one-on-one interactions, and either the teacher or student could initiate the moments of empathy
- Lasting Impact from Empathy: following the moments of empathy, students felt a stronger connection to their teacher, and in many cases still have lasting impacts from that experience.

Once the three themes had been identified, I went back through the transcripts looking for specific student quotes that best captured each theme. The next section provides more discussion of each theme, and also offers quotations that illustrate how participants expressed these themes.

### **Theme One: Creation of Personal Connection**

Students indicated the importance of a personal relationship with teachers as a kind of prerequisite to empathy experiences. Although none of the students spoke about this in chronological terms, before the student felt comfortable enough to approach the teacher with a need or to open up to the teacher once approached, a personal connection was necessary. Serena (3-11-19) best described why a personal connection was an essential pre-component of empathy:

If you didn't know that kid, you wouldn't know if their facial expressions are different that day because you don't pay attention to them. Like there's another kid in your class, but since you took that time to actually recognize the student and the student recognized you, then, then you know like, "Oh, shoot. This kid's kind of sad maybe, or they're not doing too well."

Four factors were found to be part of the process of building a personal connection between the teacher and the student: 1) the use of humor as a way to connect, 2) teachers sharing personal stories or experiences with students, 3) teachers initiating conversations, and 4) students

watching how teachers interacted with other students. This next section explores these four factors while using student quotes to illustrate each element.

**Use of humor.** Three of the four participants listed humor as a way to begin connecting with their teachers. Humor was found to happen in both large class settings and one-on-one interactions. A large class setting example was found in Daisy's statement describing a teacher as someone who, "tried to make class entertaining and not so boring and just the same thing every day. And she always would just try to joke around and stuff" (Daisy, 3-13-19). Serena also shared a large class setting example, "like he's a teacher that you just go and talk to and he, uh, like when taking attendance, that's the one thing, um, that he'll make connection with, he'll say your name and then he'll say something funny after" (Serena, 3-11-19). As Serena's prior quote indicated, humor enabled students to feel that their teachers could be approached in conversation. This is a significant aspect of having a personal connection; many of the stories of empathy came from situations where students were comfortable approaching a teacher.

Wade and Daisy echoed the importance of a teacher being seen as approachable through the use of humor. Wade said this about one of his teachers, "When talking to us, like, she's able to see us like, eye-to-eye. Like, she tells us about, like, she tells us, like funny stories that happened to her and, like, um...just, like, personal experience." He later added, "Once you tell us like funny stories that happened, like either what's happened to her, happened to her daughter, uh, then it was, I realized like, I could speak to her like, not in a teacher way" (Wade, 3-8-19). Daisy also added that, "Teachers that have a good sense of humor and you can joke around with them and stuff," and later added, "I feel like if you can laugh about something it's [the relationship] like way better" (Daisy, 3-13-19). Humor, as shown by the examples above, was a



combination of jokes and funny stories that enabled students to see teachers in a new way and open the door to personal connection.

**Personal stories.** Similar to humor, teachers sharing personal stories was also found to be a mechanism used to create personal connection. Three of the four students spoke about this theme in their interviews. The fourth students spoke indirectly to the importance of personal stories. Daisy shared a story from her early years in school, describing how her second-grade teacher shared her love of jump roping with the class and how this impacted Daisy:

I feel like that was really neat because like some teachers they're strictly teachers. They don't talk about their kids, their husband, what they do outside of school. You never know a lot about them, but teachers who you can talk to, they like, they give you like insight of their life (Daisy, 3-13-19).

Students believing that a teacher was someone they could talk to because the teacher had shared a personal story with them was also echoed in both Serena's and Wade's interviews. Serena stated, "I think it's easier when they're more personable, they aren't so much like the teacher from...what's that movie called? *[Ferris] Bueller's Day Off*" (Serena, 3-11-19). Wade added that he felt like his relationship with a teacher began "once we got her to tell us like, a personal story that had nothing to do with school" (Wade, 3-8-19). He went on to explain, "It was totally off topic from what we were learning, but it kind of just took me out of like that perspective that they were teachers and that's it" (Wade, 3-8-19).

The stories shared by teachers allowed the students to feel a closer connection. Blaire (3-18-19) added that this made classrooms a place to interact not only with the curriculum, but with each other and the teacher. Ultimately, each participant reiterated Wade who said, "Kinda like take a break sometimes from the curriculum of the school and kinda just like talk about your

personal lives” (Wade, 3-12-19). Like humor, personal stories began the process of breaking down barriers between teacher and student that allowed students to see their teacher in a new light and connect in a more personal way. Ultimately, personal stories enabled students to feel secure in later approaching teachers with personal concerns.

**Initiate conversations.** In creating a personal connection, students found that a teacher taking the initiative to start conversations was a significant aspect of building a relationship. Initiating conversation was seen in what students considered to be simple acts. As Daisy described it, “They ask about your life, they ask questions, they like, when you ask them something they give you responses but also maybe will ask you something back. It's just like creating a conversation” (Daisy, 3-13-19). Reflecting on the use of humor, Wade added that during class down time a teacher “could come over and talk to us and, like, we'd make jokes and things like that” (Wade, 3-8-19). Like humor and personal stories, students began to feel they could talk to their teachers because of the teacher taking the initiative to connect. Serena emphasized that initiating conversation was unique and needed. She said:

Like, a lot of teachers don't actually ask “How you are?” or like go up to you and be like, “How's your day?” or “Are you like, doing okay?” — Stuff like that. And he did. So, just him going out of his way and like asking, not just me, it was everybody too (Serena, 3-16-19).

The final portion of Serena’s comment about her teacher initiating conversation with all students was reiterated in Blaire’s interview when she said, “[Teacher Name] reached out to everybody. Like, doesn't matter who you were, like everybody in the class had, she had talked to [them] at some point.” She later added, “Like it didn't matter who you were, like she would talk to you, which is nice because a lot of teachers don't do that” (Blaire, 3-15-19). Blaire was able to see that

her teacher intently sought out every student in her class to talk to them, and Blaire felt that this was an important characteristic of her teacher.

An additional thread within the theme of teachers creating connection with students can be detected in these last two quotes. This last thread is the impact teachers had on the participants when students observed how their teachers interacted with other students.

**Teacher and other students.** All four students spoke about watching their teachers interact with a classmate and how this experience affected the way they saw that teacher or felt about that teacher. Wade shared a story about watching his friend and a teacher interact on a personal level and how it helped to start his own relationship with that teacher. He stated, “He [his friend] would talk to her, and that kind of gave me the confidence to talk to her. And then, like, I now, I'm able to talk to her just by myself, like, without help with him” (Wade, 3-8-19). Daisy added that her teacher would include everyone in conversations, even if the person said something that did not make sense or was not particularly accurate (Daisy, 3-13-19). Blaire also spoke about watching her teacher interact and felt that it showed that her teacher was “really good at understanding people” and made her feel like he could be someone she could go to, if needed (Blaire, 3-15-19). Serena shared a story of watching her teacher interact with an angry student in her class. Serena described the teacher as squatting down to the student’s level, face-to-face, and engaging with the student. Serena said:

She'll like make him feel like she's also one of him and like accept him for who he is and not saying, "Oh, I'm the teacher, listen to me." She'll [be] like, "What's wrong? Do you think that's good word choice?" Like, 'cause he's cussing at her and everything (Serena, 3-11-19).

While these interactions were not directed at the students, each participant felt that the teacher's actions opened the door to seeing them either in a new way or interacting with them in a more personal way.

All four of the threads of theme one led to students feeling a personal connection with their teachers. Students understood that teaching a subject matter is a priority in education, but also felt that creating personal connection should be a priority as well. Daisy stated it best when she said:

If you like what you teach, then be passionate about it, but also be passionate about creating relationships with students, and knowing that even if they don't try to make a relationship with [you], [you] should still try as much as [you] can because students realize that, and they see that even though at times it seems like they don't. Anything helps (Daisy, 3-19-19).

