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Exploring Educators' Perspectives on Empathy and Equity through a Role-Play Game Experience

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EXPLORING EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES ON EMPATHY AND EQUITY
THROUGH A ROLE-PLAY GAME EXPERIENCE

By

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to investigate potential changes in views of empathy and equity among a sample of educators engaged in a role-play simulation game. The investigation addressed three research questions: 1) Do the participants report a shift in their thinking on issues of empathy and equity after engaging in the role-play simulation? 2) How do the participants describe the nature of the shifts in their views on empathy and equity after engaging in the role-simulation game? 3) What specific features of the game do the participants identify as especially important in generating deeper and more critical consideration of their preexisting attitudes around empathy and equity? Findings indicate that the educators evidenced shifts in thinking on issues of empathy and equity. However, the participants revealed greater shifts in views on empathy and less clear changes in views of equity. The results of the study suggest that role play simulation games are useful instructional tools for approaching difficult topics surrounding empathy and equity in education.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Cultivating empathy and equity perspectives in education engenders possibility for positive relationships. This is especially pertinent to the relationship between teacher and students. A teacher's personal beliefs, attitudes, teaching practices, and relationships with students often reveal places where their empathy and equity practices need further reflection and refinement. Finding ways to help educators reflect on and identify their perspectives can enable them to pursue practices that benefit their relationships with all students in their classroom.

Beginning with the pioneering work of Wickman (1928), research has explored and confirmed the idea that the teacher and student relationship is vital to the academic and affective success of students. Teachers spend significant time with students in a socialized environment that requires navigation of affective and academic elements. Murphy et al. (2018) suggest school is an influential social institution that explicitly and implicitly shapes students' thoughts and actions. This reflects the idea that teacher perceptions or reactions to a student's affect, behaviors, or academic skills can influence that student's view of self (Chang, 2018). Teachers can unknowingly ground their perceptions in biases that influence their interactions with students. Jussim (1989) studied the idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy, which is based on the notion that a teacher can respond to a student based on their own perceptual bias, thus creating a pattern the student fulfills repeatedly. A teacher's perceptual bias, combined with their position of power over the student, can create an imbalance in the roles of the socialized classroom.

Educational systems perpetuate these assumed roles. Kedar-Voivodas (1983) studied student and teacher relationships through the idea of assumed roles, finding that a student adopting an active learner role could conflict with a teacher's managerial role, for instance. This

could invite conflict if a teacher views a student's questioning and risk-taking as an aggressive stance against conformity and discipline. The teacher's perspective might lead them to reject the student's actions, adversely affecting their relationship, not to mention the student's academic and affective skills. This research highlighted the potential discord between the three roles a student typically takes on compared to a teacher's five roles, particularly if teachers dismiss or discourage students' learner roles: "if this imbalance in the priorities assigned to the three roles is to be rectified, teachers need to be made conscious of their biases" (p. 434).

Teacher self-awareness has the potential to mitigate the potential for these negative interactions. Yet teachers and even teacher educators themselves are often unaware of personal biases they hold toward students due to ethnicity, gender, behavior, or ability. Santoro states, "given that teacher educators, like most teachers, are drawn from the dominant ethnic majority, like their teacher colleagues, many may not have considered the 'ethnic self' in relation to the 'ethnic other'" (p. 43). Self-reflection can lead to self-awareness, but it takes time and training. One researcher who pursued this line of research was Shockley's (2011) study which examined the integration of cultural awareness and self-reflection in teacher trainings for both veteran and pre-service teachers. Creating space and time for self-analysis focused on privilege, racism, and cultural identity allowed educators to identify, accept and begin to address personal biases. This work underscored that teachers' attitudes about these issues make a significant difference in their ability to cultivate empathy.

Prawat and Nickerson (1985) researched how the self-concept of students can be impacted by teacher attitudes toward them. Their research found that teachers who strictly and narrowly focused on learning and academic matters were prone to ignore a positive growth mindset in students. In short, these teachers were not especially emphatic of their students.

Conversely, teachers who held that academic success is inherently linked to the affective attributes of students (such as positive self-concept, etc.), tended to be more well-rounded successful educators. This research, along with that of Seaton (2018) and Warren (2014) reflect the importance and need for teachers to have time and training opportunities in order to explore and reflect on personal biases and perceptions. Simply, understanding personal biases is a first step in enabling teachers to focus on empathy and equity.

Researchers such as Belman and Flanagan (2010), Gomez and Marklund (2018), and Landers (2014) have led important discussions around the possibilities that exist within games as instructional tools to help teachers explore perspectives outside of their own experiences. Games, such as role play simulations, allow participants to access both the affective and cognitive aspects of a character as part of game play (Bedwell, et al., 2012; Bertrand, et al., 2018). Games that prioritize education over entertainment, also known as serious games, are common to education in both digital and non-digital formats (Laamarti, et al., 2014), can be used in medicine for training practical skills (Kingsley, et al., 2015), and for helping those in the helping professions develop affective skills such as empathy (Reid & Evanson, 2016). Serious games can also focus on engagement of content with or without affective aims. Yet Belman and Flanagan (2010) note “games are particularly well suited to supporting educational or activist programs in which the fostering of empathy is a key method or goal” (p. 5).

Gaming and gamification have become an accepted instructional tool in the toolbox of pedagogical strategies for teachers (Dorn, 2018). Simulation games allow a player to walk in another’s shoes for the purpose of gaining insight into a different life. Serious games for teachers open to broadening their perspectives could enhance educators’ ability to cultivate empathy and equity.