Overall, personal connection opened the door for empathic interactions to occur as seen in the next theme explores specific incidences where students felt teachers showed them empathy.

### **Theme Two: Moments of Empathy**

Students discussed that because of the personal connection with their teachers, they felt a sense of being comfortable in two distinct ways. The first was that students felt comfortable to show their authentic or true self, which could be a funnier or sillier side. Students also felt a sense of being comfortable with their teacher that enabled students to approach the teacher when hurting and to open up if their teacher interacted with them. This section explores the features of being comfortable, as well as specific examples of moments when students felt a teacher showed empathy.

**Comfortable to be yourself.** Before a student could share a need with a teacher, students spoke about the need to feel comfortable being authentic in their interactions with the teacher. All four students expressed that by feeling a personal connection with a teacher they felt comfortable showing their true or authentic self to that teacher. Daisy offered, “With her, I could be myself and like be funny, and she would understand it” (Daisy, 3-13-19). Wade reiterated this by saying, “But, like, [Teacher Name], like, I would actually talk to her” (Wade, 3-8-19). Students also expressed that part of being authentic with their teachers was that they did not have to worry about being judged. Serena added. “I think [Teacher Name] was just like a really personable teacher. Personable being like I could ... I could tell her anything without feeling like I'm being judged or anything like that” (Serena, 3-16-19). Blaire echoed Serena's thoughts. Blaire said she felt comfortable enough with her teacher that she could just “go to her if I had a problem. Like it's a lot easier to ask questions and bond with the teacher and not feel, like, afraid that they might judge you or, uh, not want to help you” (Blaire, 3-18-19). Wade described that he often has had anxiety when talking to teachers, but that when “you feel more comfortable, um, like you're not really afraid to say something dumb” (Wade, 3-8-19). Being free of the worry that students would be judged or look incompetent, as well as having a personal connection to a teacher, enabled students to be authentic with their teacher.

**Teacher is approachable.** Before students could talk about a personal problem or concern, or before students felt comfortable to open up to a teacher who came to them, students needed to know that their teacher was someone who they considered approachable. For Wade, this meant being able to see the teacher as a person, and feeling that it was “a lot easier to come to problems with a person who teaches because they have a lot of knowledge and they've also had experiences as a person, rather than [just as] a teacher” (Wade, 3-12-19). Serena described

needing to feel trust that the teacher she approached would be both open and welcoming to help, and would “not make me feel like I’m just a burden” (Serena, 3-11-19). Daisy and Blaire both added that they felt closer to their teacher when the teacher was approachable. Blaire stated, “She went through questions, and she helped me understand them better, which is, I don't think [is] something I could do with a lot of teachers” (Blaire, 3-15-19). Students, overall, felt that an approachable teacher was someone they could go to and ask for help.

The combination of feeling comfortable to be authentic with a teacher, and feeling comfortable to approach a teacher, helped students to reach out in times of need. This next section examines empathy scenarios shared by the participants during their K-12 school careers. The first set of scenarios discuss times students went to a teacher with an issue or need. The second set of scenarios reviews those times a teacher came to the student.

**Empathy scenario: student-initiated.** While the scenarios range vastly, two common threads could be seen in the stories. The first was that each teacher responded right away either with words or with a combination of words and actions. The second thread was that each story happened in a one-on-one setting between the teacher and the student.

The common elements of one-on-one interaction and an immediate reaction can be seen in the story Serena shared having a seat assignment between two bullying students during her freshmen year. When she approached her teacher and told him about what was happening, Serena described how the teacher apologized for putting her in that situation, while also taking action right away. Serena said, “He actually did something about it right then and there, not just be like, ‘Okay, next class we'll deal with it.’ He was like wanting to do it right then and there” (Serena, 3-11-19). Blaire had a similar situation when she approached her teacher with concerns about a rooming situation while on a school trip in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Feeling nervous about what the

roommate would say, Blaire approached her teacher when she had a moment to meet with her one-on-one. Blaire shared with her teacher about what had been happening and her discomfort with the rooming situation. Blaire's teacher responded that she understood and immediately orchestrated a room switch in a discrete way (Blaire, 3-15-19). Daisy added that she spoke one-on-one with her teacher about the academic struggles she was having in high school, and the teacher immediately responded by asking questions, listening, and letting Daisy openly share (Daisy, 3-13-19).

Feeling comfortable to approach a teacher allowed students to reach out in times of need by going to their teacher and meeting one-on-one. When students reached out in those moments of need, teachers responded right away with either words or words and action. This happened for almost every story shared by the student. In one story, a student reached out to a teacher, was rejected by that teacher, and then reached out to another teacher before being shown what he felt was empathy. That story began with Wade getting sick as an 8<sup>th</sup> grader while at school. He desperately needed help, but the school was participating in a fun day with yearbook signing, and staff were busy. Wade described what happened when he first reached out, was rejected, and then reached out again:

And so, I looked out into the hallway, like I peeked my head out, and I saw my gym teacher who's kind of an ass, but I needed help. And so, I called his name. And he looked at me and just walked away. And I was like, "All right, well, that's cool, I'll just sit here longer." Um, so I waited until my, I saw my leadership teacher walk around, and I said, "[Teacher Name], I really need some help." And she's like, "Are you sick?" And I was like, "Yeah, it's everywhere." And she's like, "Okay, let me help you." And she's kind of queasy herself, so she didn't- she didn't want to clean it up. But she knew I was in very

dire trouble by how my clothes looked and how the bathroom looked. Um, and so she got my friend that I was with to come get me with a bag of clothes. And like she called the custodian, and, like, kept it, like, kept it very down low. Like no one knew about it (Wade, 3-8-19).

Wade admits that he did not have a personal connection with his gym teacher, but in a moment of need he reached out in hopes that the teacher would respond, but the teacher did not.

However, when Wade reached out the second time, it was to a teacher that he did have a personal connection with, and this time his needs were met. Looking back over the story, Wade felt that the teacher who had shown him empathy did so because the teacher knew him and they had a relationship. Wade also believed that the other teacher did not show empathy in that situation because he did not really know Wade and probably “thought of me as, like, another delinquent student who's skipping out on the yearbook [signing in the cafeteria]” (Wade, 3-8-19).

Personal connection and feeling comfortable to both be oneself and approach teachers, led the participants to seek out teachers in times of need. Looking back on the stories shared, all four students believed that their teachers had shown an empathetic response. However, these were not the only experiences students recalled when talking about times students felt a teacher had shown them empathy. Each student also shared stories where the teacher initiated the conversation, which allowed the student to open up and share what was happening in their life.

**Empathy scenario: teacher-initiated.** All four students had times they could recall when the teacher first initiated a conversation, listened to the student's need, and then expressed what the student described as empathy. Similar to the student-initiated empathy scenarios, each of the stories of teacher-initiated empathy took place with teachers with whom students had a personal connection. Each scenario also occurred in a one-on-one setting. Blaire described a time



in high school where she had been having a hard day at school and had been crying earlier in the day. Blaire stated:

And I came to class and when I cry, I have like horrible red circles under my eyes and that I just looked horrible. And, uh, she asked me – she like took me out in the hall. She's like, "Are you okay? Is everything okay?" And she said that I could leave if I wanted to or like take a walk and come back, and I don't have to do anything if I didn't want to. And there was like concern for me (Blaire, 3-15-19).

Blaire was able to confide in her teacher the personal struggles she was having on that day. This was a teacher with whom Blaire had a personal connection. Similar to Blaire's experience, Daisy spoke about an incident that happened during her junior year of high school. Daisy was not doing well at school after learning that a friend had passed away in a car accident the night before.