Statement of the Problem

The growing diversity in the United States is reflected in increasing diversity of student populations filling classrooms. Frequently, these students bring different backgrounds, languages, and cultural understandings to their academic and social learning than those held by their teachers. In order to teach students effectively, teachers must go “beyond mere awareness of, respect for, and general recognition of the fact that ethnic groups have different values or express similar values in various ways” (Gay, 2001, p. 107). They must navigate new perspectives around student academics and behaviors based on this increasing diversity, prioritizing lenses of empathy, and equity to foster strong relationships with their students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to investigate the personal perspectives of elementary educators who engage in a role-play game designed to elicit issues related to empathy and equity. Teachers who are cognizant and reflective about their own perspectives of empathy and equity in the classroom become models and catalysts for initiating and sustaining social change around these critical issues (Gerdes et al., 2011; Murphy et al., 2018).

A case study offers the potential for insight into how a role-play simulation game may help educators become more aware of their relational capacity for connecting with students. Cochran-Smith (1995) and Nieto’s (2000) work points to the importance of educators working together in order to form responsive pedagogy based on empathy. This work can take the form of intentional study groups, responsive professional development, or even shared experiences like role-playing games designed to help educators examine their deeply held beliefs.

The Role-Play Game Simulation

This role-play simulation game to be used in this case study was originally created as a team effort in a summer doctoral course. The group gave the game over to me at the end of the term with full permission to change and use it as I considered appropriate. I have revised and rewritten aspects of the game in order to create a strong instructional tool for my pre-service students. The game includes characters that represent diversity concepts on gender identity, family diversity, ethnicity and cultural identity. Each participant plays as a character with a pre-determined set of demographics. They go through “life” as this character which includes the strengths and challenges connected to that character’s demographics. As the game unfolds, the participant must navigate barriers and even privileges related to their characters identity.

The objective of the game is to put the player into the shoes of another person in order to experience what their character’s life can be like. It is interesting to note that during one simulation, a student became so frustrated with the setbacks his character encountered, he decided to “quit” the game. It was pointed out to him that as white male he had the privilege to simply step out of his character and resume his normal life. A real-life version of his character would not have that option.

Research Questions

This study attempted to gain insight on a number of interrelated questions. First, is the issue of simply how effective is this particular game-play simulation in engendering deep considerations on empathy and equity among a team of in-service teachers? This is an important establishing research question because, while my previous experience has revealed that the game simulation is a powerful tool in creating changes in attitudes among preservice teachers, the simulation has not been used with a team of in-service teachers. As such, I cannot merely assume

shifts in views on empathy and equity will automatically occurs simply by engaging in this activity. Any self-reported attitudinal change must be documented to provide context of any the subsequent sub-questions. It should be noted that even no significant changes in views is an important finding that would be helpful to other scholars interested in the use of game-play in education.

Moreover, the rationale for the study also held that if the participants report that the game did indeed affected a change in their views on issues related to empathy and equity, two sub-questions would then be considered. Namely, if the participants reported attitudinal shifts in their views on empathy and equity, what is the nature of those changes? Additionally, what specific features of the game assisted in generating deeper and more critical consideration of their preexisting attitudes around empathy and equity?

Stated more formally, research questions guiding this research included:

General Research Question:

Do the participants report a shift in their thinking on issues of empathy and equity after engaging in the role-play simulation?

Sub-Question A:

How do the participants describe the nature of the shifts in their views on empathy and equity after engaging in the role-simulation game?

Sub-Question B:

What specific features of the game do the participants identify as especially important in generating deeper and more critical consideration of their preexisting attitudes around empathy and equity?

Key Terms

Empathy is “understanding a person from his or her frame of reference rather than one’s own or vicariously experiencing that person’s feelings, perceptions, and thoughts” (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.). Educators use empathy to understand the students they serve need different things, based on their life experiences. Warren (2014) states, “empathy’s relevance to the teaching profession has remained central to the human interactions between teachers and students throughout the years (p. 396).” Research on empathy conducted by Baston et al. (1997), Gomez and Marklund (2018) and Kaur (2012) indicate empathetic involvement with others strengthens individuals’ awareness and appreciation for their humanity.

Equity is the fair access to educational opportunities, resources, and achievements. Regarding equity in education, Gordan and Shipman (1979) relate, “equitable (not equal) access for all students in order to ensure fair distribution of educational resources” (p. 1030). The work of Nieto (2000), Kaur (2012), and Carlisle, et al. (2006) delineate the difference between equity and diversity while underscoring equity is often connected to social justice work. Researchers such as Dutro et al. (2018), Nieto (2000) and Varadharajan & Buchanan (2017) emphasize the importance of building educational policies and practices that reflect equity as a priority for diverse student populations.

Gamification denotes the introduction of game play to assist in the instruction of material. Generally, gamification is found in institutions that need to instruct individuals on a set of material, such as schools or businesses (Landers, 2014; Ortiz-Rojas et al., 2017). Gamification has a rather long tradition in education. From competitions of spelling bees to “jeopardy” games, educators have used games to foster learning. More recently, video and board games have been

employed in classrooms too. The term “serious games” is used to describe games designed for educational purposes rather than solely for entertainment purposes (Laamarti et al., 2014).

Role-Play Simulation Games are designed to mimic real world situations and/or historic periods (Hoy, 2018). These types of games can be either digital (i.e., videogames) or non-digital (i.e., boardgames). These types of games can be introduced as part of the gamification of classrooms in order to enhance learning.

Limitations and Delimitations

Exploratory case study design involves several inherent limitations. This research study included a group of teacher participants who knew one another. This presents a design limitation whereas the participants may be reticent to share their true perspectives due to group dynamics I could not anticipate. Their pre-existing knowledge of one another superseded mine. Thus, it required care on my part in facilitating the discussion and working to invite all voices and generate conversation that helped the sample move beyond their assumptions of one another’s viewpoints.

An additional limitation is that the findings of this study cannot be strictly generalized to other populations. This is a limitation shared by other qualitative research designs. Because the case study included a small sample of one team of teachers from a specific type of school (see delimitations below), generalizing the findings to other teachers is impossible and inappropriate. Nevertheless, the findings offer potential for role-play simulations to spark critical assessment of attitudes on empathy and equity among teachers.

Delimitations of this particular study, or decisions I have purposefully made to create a feasible and meaningful study, include opting for a small sample size and choosing a district site with the lowest diversity rating in the district. The first decision to use a small sample of teachers

is related to the structure of the role-play game in which a target of four participants can play on a single game board. However, due to condition created by the COVID pandemic, the game was ultimately modified for use over Zoom and could, therefore, accommodate a larger number of players. The delimitation of a group familiar with one another was intended to give participants a sense of comfort and safety in sharing personal perspectives within an already-established relational system.

Another important delimitation regards my choice of school district which has an extremely low diversity rating. This was a deliberate choice for two reasons. One, I was very interested in gaining the perspectives of educators who have chosen not to work in a district with little Title 1 schools given my belief that each school owns its own kind of diversity, and empathy has a place in each school setting. The second reason for this choice is that it made it possible to compare this study's results with a potential future study of Title 1 teachers in a highly diverse school in order to compare and contrast the results.

Related to the choice of school district site, a critically important delimitation is the fact that, with the exception of one individual, all the participants were white. This was an important research decision as the point of this investigation is to examine shifts in views on empathy and equity especially as related to diverse students. The racial composition of the sample imposes a particularly interesting and compelling dimension to the research. It should be noted that while 10 of the participants were white, one participant was of Hispanic heritage.

Finally, as the study was conducted during a COVID outbreak, the pandemic itself created a number of delimitations in the form of accommodations. For instance, the role play event could not be conducted in-person but had to be modified over Zoom. This created restrictions on the time people could be on the platform and affected interaction between the

participants. It is likely these dynamics did influence the findings and will be discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

Bracketing

As a veteran educator who has spent 21 years in bilingual, high-poverty school settings, I have a background in dealing with issues arising from a lack of empathy in educational settings and have been intentional in my work to increase my own empathy and equity. As a Behavior Specialist dealing with significant and violent behaviors, I have seen first-hand how significantly classroom teachers' ideas and practices hindered or enabled them to manage of challenging behaviors. In my current role as an Assistant Professor of Education, I instruct pre-service educators in classroom management, ESOL methods, and instructional practices, and I am committed to maintaining a strong emphasis on empathy and equity as part of my work. I believe educators who have taken time to understand their own biases and perspectives are better prepared to serve their students. I hold strong views on the importance of these ideals in shaping positive teacher/student relationships, because I believe they enable classroom communities to foster trust and respect, which leads to responsibility and rapport.

Part of conducting ethical and reflective research means I must acknowledge these experiences with participants prior to soliciting their participation and throughout the research process. The goal of this research is to listen to and understand what educators believe and perceive about empathy and equity issues within the classroom. As much as I can, I must set aside my own personal ideas and biases on these issues in order to be a thoughtful listener and observer of others.

Teachers make decisions every day based on their personal perspectives of the students in their classrooms. Exploring the foundation of those perspectives through role-playing games may

make it possible for teachers to reflect on their practice and provide positive educational experiences for all students.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The nature and ideals of empathy and equity have been investigated through various lenses within the helping professions. The results of these efforts offer insight into importance of empathy and equity in the field of medicine (Adamson et al., 2018) and in social work (Erera, 1997; Gerdes, et al., 2011). In education, researchers such as Cochran-Smith, M. (1995), Nieto (2000) and Warren (2014) argue for the importance of exploring empathy and equity as part of teacher training programs in order to better prepare teachers to work with diverse communities. Taken together, their research conclusions suggest that empathy is an important element of a successful teacher's disposition. They also concluded that without training and experience, teachers may struggle to effectively serve diverse populations.

Gordan and Shipman (1979) discussed the relationship between education and equity and have sought to articulate its place within the educational system. Their research calls for a revising of education's current treatments and interventions as insufficient to address larger issues of social injustice and inequity. In 2008, key findings emerged from a 2007 Supreme Court Case that struck down racial integration plans from several large school districts across the nation (Orfield et al., 2008). These plans involved school choice options where race could be used as a determining factor in choice school acceptance. Social scientists from around the nation supported these plans as a positive movement towards racially diverse schools. Yet Orfield et al.'s 2008 work indicated school district enrollment plans that were race-neutral often resulted in racially isolated schools.

In his essay on equity and social justice, Kaur (2012) discusses the work of Florian and Rouse (2009) who make a case for inclusive education to mean all students regardless of ethnicity or need. They conclude that teacher training is critical to the success of an inclusive school environment. While this research emphasizes the importance of teacher training, the field must also consider the needs of in-service teachers who also need opportunities to reflect upon and cultivate empathetic and equitable educational practices.