Daisy described the interaction with her teacher:

And he had came up and he sat in front of me and he was just like, "Why are you here?" He was just like you – he's like – it was so like blunt, he's like, "Why are you here? You shouldn't be here if there's something has happened, like you don't have to go to school, you don't have to pretend like everything is okay." He asked me a lot of questions about how I was and he just came and literally sat next to me. And so, it was like crazy to see someone who usually just like, oh, a very like happy go lucky guy and he's like, oh, very talkative just like really be one-on-one with you (Daisy, 3-13-19).

Both of these stories showed Blaire and Daisy being approached by a teacher in a one-on-one situation, and having the teacher respond to the student in a way that the student perceived as being empathetic. This was also the case when Serena recalled a time a teacher initiated the conversation and later in the conversation exhibited behavior that she felt was empathy. Serena

was in middle school when her divorced parents met for dinner. It had been a while since both of her biological parents had been in the same room, let alone at the same table. Things did not go well and there ended up being a very public scene in the restaurant. Serena described what happened as she and her sibling got up to leave the restaurant and her teacher, who had been there by coincidence, approached her and her sister. Serena said:

[Teacher Name] was actually there [at the restaurant] and sitting at a different table. And, so we were walking out, like falling [down as we are leaving] because it was so embarrassing. But, she actually got up from her table. She gave us both a hug from the side. "It's all okay, like, if you ever need someone to talk to you. I'm here. Even though I'm a teacher, like come to my room, hang out with me, like we can talk about things, we can do crafts, like nothing matters. We don't have to talk about anything big. We can just hang out and like I'm here for you," and like [she's] hugging us and everything. And, that really, it really was like heartwarming to know, where like, she's our teacher and she cares this much about us, you know, and to take the time and like the initiative to stand up and go hug us even if it would be awkward if our dad and stepmom saw that (Serena, 3-11-19).

While not as public of an event as Serena's, Wade also had a time a teacher took the initiative to start a conversation with him and show him empathy. Wade was in fourth grade at a new school. As many of the students had been together since Kindergarten, Wade was struggling to break into the social scene. Wade explained that his teacher sat down with him and asked him about the kind of friends he had at his old school, as well as what he liked to do for fun. Later, his teacher introduced him to a couple of specific classmates who remain Wade's friends today. Wade said, "She was different 'cause she noticed my problem before I had a chance to even ask

her for help. So, she kinda just took that extra step and kinda jumping the gun to help me find friends” (Wade, 3-8-19).

Each of the stories shared reveals the lived experience of high school students with what they considered to be empathy from their teacher. The stories varied in context, but the common thread was students feeling enabled to share their needs with their teachers because of the personal connection they developed with each teacher. The next theme explores how students were able to articulate the impact their teachers had on their school experience and their lives.

### **Theme Three: Lasting Impact from Empathy**

Looking back over the stories the participants shared, three common threads were discovered about what followed the times when students felt a teacher had shown them empathy. This section will describe those threads, which are: a stronger connection or relationship being established, the feeling of connection to the teacher even years later, and the personal impact these experiences had on the students.

**Stronger relationship.** All four of the participants expressed in one way or another that they felt a stronger connection, or a strengthening of the relationship, after a teacher showed empathy. Wade provided on such example of how his relationship with a teacher changed after a moment of empathy. Wade said, “I didn't know too much about her before I had her class, but after I had her class, me and her were pretty close, yeah” (Wade, 3-12-19). Blaire described feeling as if her teacher was a nice person before that empathic interaction, but “I think even more highly of her now” (Blaire, 3-18-19). Similar to Wade and Blaire, Daisy and Serena also saw a change in the teacher-student relationship. Daisy stated, “We still had a really good relationship and obviously it became stronger because it just was very important to have someone who really cared, and me and her still are very close” (Daisy, 3-19-19). Serena echoed

this by saying, “Before that incident, I thought of her the same, um, and then I just felt a stronger relationship with her after that, so I think our relationship kind of changed” (Serena, 3-16-19).

Each student, when looking back on the stories they had shared about when a teacher had shown them empathy, felt a stronger connection to their teacher than just the initial personal connection. While the initial personal connection was necessary to open the door for moments of empathy, a stronger relationship was the result of the moment of empathy.

**Feeling connected years later.** The next thread uncovered as students reflected on the stories they shared about teacher empathy was the idea that students still feel a connection to their teachers, even years later. Three of the four participants stated that if they saw the teacher they found to be empathetic in their past at school or at a store today, they would still feel a connection with their teacher. Serena talked about how she will never forget her teacher, and still feels close to her even though she does not have that teacher for any of her classes. Daisy stated that if she saw her teacher today, “It would still be the same. Like, give me a big hug, ask me how I’m doing. It would never be, like, we haven’t seen each other in, like, four years kind of thing” (Daisy, 3-13-19). Wade echoed this statement as he talked about meeting up with his fourth-grade teacher years later: “It wasn’t like awkward being like, ‘Oh, I haven’t seen you for three years, and you used to be my old teacher.’ It was like, ‘Oh, it’s my old teacher who kinda helped me warm up to the school’” (Wade, 3-12-19). The stronger connection that first resulted from the times teachers showed students empathy resulted in a lasting impact on how the students felt towards those teachers. However, this was not the only lasting impact the moments of empathy had on the students, as some of the students also described a personal impact.

**Long-term Impact.** Looking back over the times that the participants felt a teacher showed them empathy, each one had a specific way they felt those moments had impacted them.

Blaire felt that after experiencing empathy from teachers she has come to believe “that teachers are there for you. Like, they have your best interest and, uh, want to help you when they can, most of the time, at least” (Blaire, 3-18-19). Wade believes his leadership teacher’s empathic response to his sickness, as compared to the gym teacher’s response, has forever changed how he views teachers. Wade stated:

Like I feel like if [Teacher Name] wasn't there, it would have definitely changed how I look at teachers like forever probably, just because like the only time I've ever asked for help, not academically, was that, and if I felt I couldn't get help from [the gym teacher], like who else would I get help from? (Wade, 3-8-19).

Wade later added, “I guess like [Teacher Name] was like my saving grace or whatever, 'cause like she was really helpful and, uh, made sure I didn't feel like an idiot (Wade, 3-8-19).

For Serena and Daisy, the moments of empathy personally impacted them in profound ways. Looking back on the interaction with her teacher, Serena could identify two distinct ways her teacher’s empathy had impacted her. The first was regarding Serena’s confidence to speak up in classes. Serena said:

I used to really struggle with raising my hand in class and like admitting that I'm not understanding something. And now I'm more outgoing, um, and I'll raise my hand and be like what the heck is going on. I didn't used to be like that and I think it's because of her. She said, "Don't be afraid. Like that's their job to teach you and if you're not understanding, then say something. " So, I think her, just going over things with me when I'm not understanding them... like [I don't] have to do that anymore because now I'm like actually taking action and doing that [for] myself instead of her teaching me again” (Serena, 3-16-19).

The other significant impact on Serena was in relation to her interactions with peers. Serena now believes:

[I] will never, like just sit back and look at situations that aren't right and then just watch it happen. Um, I'd definitely step in a lot more, even if it's not, like my place to step in. If I see somebody really needing my help, someone to stand up for them or somebody to just, like have a shoulder to cry on, I'm definitely that person (Serena, 3-16-19).

For Daisy, these moments had a profound influence on her decision to become an elementary teacher. She said, "I feel like it's the reason why I want to be an elementary school teacher like because I know how much teachers can shape your life and how much of an impact they have on everybody" (Daisy, 3-13-19).

All four of the participants were able to look back on moments when they felt empathy had been expressed to them by a teacher. From these moments, participants were able to identify how these experiences shaped their opinions of their teachers, their school experience, and even their own lives.