Games promoting empathy perspectives and supporting prosocial causes have been explored by researchers such as Belman and Flanagan (2010) Landers (2014), Gay (2001) and Gee (2012). Their focus on gaming as an instructional tool within the helping professions has contributed to an extensive body of work. This work explores and supports the idea that gaming is useful in building both practical and affective skillsets

This literature review synthesizes what is presently known about the importance of empathy training in professions dedicated to helping others, the nature of role play games as an instructional tool, and research on the effectiveness of game play in assisting professionals build empathy and equity considerations in their practice.

Empathy Training in the Helping Professions

Research indicates the importance of empathy, particularly in helping professions like nursing (Adamson et al., 2018), social work (Gerdes et al., 2011) and education (Murphy et. al., 2018). Professionals in service-oriented careers must develop affective skillsets such as empathy. This involves recognizing the emotional and experiential aspects of those they serve coupled with the cognitive ability to make wise decisions (Erera, 1997).

Research on ways various professions prioritize empathy within their training can offer insight into how professionals may develop this attribute as a professional disposition. Krasner et

al. (2009) researched mindfulness training for physicians. Their findings indicate purposeful attention to their own self-awareness coupled with training in meditation, helped participant doctors develop increased empathy for patients without becoming overly burdened by their needs. In a similar study, Erera (1997) examined a cognitive empathy training program for 51 student social workers focused on helping them develop cognitive empathy constructs. These constructs included using logic, hypothesis generation, and deductive and inductive practices in order to achieve more in-depth understanding of their clients. Findings suggested that empathy training itself was not enough and must be coupled with other strategies such as increased self-awareness training, active listening, and strong communication skills.

Baston et al. (1997) explored whether helping a person change their attitude toward a single person from a stigmatized group could result in a changed attitude towards the whole group. The first goal of the research was to determine if knowledge regarding the stigmatized person could result in a change of empathetic response towards that group. The second goal was to determine if increased empathetic responses could create a longer-term attitudinal change towards a stigmatized group of people. The participant sample was made up of 46 psychology students from the University of Kansas. This research used three stigmatized groups as examples within their research: a young woman with AIDS, a homeless man, and a convicted murderer. Each experiment allowed the participants to self-report through questionnaires on their empathy levels and opinions about these three profiles. Three different experiments around this question resulted in increased positive attitudes towards stigmatized groups.

The findings of these studies suggest that empathy and equity training can result in alternations in dispositions. Specifically, relationship building and interaction can enhance empathy (Erera, 1997), greater emphatic understanding of others yields positive attitudes

towards even socially stigmatized groups (Batson et al., 1997), and greater empathy helps increase “prosocial behaviors and justice orientations” (Wang et al., 2003, p. 222).

Adamson et al. (2018) researched narrative story techniques with nursing staff using stories, poetry, and art designed to build strong relationships with critically ill patients, families, and colleagues. Through this work, participants indicated “a positive effect on empathy for patients, empathy between nurses on nursing teams and the ability for nurses to grow increasingly more self-aware of the emotional and social impacts of their work” (p. 8). This study indicated the power of storytelling as a means to fostering empathy.

Gerdes et al. (2011) explored how to cultivate social workers’ empathy through neuroscience. This study was designed to measure if students’ cognitive understandings of how the brain works in relation to empathy-building through mirror neuron and neuroplasticity instruction would increase participant empathy towards clients. Their research indicated that when social workers better understand the cognitive science around empathy, it helps them utilize more empathetic responses in their fieldwork.

Murphy et al. (2018) used the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) to collect data on educator empathy as it related to teachers’ willingness to address bullying in the classroom. This tool was created and used by Davis (1983) to measure empathy as both a cognitive and affective response. The IRI consists of 28 questions which are equally distributed amongst 4 scales: The Perspective Taking scale, Fantasy scale, Empathetic Concern scale, and Personal Distress scale. Davis’s (1983) research indicated that while these are not exclusive responses to empathy, they “do provide measures of several qualities important for both theoretical and practical reasons” (p.114). Results from Murphy et al’s (2018) work indicated that teachers with low levels of personal distress displayed sufficient empathy to approach bullying in the classroom without

getting overwhelmed themselves (p. 21). Using a tool such as the IRI can provide knowledge around the cognitive and affective complexities of empathy understandings for educators and others in helping professions.

In education, Dutro et al. (2018) explored pre-service educators' personal understandings of what it means to foster positive teacher-student relationships within diverse communities. Their findings document that many teachers enter the profession without ever having to challenge or examine their own perspectives on race and ethnicity. This would suggest a critically important missing component in teacher preservice training.

Shockley and Banks's (2011) research, based on transformative learning theory, sought to undo "racist, sexist, and other oppressive beliefs so that students from diverse cultural, linguistic, gendered backgrounds will experience equitable education" (p. 224). Their study involved participants from an education master's program with a focus on social justice who engaged in different activities over the course of two years. Using qualitative data derived from participants using art as a conceptual tool, reflective writing on their own practice, and work around deconstructing privilege, three distinct shifts were recorded. In year one, participants were reluctant to acknowledge personal bias. In year two, participants began to acknowledge their bias, and in year three, the researchers were able to document attitudinal shifts in participants' self-reported perceptions of bias. This led to altered perceptions of societal perspectives on these issues. While Shockley and Banks did not employ a game-play strategy *per se*, their work nevertheless demonstrates the potential for engagement in activities to generate important attitudinal changes.

These studies highlight the importance of training around empathy and equity. They also indicate the various forms and means such work can take, such as storytelling, neuroscience

feedback studies, and reflective writing. The strategy under focus for this particular study is the use of role-play games as an instructional tool to enable educators to interact with issues of empathy and equity from different perspectives. Regardless, these studies indicate the importance of helping professionals understand empathy and its cognitive and affective components in order to improve relationships, support, and change.

Role-Play Games as an Instructional Tool

Gaming and gamification are terms that describe the action of playing a game for entertainment or learning purposes. Gamification involves putting game-like devices such as scoring, character play, or storyline, into a non-game context that would not typically have those attributes. Researchers who have chosen to explore gaming or gamification as instructional tools find it has significant influence on learning outcomes (Landers, 2014), can increase learner engagement (Squire, 2006), and fosters empathy training (Belman & Flannagan, 2010).

In order to connect gaming and learning outcomes in a more precise way, Bedwell et al. (2012) proposed nine gaming attributes that can influence learning outcomes. The goal of this research was to consolidate earlier work on gamification attributes in order to more accurately study the cognitive and psychological aspects of gamification related to learning outcomes. Utilizing the taxonomy work of Bedwell et al. (2012). Lander's (2014) work expanded on the cognitive and affective aspects of gaming for learning purposes. He proposed five components to his theory of gamification:

1. Instructional content influences learning outcomes, 2. Behaviors/attitudes influence learning, 3. Game characteristics influence changes in behavior/attitudes, 4. Game elements affect behavior/attitudes that moderate instructional effectiveness, and 5. The

relationship between game elements and learning outcomes is mediated by behaviors/attitudes. (pgs. 760-762)

His research on learning outcomes as related to the gamification of content suggests gamification can produce positive outcomes for learning as long as the content is already of high quality: “critical to the success of any gamification effort is that the instructional content in place is already effective. The goal of gamification cannot be to replace instruction, but instead to improve it” (p. 760). Further, “gamification affects learning via mediation when an instructional designer intends to encourage a behavior or attitude that will itself improve learning outcomes” (p. 763). Gamification in and of itself must be purposeful in both its cognitive and affective constructs in order for participants to gain the most value from the learning experience.

Gamification has become more common place within education. The concept of serious games, also known as game-based learning, has become the focus of research in relation to its influence on learning and motivation. Game design is an important consideration when using gaming as an instructional tool. Laamarti et al. (2014) conducted a review of serious games and the criteria required for a serious game to meet its desired outcome. Within the study, researchers worked to identify a taxonomy to identify the major characteristics of serious games. Through the review of existing research, they created a five-category taxonomy. These categories included application area, activity, modality, interaction style, and environment. While these categories prove helpful for analyzing serious games, this research also indicated the need for further research on serious games to help balance the taxonomy components with the elements of entertainment needed to keep gamers engaged in the learning (p. 12).

Since the focus of serious games is learning, the components of a serious game must be balanced with the skills required to meet this objective. Different types of game-based learning

engage different levels of skill and interaction with the learning objective. Squire (2006) used work from Rieber (1996) to identify two types of games. The first is exogenous, in which the content of the game is extrinsic to the action; the second is endogenous, in which the content is heavily linked to the game play itself. These two types of game play hold different purposes. Exogenous games are designed to make learning content more fun and amenable. They focus on repetitive skill drills with an entertainment component. These games can be played with any content (Rieber, 1996, p. 50). In contrast, endogenous games pull the player into the game as one of many players which can promote critical thinking skills and social interaction experiences. Digital technologies such as video-gaming offer these sorts of avenues for learning content and acquiring skills in collaboration, problem-solving, and critical thinking. Players “learn by doing” within videogames despite being constrained by software and systems that prioritize particular elements of gameplay (Squire, 2006).

New digital literacies are emerging that combine novel technology and established instructional outcomes in ways that are significantly shaping education (Kingsley & Grabner-Hagen, 2015). The intersectionality of new literacies can foster twenty-first-century skills (Sardone & Devline-Scherer, 2010) and engage students in complex tasks useful for future workforce expectations. Students in today’s elementary classrooms come with a plethora of skills in navigating and utilizing digital platforms for their own use (List, 2019). Research has been able to substantiate that motivation and engagement components within game design influence learner outcomes in positive ways. However, the work of Wilson, et al. (2009) and Kraiger et al. (1993) suggest there is more work to be done in isolating which subcomponents of motivation and engagement have the most impact.

Overall, research indicates a clear relationship between effective gamification and enhanced learning. Educational practice, more than ever before, is focusing on social emotional learning and social justice perspectives in the classroom. The use of gamification as tool to explore empathy and equity from both the teacher and student perspectives continues to be a topic of research and study.

Game Play to Cultivate Empathy and Equity Perspectives

Gaming allows participants to become immersed in ever-changing environments as they interact with other players and game components (Gee, 2012). Within these experiences, there is potential for emotional reactions to simulated situations individuals have not encountered in their own lives, thus introducing new perspectives from which to consider one's empathetic capacities (Hoy, 2018).

Simulation games are immersive environments requiring players to be strategists, designers, and researchers in order to successfully move through the game. Well-known simulation games such as the Sims (<https://www.ea.com/games/the-sims>), have been in existence for over twenty years. Enthusiasts of these types of games can meaningfully inculcate empathy and equity perspectives into the game by offering challenges to other players that may simulate poverty (Gee, 2012) or ask players to re-enact a moment in history (Hoy, 2018). These types of game immersion combine cognitive and affective domains, allowing players to access and cultivate emotions such as empathy for the characters they represent (Bertrand et al., 2018).