## **Summary**

Each of the four participants offered a unique perspective and presented different situations in which they had experienced empathy from a teacher. From the stories students shared, three themes became evident. The first theme was the creation of personal connection, and students verbalized that before the moments of empathy occurred, some relationship building transpired through personal connection. Humor and personal stories were just two of the ways teachers were able to create personal connection with students.

The second theme from the data was exploring specific moments of empathy. Participants described a variety of experiences and scenarios in which empathy was shown.

These stories included being a new student at a school, a family incident at a public restaurant, a time when a student was grieving, a time when a student was upset, getting sick at school, academic struggles, an issue with a roommate, and a bullying situation. Upon reflection, students felt that these moments of empathy had profoundly impacted their lives in different ways.

The last theme studied how the moments of empathy created a lasting impact on students. For students, moments of empathy influenced how they view teachers, how they interact with others, students' academic standing, and for one student, her future career choice.

The essence of the lived experience of these high school seniors with regards to teacher empathy can be summarized as follows: students felt safe to openly share a need with teachers they considered to be trustworthy. In return, the teachers responded in a way that students felt empathy had been shown to them, and this moment of empathy impacted students both personally and academically. Chapter Five provides a discussion of these results. Implications and recommendations for practice, as well as recommendations for further research are also discussed.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This phenomenological study was conducted to examine the lived experiences of students regarding times they felt a teacher had shown them empathy. Four high school seniors participated in this study by looking back over their K-12 school career. Research on empathy in education has yielded useful information, but questions concerning students' perceptions and experiences have not been adequately addressed. This study sought to make a contribution to filling the gap in empathy literature regarding inquiry into students' experiences with teachers they perceived as being empathetic. Participant stories generated three themes that offer a student's perspective of experiencing teacher empathy:

- **Creation of Personal Connection:** Teachers used a combination of humor, initiating conversations, personal stories, and universal treatment of all students to create personal connections with students
- **Moments of Empathy:** Personal connection with teachers allowed moments of empathy to occur, primarily in one-on-one interactions, and either the teacher or student could initiate the moments of empathy
- **Lasting Impact from Empathy:** Following the moments of empathy, students felt a stronger connection to their teacher, and in many cases still have lasting impacts from that experience.

This chapter presents what this study has revealed about students' lived experience of teacher empathy, and how these findings provide answers to the research questions. Findings are also discussed in terms of how they align to current research, and specifically Cooper's (2004, 2010) empathy research. Implications and recommendations for practice, recommendations for further research, and a conclusion will follow.



## **Discussion of Findings**

This study was guided by the following research question:

### *Primary Research Question*

When reflecting on their K-12 schooling journey, what stories do high schoolers tell regarding empathetic interactions with their teachers? What do these stories reveal about their lived experience of empathy in school?

The primary question was supported by the following two questions:

### *Sub Research Question 1*

What is the nature of these experiences, in terms of the context, situation, or need pertaining to the empathy they experienced?

### *Sub Research Question 2*

How do empathetic experiences appear to shape the students' opinions of their teachers, their learning, and their lives?

Using personal interviews, students shared their experiences with teachers while providing insights into moments they felt a teacher had shown them empathy. Through this process, the biggest and most surprising finding is what I have termed as The Trajectory of Empathy. The findings in Theme Two around moments of empathy were expected as the purpose of this study was to explore students' lived experiences with empathy. However, I was surprised to find students speak about what occurred before empathy was shown and what occurred as a result of empathy being shown. My surprise came out of believing that this research study would be focused on only the moments of empathy and the situations surrounding these moments. The finding of The Trajectory of Empathy is significant in understanding that a

moment of empathy is predicated by actions from the teacher, and that a moment of empathy can have long-term effects on students.

While The Trajectory of Empathy was the biggest and most surprising find in this study, there were other findings as well. In the next section, answers to the research questions drawn from additional findings from the study are presented.

### **Primary Research Question**

*When reflecting on their K-12 schooling journey, what stories do high schoolers tell regarding empathetic interactions with teachers? What do these stories reveal about their lived experience of empathy in school?*

In all the students' stories, five elements were apparent: personal connection happened in large settings, empathetic interactions happened in one-on-one interactions, the students felt comfortable to openly sharing what was going on in their lives, the teacher responded in some way to students, and students felt resolution after the empathetic encounter. The first element was captured in *Creation of Personal Connection* theme and was related to students' need to have a personal connection with their teacher, though one-on-one moments were not necessary to create this personal connection. Overwhelmingly, students described how personal connections, as well as the beginning of a relationship with a teacher, began in whole class settings. When humor and personal stories were used in whole class settings, students felt they could relate to their teacher, while also feeling a connection to their teacher. This finding is congruent with the empathy work of Schutz and Decuir (2002), as well as Cooper's (2004, 2010) research on "functional empathy" being used to connect with students in large class settings. Cooper (2004) writes, "Maintaining thirty, rich mental models simultaneously is very difficult, so to

cope...teachers treat the group as if they were one person...[by] using shared humour to create a bond with a group” (p. 17).

Students in this study also recognized the pressures teachers have, and they did not expect the teacher to spend one-on-one time with every student every class. Rather, participants reported that whole group check-ins, even once a week, work just as well. The *Creation of Personal Connection* theme describes how a personal connection is an important aspect of teacher empathy, but that personal connection could happen in whole class settings.

While personal connection occurred in large class settings, moments of empathy occurred in one-on-one settings, as described in the *Moments of Empathy* theme. In all the stories shared, students described meeting one-on-one with their teacher and expressing a personal need. It did not matter who initiated the conversation. This finding supports Cooper’s (2004, 2010) empathy work and specifically the type of empathy described as “profound empathy,” which she found occurs primarily in one-on-one situations and is considered a powerful and transformative empathy for students.

In addition to meeting one-on-one, students described a need to feel comfortable to open up to a teacher and discuss what was happening in their lives. Ultimately, students needed to feel that the teacher would listen and not make them feel foolish before sharing. Only once in the interviews did a student tell a story about reaching out to a teacher with whom the participant did not have a personal connection. The ability for students to freely share what was happening in their personal lives and have teachers show empathy to the students supports the empathy research of Preston and Hofelich (2012) who stated, “The degree to which one can empathize with or understand another depends upon [interactions] between how the target and observer express themselves...even empathic subjects cannot accurately gauge the emotion of targets who

are not expressive” (p. 28). This study confirms Preston and Hofelich’s (2012) research from the student experience perspective, finding that before students can openly express themselves to a teacher, the teacher has the first responsibility to create a personal connection with the students that allows them to feel comfortable enough to share.

When telling stories about empathetic interactions with teachers, all students in this study remembered a time when a specific need was met by a teacher they perceived as empathetic. Students shared with a teacher about something difficult that was happening in their lives and involved a need in order to overcome the difficulty. These needs ranged from personal needs (e.g., grieving for a loss, upset about life) to academic needs (e.g., struggling with a class, struggling with school). As captured in the *Moment of Empathy* theme, students described how empathetic teachers responded to their needs with either words or actions or a combination of the two. Baron-Cohen (2011) states, “There are at least two stages in empathy: recognition and response. Both are needed, if you have the former without the latter you have not empathized at all” (p. 11). Students’ stories confirmed Baron-Cohen’s (2011) research as many of the stories described a time when a teacher recognized there was an issue happening, approached the student, and then responded to the student after learning about the student’s specific need.

The last element revealed by students’ stories was that a teacher’s empathetic response led students to feel a sense of resolution about what was happening in their lives as all four students recalled how they felt relief after experiencing empathy from their teachers. This finding supports the work of Warren (2018) who wrote, “The application of empathy ends when the target- the individual on the receiving end of an empathetic response- confirms that the observer’s actions effectively alleviate their personal distress” (p. 171). For students, empathy only occurred when they felt some relief after interacting with their teachers. This is an important

aspect of empathy. If a student does not feel that his or her teachers have given them relief, through either words or actions, then the student may not see a teacher's actions as empathetic.