Board game simulations can operate in parallel ways to video simulation games. Hoy's (2018) research on simulation-based board games emphasized the importance of role-playing in order to foster empathy through perspective-taking within historical events. In his research, participants indicated judgmental attitudes toward particular people or groups who made

unlawful choices. Hoy ascertained these perspectives before conducting the gameplay. Specifically, he identified how participants moralized their own preconceived notions. Hoy regarded these prevailing notions as impeding the participants' ability to express empathy for the circumstances and people within a particular historical event. Hoy then had participants play a board game where players took on identities of lawbreakers and lawmakers of the early nineteenth century. In order to win the game, players needed to accumulate the largest amount of wealth. Players experienced the incentives laden in their assigned identities, as smugglers or businessmen; thus, learning historical content in a more meaningful way. Hoy's research indicated gameplay allowed participants to grapple with historical content while engaging them in moral dilemmas. Post gameplay, participants expressed different views based on their experience of life's complexities in their given roles. Debrief sessions indicated their awareness of "the wide array of motivations and factors that go into real-world decisions" (p.127).

This type of empathetic response to gameplay is built on the work of Belman and Flannagan (2010) who studied game design with a focus on fostering empathy. Their research was built on the belief that games can be effective "in supporting educational and activist programs in which the fostering of empathy is a key method or goal" (p. 5). They noted four main design principles in order for "empathetic play" (p. 10) to take place. First, the player must be induced into responding empathetically either through explicit or subtle prompts within the game. Second, players should be given "specific recommendations" (p. 10) in order to address issues within the game. Third, if the design goal is to shift empathy perspectives, both cognitive and affective experiences need to be included in game play, otherwise, short segments of empathy scenarios are more conducive to game play. Fourth, game design should have some connection or relatable content to the player but not so much that the player becomes defensive

and avoids the interaction altogether. Their research identified the need for further study to narrow down which particular design features and strategies elicit different kinds of empathy.

Researchers who have followed Belman and Flannagan (2010), such as Bertrand et al. (2018), Wouters et al. (2013), and Reid and Evanson (2016), suggest games can promote, explore, and specifically shape participants' affective perspectives through purposeful role-play simulation and player-to-player interaction. What continues to be a focus for serious games and a point of further research is which components within game design promote empathetic responses from players.

Conclusion

This literature review outlined the importance of cultivating empathy in the helping professions, along with the ways gamification can be an important tool in that process. From narrative storytelling to neuroscience, researchers continue to seek ways to help nurses, social workers, and educators engage in perspective-taking skills that foster empathy and equity in the workplace. Current and future potential within virtual and face-to-face gameplay offers possible pathways to help educators foster their own empathy and equity within the classroom.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The increasingly diverse student population underscores the importance of fostering educator of empathy and equity (Fisher & Komosa-Hawkins, 2013). Teachers who are able to empathize with a student often determine short-term outcomes like discipline versus redirection, while shaping longer-term repercussions determining whether that student passes or fails (Shimomura, 2013). This study sought to explore these issues with a sample of elementary educators by asking them to discuss their perspectives about empathy and equity following participation in a role-play game designed to encourage critical evaluation of prevailing attitudes. Specifically, this research aimed to examine these research questions:

General Research Question:

Do the participants report a shift in their thinking on issues of empathy and equity after engaging in the role-play simulation?

Sub-Question A:

How do the participants describe the nature of the shifts in their views on empathy and equity after engaging in the role-simulation game?

Sub-Question B:

What specific features of the game do the participants identify as especially important in generating deeper and more critical consideration of their preexisting attitudes around empathy and equity?

An exploratory case study design (Yin, 2016) was used as the research design for this qualitative study. This design is well suited to examine teachers' real-life experiences, as game

play induces their memories, experiences, and reflections on empathy and equity. Simons (2009) emphasized “case study is a study of the singular, the particular, the unique” (p. 3). This is an appropriate design choice as I was interested in studying the particular and unique experiences of a group of teachers. Case studies have been used in various professions for years with success and serves my study purposes very well.

Case study research generally requires more than one data source (Yin, 2016). As part of this case study research, I elected to collect data in two forms. First, observational data of the actual gameplay event and participants’ interactions constituted a critical data source. I, with the assistance of a highly experienced researcher, also conducted the role-play simulation and kept separate observational notes. These notes were used to document the nature of the conversation, behavioral responses, and any other observations deemed potentially significant (Yin, 2016).

The second significant source of data came from an interview with the group of teachers in the form of a focus group. This interview was audio recorded. A vital part of the interview was a debriefing session of the gameplay that explored tension points, moments of insight, and reflections elicited by the simulation (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). This debriefing session resulted in some of the most important data used in the analysis.

In research such as this, a focus-group interview serves multiple purposes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). First, it is less threatening to any single individual if they can use a shared experience as a stepping-stone into the conversation. It also generates the possibility for participants’ (who share an established relationship) to yield rich and forthright insight into a topic. It is also possible that a focus group dynamic could develop a “group think” mentality or create a situation in which one participant dominates the conversation (Litosseliti, 2003). As the

researcher, I recognized the responsibility to monitor the focus group interview carefully and guide the conversation away from these potential issues.

Setting

The school district from which I recruited participants is comparatively large, serving 42,000 students across 42 elementary schools, 11 middle schools, eight high schools, and four charter schools. These schools are located in a mixture of urban, suburban, and rural areas in the Pacific Northwest. Woodland School District (pseudonym) has a student demographic of 48% White, 40% Hispanic, 5% Multi-ethnic, 3% Pacific Islander, 2% Asian, 1% African American, and 1% American Indian. The district's staff demographics are 75% White, 16% Hispanic, 2% Asian, 1% American Indian, 1% African American, <1% Pacific Islander, and 5% Other.

The teacher group I ultimately recruited come from both elementary and secondary schools. My connections in Woodland School District made this school a convenience sample for the study. However, it is important to note I did not have a previously established relationship with any potential participants with the exception of one individual who was a former student. School demographics indicate an Ever-English Learners population of only 6% and a free/reduced lunch rate of 41%. As such, the participants in this investigation teach in a setting that is predominantly white and middle-class but steadily experiencing important demographic changes.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

I recruited approximately eleven public school, general education elementary and high school educators who were known but represent different school in the Woodland School district. All of the participants were white with the exception of one individual. This individual

was Hispanic. Because this participant was the only ethnic minority status individual, I will not provide any other information on this teacher in order to protect their anonymity.

As part of the informed consent process (Appendix A), I explained my own background, interest in the study, and outlined the participants' rights and responsibilities. I anticipated that the purposeful selection of a cohort of educators familiar with each other would establish a safe and comfortable space for participants to discuss challenging issues and share candidly about their gameplay experience. This choice aligns with the contention that focus groups can effectively create a sense of safety for participants familiar with each other to share personal ideas and perspectives (Litosseliti, 2003). As illustrated by Green et al.'s (2003) work on focus-group dynamics, the unique potential of a focus group lies in its ability to generate data based on the synergy of the group interaction. Rabiee (2004) notes, "the members of the group should, therefore, feel comfortable with each other and engage in discussion" (p. 656)

I used a combination of purposive and network sampling to find educators willing to participate. The original plans for the investigation called for data collection (both the game simulation and debriefing focus group interview) to occur at a site unassociated with the participants' workplace. Unfortunately, as noted previously, conditions created by an increase in COVID cases caused the state of Oregon to impose restriction on social gatherings. As such, all the data collection occurred over Zoom as both the game play event and focus group were conducted online.

Data Collection

Data collection included direct observation of the game-play session (Appendix B), a focus-group debrief with an audio recorded group interview (Appendix C). Both the game-play session and the focus group debrief will included a second observer. This observer was a

seasoned research professional who has extensive experience with game-play as an instructional tool. Sam (pseudonym), who has great interest in the specific role play simulation used in this study, assisted in the direct observation of the game play session and provided field notes of both the gameplay and focus group debrief. He abided by all IRB expectations of participant and data confidentiality and security.

In addition to utilizing a second observer (Stake, 2010) I used a research notebook to track design decisions, record analytic and bracketing memos, and constructed an audit trail of data collection and analysis procedures. Field note observations were an important source of data for this study, and all focus group interactions and individual interviews were recorded and transcribed using otter.ai. Member checks were also utilized for focus group interviews. These various types of data and transparency measures contributed to data triangulation and research trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Analytical Procedures

A research study requires a significant amount of organization. Miles et al. (2020) suggest good qualitative research has two main audiences to consider when organizing and documenting data analysis, the self and the reader. The researcher must have a high level of organization in order to track and document the life of the study for their own integrity, while the reader needs to be able to follow the process of the study in order to assess the credibility of the work.

Purposeful consideration regarding protection of participants and data was highly important. Pseudonyms for all participants are used in the reporting of the findings. Data were handled confidentially, with a careful system of digital files and folders as part of the organizational process. Analytic memos supported my analytic considerations about the data and

its meanings, as well as provided an audit trail, which served to increase transparency to support the study's validity and reliability. Creswell and Poth (2018) state "using an audit trail as a validation strategy for documenting thinking processes that clarify understandings over time" (p. 188).

I coded the data through an iterative process utilizing in vivo coding and values coding (Miles et al., 2020) since "values coding is appropriate for studies which explore cultural values, identity, intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences" (p. 67). These two types of coding allowed me to discern categories and patterns related to my research questions. An analytical conversation with my research associate, Sam, immediately after the game-play and focus group debrief was highly useful in comparing our conclusions from observations. Audio recordings and transcriptions of the data collection session worked to supplement and corroborate field note observations.

Following the coding phase of analysis and using the reiterative process outlined by Miles et al. (2020), I created assertions which were examined against the research questions. Careful consideration of these assertions eventually led to the identification of specific themes. These themes were especially important in providing answer to sub-question A.

Research Ethics

Ethical considerations began with securing IRB approval in accordance with the human research protocols of George Fox University. All participants required to sign an informed consent form (Appendix A) before the research began. I assigned all the participants a pseudonym in order to keep their identity confidential. Prior to beginning game play, I also assist the group establish norms for interactions during game play and reviewed them as we moved into the focus group interview. As issues of empathy and equity may be considered a sensitive

issue, I attempted to be as transparent as possible about my intentions with the study, as well as the collection and use of the data. Member checks of transcribed data was offered in order to give participants the opportunity to verify their perspective on findings represented within the study.

Confidentiality and the protection of rights of the participants and school district was critical to the integrity of this study. I strictly guarded all identifying factors of participants and the school district using pseudonyms. Ethical considerations regarding the protection of data required that my laptop be locked in a cabinet as another measure of safety when not in use. All data materials, field notes, signed letters of consent, audio recordings, and transcriptions were secured in such a way that I am the only one with access. Three years following the completion of the study, I will personally destroy all research materials.