This section explored five elements revealed in student's stories regarding the lived experience of teacher empathy in a K-12 setting. These five elements were: personal connection happened in large settings, empathetic interactions happened in one-on-one interactions, the students felt comfortable to openly share what was going on in their life, the teacher responded in some way to students, and students felt resolution after the empathetic encounter. In the next section, answers to the sub research questions drawn from the findings will be presented. At times in the section on the primary research question, findings that also applied to the sub-research questions were discussed. However, specific findings and empathy research related to each of the sub research questions is presented below.

### **Sub Research Question One**

*What is the nature of these experiences, in terms of context, situation, or need pertaining to the empathy they experienced?*

In all the stories shared, students felt comfortable approaching or being approached by a teacher, as detailed in the *Creation of Personal Connection* theme. This in turn led to what the *Moment of Empathy* theme described, as students were able to share a personal need with their teacher. In addition to students feeling comfortable to share their need with their teacher, all empathy interactions happened in one-on-one settings.

Another common aspect of each participant's story was that empathetic experiences could be initiated by either a teacher or a student. This supports the work of Tettegah and Anderson (2007) who wrote, "Creating supportive learning environments is one of the primary

goals in educational psychology and should include empathic responses whether the behavior was initiated by the student or teacher” (p. 74).

### **Sub Research Question Two**

*How do empathetic experiences appear to shape the students’ opinions of their teachers, their learning, and their lives?*

Reflecting back on empathetic experiences with teachers, students could see many areas of their lives that were affected by these interactions. The *Lasting Impact from Empathy* theme captures these lasting effects. An example of this impact was seen in Wade’s interview. The contrast of an un-empathetic response with an empathetic response to a specific need helped Wade to see how much of a difference one negative situation could have had on his life. However, when the second teacher reached out and demonstrated empathy, it helped Wade continue to trust that teachers could be approached in times of need as he moved on in his school career.

How the participants viewed teachers was not the only lasting impact empathetic experiences had on students. Students mentioned that the ways they interact with others, as well as their choices for future careers, were additional long-term effects from teachers showing them empathy. Another impact of teacher empathy on students was related to academic struggles. Blaire, Serena, and Daisy all mentioned how the support and help received from teachers impacted their academic standing in certain classes, and in some cases, their overall academic standing. Blaire shared about her experience in an AP Science class and how she expressed to the teacher her struggle with exams. Daisy and Serena both described similar experiences. Serena also described how her teacher coached her on how to get help in other classes by feeling empowered to raise her hand or speak up when something was confusing.

The *Lasting Impact from Empathy* theme that emerged from students' stories reaffirms the studies of Baird, Gunstone, Penna, Fensham, and White (1990) and Logan and Skamp (2008). Baird et al. (1990) pointed to the connection between the teacher and students, through emotion and expression, as having a direct correlation with teachers both keeping students engaged and successfully teaching their subject matter. Logan and Skamp (2008) added that listening to students and responding to feedback from students assisted in reversing the decline in both students' interest and attitudes about an academic subject.

Overall, when students reflected back on the moments when a teacher had exhibited empathy, students felt a stronger connection or a deeper relationship with their teachers. The stories shared as exemplars of the *Moments of Empathy* theme illustrate how teachers affected students' well-being, as well as their academic standing. These findings both support and extend Cooper's (2004, 2010) empathy research. While Cooper (2004) interviewed teachers in order to understand the impact of empathy in education, this study has taken the student perspective and arrived at similar conclusions regarding what predates a moment of empathy, what occurs in a moment of empathy, and the personal impact of teacher empathy on students. This study also extends Cooper's (2004, 2010) qualitative research on teacher empathy. Cooper (2004, 2010) found that teachers were able to describe immediate impacts of teacher empathy on students. However, long-term impacts, looking back even years later, were not included in her research. This study has added the students' perspective on teacher empathy, and broadened the research exploring the long-term, personal impact of empathy on students.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

This study and previous research on empathy assert that teacher empathy profoundly affects students and is needed in education. Based upon the findings of the present study, two

implication for practice and one recommendation for policy are proposed. This section begins by discussing the need for teachers to extend their concern and focus beyond the curriculum, advocate for students' well-being, and advocate for the opportunity to create relationships. A concluding section will provide a recommendation that policy to move away from defining student success primarily through standardized achievement scores.

### **Beyond the Curriculum**

Teachers are expected to get through a lot of curriculum with students in one year. As a teacher, I understand the pressure of instructional and curricular goals. However, there is also a need to give priority to the emotional aspect of students within educational settings. This study has provided concrete examples of teachers going beyond the curriculum in order to make a significant impact on students' lives. Additionally, students in the study expressed a desire to connect with their teachers.

The participants also recognized that this effort takes time, but hoped that teachers would believe that creating a personal connection is just as important as the teaching of content. Choosing not to see the benefits of connecting with students, or failing to understand the emotional aspect of education, can have devastating consequences. Failure to connect with students leads students to believe that teachers are only "interested in one particular, de-contextualized aspect of [the] student, in this case learning" (McHugh, Horner, Colditz, & Wallace, 2013, p.20). Students need to have teachers they can turn to in their times of need. Teachers who are seen as approachable and safe exhibit both knowledge of their subject and knowledge of their students.



## **Time to Advocate**

Some teachers may already agree that creating a personal connection with students is a valuable and necessary component of the classroom. Other teachers may come to believe in the benefits of seeking a more holistic view of their students as a result of educational research on this topic. For teachers who want to incorporate opportunities to create personal connection with students, the challenge of current, heavy-laden workloads and tight schedules can be daunting. I propose that the time has come for teachers to advocate on behalf of themselves and their students to their administrators and district officials concerning the need to open up daily or weekly time slots in their schedules to create moments of connection with students. When schedules are being created at the beginning of the year, teachers and administrators need to sit down and consciously discuss how teachers can incorporate time for personal connection within the current curriculum workload.

Teachers need to feel empowered to advocate for built-in community relationship time in the classroom. As the experiences of the participants in this study illustrate, teachers do not need to do large activities to create connection with students. This can be small chunks of time each class period to do either large group bonding activities or have time set aside to meet with students in small groups. Teachers can use these times of creating personal connection to explore how the class is going academically while also asking about students' personal well-being. In my classroom, at the elementary level, I set aside the last thirty minutes of each Friday for a fun time. Students do puzzles, draw pictures, build with Legos, and have Checkers competitions. I use this time to walk around, sit on the floor or at their desks, and talk one-on-one with students or with small groups of students. I ask questions and listen intently. In essence, I create personal contact and personal connection with each of my students without an academic agenda. This is

just one example from elementary level practice, but teachers need to both see the importance of this kind of interaction and advocate to have this time with their students. Only when teachers and others who are working in classrooms begin to advocate for time to connect can changes begin.

### **Changing perspectives**

Once teachers and others working directly with students begin to see the importance of personal connection, and follow through with advocating for time with students, administrators and policy-makers need to also believe in the priority of creating personal connections between teachers and students. Policy-makers need to take a holistic view to student success.

In our current educational system, we view student success as meeting benchmarks and standardized test scores. I am not advocating discarding the use of testing as a source of information concerning students' progress. I am advocating that this not be the sole lens we use when viewing student success. So often in education, we hear how students are being made into global citizens who will both work in and give back to their communities. Teachers cannot be part of creating the next generation of global citizens who care, give back, and think about others if teachers themselves do not have time to engage in care and concern with their students. We need to allow teachers the opportunity to reach out and influence students academically and emotionally.

Before teachers can engage in empathy, they need time to build rapport and personal connection. Even while engaging in moments of empathy, teachers need time to respond to students. Actively listening to a student and responding to a student can happen in a quick moment, but sometimes it takes longer. Administrators, district-level leaders, and policymakers need to be cognizant that students are not blank, emotionless beings who sit in classrooms

waiting to be filled with knowledge. Students need to have time to share when things are heavy or hurting before they can fully engage in the mental process of learning. While there may be standardized assessments available to measure student's well-being, I believe a more comprehensive and effective approach is to turn to the individuals working directly with students, the teachers in the classroom. As such, we must return to relying on those we have placed our faith in, the teachers in the classroom. We must have confidence that teachers know what is best for their students, and we must trust that they can see the growth and change necessary in our students becoming the next generation of global citizens who care for others and contribute to society in meaningful ways.

Lastly, I recognize that many administrators believe that social emotional learning and personal connection are valuable aspects of a student's education. In some cases, the changing of perspective is not for the administrator, but for the administrator's staff. In those situations, the administrator faces the challenge of developing a more empathetic teaching staff. This can be a difficult process and cannot happen in a semester or even one school year. Changing teachers' perspectives about social emotional learning, while incorporating empathy into their practices, takes patience, perseverance, and time. Ultimately, it is about changing the school culture in how teachers both view and interact with students.

A practical suggestion to begin the process of changing teachers' perspectives, is the presentation of research results from incorporating empathy into the classroom. These results can include how students can be more engaged and interested in the academic material when a teacher engages in empathy (Baird, et al., 1990; Logan & Skamp, 2008). Another suggestion is the use of case studies and self-reflection activities during professional development time. Teachers could be encouraged to take an in-depth look into a past students' life with questions

centered on what was happening in the students' life, what was the teacher feeling about the student, and what could the teacher have done either in words or words and actions to meet the student's need. An additional aspect to this case study and self-reflection time would be the strategic grouping of teachers who struggle with this self-reflection process, or with engaging in empathy, with teachers who are more open to looking at the emotional social aspect of education. Administrators could also allow classroom visits between staff to exemplify how incorporating personal connection is happening in each teacher's classroom. Lastly, students can be included in the process of creating personal connection by asking them about the times they felt included and connected in their classroom.

At times, teachers can feel like suggestions or ideas are just one more thing to add to their full plate. Helping teachers understand that empathy will actually make the classroom run even smoother can be the encouragement teachers need to start The Trajectory of Empathy through personal connection. Lastly, administrators often set the culture for their school. By having an administrator model empathy to both their staff and students, they can begin to demonstrate both the impact and value of empathy in educational settings.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study examined the lived experiences of four high school seniors. Students' insights and perspectives on the times they had experienced a need being met through a teacher's empathetic response has significantly added to research on empathy and teacher empathy in an educational setting. However, the student population in the United States is diverse, and further research could explore the impact of empathy on different demographics within that population. This study was conducted in a high school, so further research is needed with middle and elementary students. Students who have been part of a special education program are another

demographic worth exploring for the topic of teacher empathy. Students of different ethnicities, students who started school at an early or late age, as well as students who are children of immigrant families also offer unique perspectives about empathy in education. While this study focused on students who had been part of a public school, additional research could include students who have come through a variety of educational settings, such as an online public school, a private school setting, or a homeschool setting.

For this study I looked at the times when students felt empathy had been shown to them by a teacher. However, one of the stories shared was about a time when empathy was not shown. That experience had a profound impact on the student. Future studies could investigate the experience of students who sought empathy from teachers but it was not shown. The context of those situations, as well as the need that went unmet, would offer additional insights into the topic of empathy.

Within the different types of student populations that could be incorporated into future research, some important questions have come forth from this study. The three questions that have emerged from this study are: (a) does a student's own empathy impact their receptivity to empathy from a teacher; (b) can empathy be taught to teachers as this study identified specific teacher behaviors as part of The Trajectory of Empathy; (c) would students describe teacher empathy as being a rare or common aspect of teachers. These questions need to be considered when contemplating future studies, both by myself and others.

Lastly, when creating this study I chose to not include the word "empathy" in any of the interview questions. My own experience in talking with other adults about empathy had led me to wrongly assume that having the word empathy in my interview questions would confuse students. However, my experience with the students during the interview process has changed

my perspective. I believe that high school seniors are more than capable to speak both eloquently and in-detail about empathy, and students would not be confused by having the word empathy in interview questions. In future studies, I plan to incorporate the word empathy into my interview questions, and I would like to also seek students' definitions of empathy. I would encourage other researchers to consider this change in their own research projects around teacher empathy from a student perspective.

### **Conclusion**

There is still much to be discovered about empathy, especially in the context of schooling. In 2018, Van Dijke et al. published an article about analyzing empathy as part of care ethics. In the conclusion section they wrote:

In contrast to the abundance of quantitative or experimental studies on empathy, qualitative research on empathy is surprisingly scarce...The lack of research on meanings and experiences of empathy in real-life situations and concrete care practices tends to make the concept “flat” and overly abstract, and we lose sight of the context in which empathy emerges (p.8).

While the findings from this study cannot be generalized, an attempt was made to address the gap in the empathy research. Cooper's (2004, 2010) research on teacher empathy looked at the impact of empathy on education, and more specifically, students. This study approached empathy using a viewpoint that was different from Cooper (2004, 2010) by exploring the perspectives of students. The findings from this study confirm the importance of empathy in education and the aspects of teacher empathy that Cooper identified from the perspective of students. This study extended that work by describing the long-term effects of empathy in

students' lives. My hope is that others will join me in continuing to seek out the perspectives and insights of students concerning empathy in education.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (STUDENTS' COPY)

##### Interview 1

###### Focused Life History

1. Tell me about you. How old are you? What do you do for fun outside of school?
2. Describe to me your family. Who is in your family? Where do you live?
3. Tell me about your experience up to this point in your school experience. Where have you gone to school? What have you enjoyed about school?

###### Understanding Empathy

4. What does it mean to you to have a teacher accept you? What does this look and feel like?
5. What do you see or feel that tells you a teacher is feeling what you are feeling?
6. What does it mean when a teacher finds a solution to your needs?

###### Details of the Experience

7. Thinking back to your elementary school years, tell me about a time you felt like a teacher accepted you, knew what you were feeling, and meet a need you had?
8. Describe for me a time you when you were in middle school, and a teacher who accepted you & felt what you were feeling, found a solution to a need.
9. Lastly, looking back over the last 3 ½ years of high school, tell me about a time you felt like a teacher accepted you, knew what you were feeling, and meet a need you had?

##### Interview 2

###### Reflection on the Meaning

- 1) Is there anything that has come up for you since our last meeting?

###### Elementary School Years

2. Looking back on the scenarios you shared a time when a teacher accepted you, felt what you were feeling, and found a solution to your needs. Why did you recall this interaction?
3. Looking at your relationship before and after the interaction, in what ways did your relationship change with your teacher after the interaction?



4. Describe how this interaction has impacted how you see yourself as well as your life.

*Middle School Years*

5. Looking back on the scenarios you shared a time when a teacher accepted you, felt what you were feeling, and found a solution to your needs. Why did you recall this interaction?
6. Looking at your relationship before and after the interaction, in what ways did your relationship change with your teacher after the interaction?
7. Describe how this interaction has impacted how you see yourself as well as your life.

*High School Years*

8. Looking back on the scenarios you shared a time when a teacher accepted you, felt what you were feeling, and found a solution to your needs. Why did you recall this interaction?
9. Looking at your relationship before and after the interaction, in what ways did your relationship change with your teacher after the interaction?
10. Describe how this interaction has impacted how you see yourself as well as your life.
11. In closing, knowing that teachers will be reading this study to learn about students' perspectives of empathy, is there anything else you would like to add at this time?

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (RESEARCHER'S COPY)

#### Interview 1

##### Focused Life History

1. Tell me about you. How old are you? What do you do for fun outside of school?
2. Describe to me your family. Who is in your family? Where do you live?
3. Tell me about your experience up to this point in your school experience. Where have you gone to school? What have you enjoyed about school?
4. What does it mean to you to have a teacher accept you? What does this look and feel like?
5. What do you see or feel that tells you a teacher is feeling what you are feeling?
6. What does it mean when a teacher finds a solution to your needs?

##### Details of the Experience

Considering what you have shared about a teacher accepting you, feeling what you are feeling, and finding a solution, I would now like to look back on your school experiences. Let's first start by looking back at your elementary school years.

You were in elementary school around 2006-2012 approximately. I know that is a long time ago, so here are some things that were happening during that time. TV shows on during that time were Hannah Montana, SpongeBob SquarePants, Johnny Bravo, and Pokémon. Some movies that came out were the Kung Fu Panda series, Ice Age movie series, and some of the Harry Potter movies.

Which teachers do you recall from your elementary school teachers?

7. **Thinking back to those teachers in elementary school that you can remember, tell me about a time you felt like a teacher accepted you, knew what you were feeling, and meet a need you had?**

Where were you? What was happening? How did you feel at the time?

Let's transition now to middle school. You were in middle school around 2012-2015 approximately. I know middle school isn't as long ago as Elementary school, but here are some things that were happening during that time. Some TV shows on during that time were Glee, Awkward, Switched at Birth, and Pretty Little Liars. Some movies that came out during that time were the Hunger games, Ender's games, the Hobbit series, and some of the Avengers movies (Iron Man 3, Thor).

Which teachers do you remember from your middle school years?

8. **Thinking back to those teachers in middle school that you can remember, tell me about a time you felt like a teacher accepted you, knew what you were feeling, and meet a need you had?**

Where were you? What was happening? How did you feel at the time?

9. **Let's finish our time by looking at the last 3 ½ years of high school, thinking about the teachers who have had, tell me about a time you felt like a teacher accepted you, knew what you were feeling, and meet a need you had?**

Where were you? What was happening? How did you feel at the time?

## **Interview 2**

### *Reflection on the Meaning*

Thank you for meeting with me again today. You provided lots of information at our first interview. I know that it's been a few days since your first interview, and that sometimes people will recall things after the interview is over.

1. Is there anything that has come up for you since our last meeting?

### *Elementary School Years*

2. Looking back on the scenarios you shared a time when a teacher accepted you, felt what you were feeling, and found a solution to your needs. Why did you recall this interaction?
3. Looking at your relationship before and after the interaction, in what ways did your relationship change with your teacher after the interaction?
4. Describe how this interaction has impacted how you see yourself as well as your life.

### *Middle School Years*

5. Looking back on the scenarios you shared a time when a teacher accepted you, felt what you were feeling, and found a solution to your needs. Why did you recall this interaction?
6. Looking at your relationship before and after the interaction, in what ways did your relationship change with your teacher after the interaction?
7. Describe how this interaction has impacted how you see yourself as well as your life.

### *High School Years*

8. Looking back on the scenarios you shared a time when a teacher accepted you, felt what you were feeling, and found a solution to your needs. Why did you recall this interaction?

9. Looking at your relationship before and after the interaction, in what ways did your relationship change with your teacher after the interaction?
10. Describe how this interaction has impacted how you see yourself as well as your life.
11. In closing, knowing that teachers will be reading this study to learn about students' perspectives of empathy, is there anything else you would like to add at this time?

## **APPENDIX C**

### **ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION GUIDE**

1. Introduce Self & Research Project
2. Pass out Consent Forms
3. Discuss Consent Forms & Ask Students to Sign
4. Collect Consent Forms & Turn on Recording
5. Questions
  - 1) Tell the group your name and where you have gone to school since Kindergarten.
  - 2) Looking back on your elementary and middle school years, tell the group about a favorite school memory. It can be something that happened in or out of class, but happened at school.
  - 3) Looking back on your high school years, tell the group about a favorite school memory.
6. Pass out Information Sheets
7. Thank everyone for coming!

## APPENDIX D

### LETTER OF CONSENT FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

#### Exploring High School Seniors' Perception of Teacher Empathy

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study exploring teacher empathy. I believe you have valuable information to add to this research study, as well as the overall field of empathy. This research is being conducted as part of the requirements for the Doctorate of Education degree through George Fox University. I (Danielle Bryant) will be working directly with you as researcher for this study. You have been invited to share your stories around experiences of teacher empathy over your K-12 schooling experience.

#### **Details of the Study**

This study consists of a roundtable discussion and two interviews. Each interview will take place either at the high school or at a public location, of your choosing, that works well for interviewing. Interviews will take approximately 60-90 minutes each. The interviews will occur within a two-week period, and I will work with your schedule.

Both interviews will consist of open-ended questions designed to help me understand your experiences. As I don't want any questions to surprise you, or to only get an on-the-spot answer, you will be given an overview list of questions before the interviews. The questions are related to your experiences in the classroom with a mainstream teacher.

#### **Benefits**

I hope the findings of my interviews will help me understand how teacher empathy is perceived by students. Your identity will remain anonymous in this study. While your personal identity will be concealed, your voice and personal experiences will be shared as a way for educators to hear first-hand how students have perceived teacher empathy within a classroom setting, and what impact, if any, that had on a student. This is an opportunity for you to share your opinion and make your voice heard.

#### **Confidentiality**

Your identity will be protected in this study. I will use pseudonyms (fake names) to maintain confidentiality in the writing of any results of this study. You will be given the opportunity to choose your own pseudonym for the study.

There will be a digital recording of the interviews, that will be transcribed (type up) so I can better understand what was said in the interview. During this process, I will be the only one who knows your identity. This signed consent form, as well as all recordings and notes, will be kept in a locked filed accessible only to me and all material will be destroyed four years after completion of my degree. The specific location of the school, the city, or the school district will not be disclosed in the study.

**Risks**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You also do not have to answer any questions if you feel uncomfortable. The risks associated with this research are minimal as the interview questions are to help me better understand a student's experience of teacher empathy. If at any time in the interview you do not feel comfortable to respond, you are not required to do so. You may also pull out of the interview process at any time, and there will be no consequences.

**Use of Study**

The results of this study will be used for my research and dissertation as part of my study with George Fox University. The results of the research may also be used for presentation to professional conferences and/or professional publication as a means to better inform educators on the general thoughts students have regarding teacher empathy. If you would like a copy of the final result, I would be happy to share a copy with you upon its completion.

**Other Information**

You may reach me at any time with questions or concerns. While I do work, I will do my best to get back to you the same day. My contact information is 541-207-8416 or [dbryant15@georgefox.edu](mailto:dbryant15@georgefox.edu).

**Consent to the Study**

By signing below, you consent to being a participant in this study. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you at the first interview.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I have presented this information to the participant and obtained his/her voluntary consent.

Researcher Signature & Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX E

### INFORMATIONAL LETTER TO PARENTS/GUARDIANS

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s) of \_\_\_\_\_:

My name is Danielle Bryant and I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at George Fox University. I am conducting research as part of my doctoral dissertation on what students perceive to be teacher empathy, while looking back over their K-12 school experience. A couple of weeks ago I had the opportunity to lead a roundtable in your student's classroom discussing teacher empathy. From that discussion your student expressed interest in being a participant in this research, and has been chosen to participate. I believe your student has valuable information that can add to the overall research on empathy, and specifically teacher empathy.

For this research study, your student will be participating in two interviews that will last between 60-90 minutes. These interviews will be conducted either at either the high school or a public location of your student's choosing, and will take place over a two-week time period. The questions for these interviews will be open-ended and a copy of questions will be given before the interview to allow your student time to reflect on the questions. I will not ask questions that will embarrass or make your student uncomfortable.

**The participation of your student is entirely voluntary and your student has the right to stop interviews or pull out of the research study at any time. The decision to participate or not does not impact your student's standing in the school in any way.**

All information gathered from the students will be collected and analyzed in a professional confidential fashion and no student will be personally identified. The interviews and signed consent forms will be kept in a locked file accessible only to me and all material will be destroyed four years after completion of my dissertation. The results of the research may also be used for presentation to professional conferences and/or professional publication as a means to better inform educators on the general thoughts students have regarding teacher empathy.

I am grateful for your student volunteering to be in this research study. I believe that your student's participation will contribute to the understanding of the nature of student perceptions in how they perceive empathetic actions from a teacher.

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me by whatever method is the easiest.

Sincerely,

Danielle Bryant  
541-207-8416  
dbryant15@georgefox.edu



## APPENDIX F

### GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY IRB APPROVAL

#### GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY HSRC INITIAL REVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

2182039  
Page 7

Title: EXPLORING HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS' LIVED EXPERIENCE OF TEACHER EMPATHY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Principal Researcher(s): Danielle Bryant

Date application completed: February 1, 2019

**(The researcher needs to complete the above information on this page)**

#### COMMITTEE FINDING:

|                        |
|------------------------|
| For Committee Use Only |
|------------------------|

- ☒ (1) The proposed research makes adequate provision for safeguarding the health and dignity of the subjects and is therefore approved.
- ☐ (2) Due to the assessment of risk being questionable or being subject to change, the research must be periodically reviewed by the **HSRC** on a \_\_\_\_\_ basis throughout the course of the research or until otherwise notified. This requires resubmission of this form, with updated information, for each periodic review.
- ☐ (3) The proposed research evidences some unnecessary risk to participants and therefore must be revised to remedy the following specific area(s) on non-compliance:
- ☐ (4) The proposed research contains serious and potentially damaging risks to subjects and is therefore not approved.



Chair or designated member

2/25/19

Date

**APPENDIX G****STUDENT INFORMATION SHEET****Information Sheet**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Contact Information**

**Email:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone Number:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Best Days/Times to Meet**

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**Interview Sign-Up**

- ☐ **YES! I am interested in participating in two interviews**
- ☐ **No, I can't do interviews**
- ☐ **Maybe, I might be available**

## APPENDIX H

## INITIAL CODING EXAMPLE

saying, "Oh, I'm the teacher, listen to me." She'll like, "What's wrong? Do you think that's good word choice?" like 'cause he's cussing at her and everything, she knows like not to take it personal but, um, she will just like talk him through the feelings and then not making him feel like she's better than him or he's lesser than her. So, yeah. That's really cool.]

Comment [JF220]: Watching teacher interact with others

**Interviewer:** All right, the last question kind of about the empathy and then we're gonna move into some experience. What does it mean when a teacher finds the solution to your needs? And, I think you kinda talked about a little bit about this with like Math and-different things but--

**Serena:** Um, oh I think it means that they actually care about what they're doing. [laughs] Like Mr. Black, I don't know if you know him but everybody loves Mr. Black. He's the older guy, he's the substitute now but he used to be full-time teacher at North Side. Like everybody says Mr. Black and this is the teacher that people would just clap for for no reason 'cause they love him. Um, he actually wears a Gucci belt to school. [chuckles] His his students wanted him to buy one, so he went out and bought one and he wears it everyday. He wa- he's like 70 something. He wears ripped jeans and bands and Gucci belt with his little North Side vest on. So, it's like he's a teacher that you just go and talk to and he aw- like when taking attendance, that's the one thing, um, that he'll make connection with, he'll say your name and then he'll say something funny after. So, it's like- or he knows my mom so he'll be like, "Serena, oh I taught her mom at East Side," all the- like he says that every single time.]

Comment [JF221]: Care about work

Comment [JF222]: Loved by all students

Comment [JF223]: Listens & responds

Comment [JF224]: Comfortable to talk to

Comment [JF225]: Personal Connection Humor

Comment [JF226]: Personal Connection Example

Comment [JF227]: Care

Comment [JF228]: Helpful

Comment [JF229]: Concerned with student growth

So, it's like, you know he cares about you and then he'll do that thing that Ms. Beddermejn does, he's a math teacher, so he'll be like going through step-by-step. And, so it's like he actually cares that we're understanding it and not that he's just getting the content out for us to like, "Oh, I did teach them that, ok" he's just like, "This is what I'm gonna teach you, here is it. Okay, do you have any questions?" Somebody has questions, he'll go through it all again, uh, just making sure that everybody understands step-by-step, why he's doing what he's doing, stuff like that.

Comment [JF230]: Taking time Everyone understand

Comment [JF231]: Taking time See Student Differences

So, I think- I think just taking the time to recognize that students don't get everything the first try, uh, is really important 'cause I feel like a lot of teachers think, "Oh, I'm doing my job, why aren't they doing theirs?" But, it's really hard because not all students just click at the first time. So, I think when your teachers really take the time to go step-by-step or explain something more in depth that it actually needs, then that's what- it means that they're actually like-like doing their job and helping students but it's helping to find a solution.]

Comment [JF232]: Finding a solution

**Interviewer:** Anything else you wanna add for that? Finding a solution?

**Serena:** No, I think it's good.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Serena:** Yeah.

## APPENDIX I

### FOCUSED CODING TABLE EXAMPLE

| Wade  | Serena  | Blaire  | Daisy  |
|---|---|---|--|
| <i>Non-Empathetic Teachers</i><br>Teachers Above Students | <i>Non-Empathetic Teachers</i><br>Made to feel stupid     | <i>Empathetic Teachers</i><br>Get to know student | <i>Non-Empathetic Teachers</i><br>Remarks stop student from asking questions |
| Teachers Not a Person/ Regular Person                     | Shut down questions                                       | Accommodate to needs/situation                    | <i>Empathetic Teachers</i><br>Responds to students                           |
| Uncomfortable to Ask Questions                            | Felt uncomfortable  | Reach out to students                             | Students feel accepted/liked   |
| <i>Empathetic Teachers</i><br>Converse Easily With        | <i>Empathetic Teachers</i><br>Not scared to ask questions | Personal relationship with student                | Talk through things with student   |
| Talk about personal things/experience                     | They don't make you feel stupid                           | Care about Student                                | Personal Connection  |
| Feel more comfortable                                     | Answer your questions                                     | Feel comfortable to go to them with questions     | Sees student and issues  |
| Not afraid to ask questions                               | Verbalize concern for student                             | Personal Connection                               | Teacher makes effort, reaches out  |
| Not afraid of looking dumb                                | Student can trust teacher                                 | Teacher initiated conversation                    | One-on-one   |
| Non-school related conversations                          | Open and willing to help                                  | Dependable  | Joke Around/Sense of Humor   |
| Teacher between adult and friend                          | Accepts you   | Genuinely care                                    | Genuine/Real   |
| Express Needs   | Help with subjects they don't teach                       | Words of comfort                                  | Ask personal questions   |
| Show advanced emotions to them                            | Work one-on-one with student                              | Listens to student                                | Good relationship  |
| Match you in feelings                                     | Loves/Cares about their job                               | Reach out to all students                         | Student can be "myself"  |
| Expresses feelings to student                             | Connection with everybody                                 | Meaningful conversations                          | Student struggle, Teacher Help   |
| Personal Connection                                       | Immediate response to problem                             | Nice  | Verbal Encouragement   |
| Stronger Connection                                       | Show care   | Use Humor & Jokes                                 | Talked to student as a person  |
| Listens   | Personal Connection                                       | Never say something mean/always nice to everyone  | Treated like a human   |
| Out of way to help  | Open Door   | Understand student                                | Remember student later   |
| Above Pay Raise   | Body Language of concern/help                             | Immediate response to need                        |  |