Ethical considerations regarding researcher bias or assumptions was addressed through various means. First, in regard to my background as a bilingual elementary educator in high impact schools, I acknowledge and bracket my preconceived beliefs, attitudes and values around the issues of empathy and equity within education. Second, I used a critical friend to help me stay on course with the data and who challenged me when needed on my interpretations and personal assumptions.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

The data used to provide answers to the research questions guiding this investigation presented in this chapter were gathered through a 2.25-hour event involving a role-play simulation game session of Real Life (Appendix B). This role-play simulation lasted for 90 minutes and followed by a focus group debriefing and interview that lasted for another 45 minutes.

Although the game play was originally designed to be facilitated face-to-face, due to an unexpected COVID lockdown, it was ultimately presented in an online format. This format included a Zoom meeting with eleven players, myself, a second researcher as observer, and a Game Master who controlled the pace and execution of the game play. An online version of the game was created over a two-day span of time as a means to facilitate this research while following state mandates imposed on the institution designated to host this event. Participants were emailed a set of game rules along with a randomly chosen character card that included factors with numerical values as part of the online game preparations. An audio recording of the game play event and the focus group debrief allowed for data to be gathered and transcribed for use. The audio recordings were supplemented by observational field notes from both myself and my co-observer. Especially helpful were notations on non-verbal expressions and other visual cues during the game play session. These were used to assist in the interpretation of verbal and behavioral interactions and discussions.

The role-play simulation game play and focus group debrief session described above were conducted in an attempt to gain insight into the following research questions:

General Research Question:

Do the participants report a shift in their thinking on issues of empathy and equity after engaging in the role-play simulation?

Sub-Question A:

How do the participants describe the nature of the shifts in their views on empathy and equity after engaging in the role-simulation game?

Sub-Question B:

What specific features of the game do the participants identify as especially important in generating deeper and more critical consideration of their preexisting attitudes around empathy and equity?

This chapter identifies the nature of the sample used in the study. Most importantly, it articulates the findings related to the research questions. I present the findings related to the two sub-questions first. Once I have established important context with a presentation of the findings on the two sub-questions, I will then address the general question that provided the larger structure to the investigation. However, I begin with a discussion on the context of the role-play game itself—Real Life.

Nature of the Sample

Eleven participants made up the sample for the study (Table 1). The individuals included in the sample are all professional educators. They possess a combined total of 116 years of classroom experience. The participants range between three and 29 years experience with an average of 10.7 years.

Women make up a disproportionate number of the sample. Nine of the participants were women and two were men. However, the gender composition of the sample may be due in part to

the educational setting in these individuals teach. Seven of the participants teach in elementary school settings whereas four teach in secondary schools. Elementary schools are more likely to be staffed by female teachers than male teachers (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2011).

Table 1

Nature of the Sample

<i>Participant (pseudonym)</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Years of teaching</i>	<i>Content Area</i>
Ellen	Mid 30's	3	Lower Elementary
Tyler	Mid 50's	3	High School
Mitch	Mid 30's	3	Upper Elementary Bilingual
Megan	Early 40's	5	High School
Diane	Late 30's	16	Elementary Music
Madilyn	Mid 40's	15	High School
Claudia	Mid 40's	14	High School
Christine	Mid 30's	5	Upper Elementary
Tammy	Early 30's	5	Elementary Music
Emily	Early 40's	20	Elementary Music
Jeanne	Early 50's	29	Upper Elementary

Context of the Game

The purpose of the Real Life game to engage participants in a role-play simulation that allows each person to experience an educational journey from the perspective of a character who owns pre-determined factors such as race, gender, socio-economic circumstance (SES), family situation, and academic abilities. Each participant is asked to consider the game from the perspective of their character. Participants are asked to debrief and reflect on their character's challenges and strengths after the game play in an effort to explore personal perspectives of empathy and equity. The objective on Real Life is to assist each player to make connections between what they know as an educator and what they have learned by participating in the role game play. These insights could have significant impact on their classroom practice.

The nature of the simulation is intensive and generally requires at least two hours to complete. Real Life game play requires each player to possess a character card which displays a list of factors that are integral to the game play process. These factors include family, race, academic, SES, gender, and Grit. Grit is a particularly interesting element of the game and attempt to approximate roughly the concept of “grit” (e.g., personal resilience) as argued by Angela Duckworth (2016). Grit is the only factor that is determined by a roll of the dice prior to game play. All other factor values are pre-determined and can have significant impact on the life circumstances and opportunities the various characters. During play, the value assigned to any given factor must be combined with a dice roll and equal a specified number in order for a player to move forward. Grit, if owned by the player, may be used to make up any differences between the combined value of the dice and the factor in order to reach the needed number to move forward. Real Life spaces and Grit spaces on the board create additional challenges or benefits depending on the card drawn by the Game Master.

Players must complete several life events within the board game. Examples of life events include preschool, kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, high school, college, career and finally spaces labeled “Life Event.” All life events have cards that require players to use a designated factor and combine it with a dice roll to accomplish the event. The game is concluded when the first player completes the entire board and lands on the Real Life space or time is called. All play stops at that point and each player randomly chooses a Life card that details the completion of their Real Life journey. Players choose their Life card in the order of their position on the board.

Key Moments During the Game Play Simulation

Three key moments within the game play illustrate important issues facing educators and students. These moments specially involved Mitch, Megan, and Christine who encountered different situations based on their characters' predetermined factors and the circumstances that arose during game play. However, the larger point of analysis is what the group came to understand about empathy and equity through the experiences of Mitch, Megan, and Christine.

Necessity for a Hidden Hand of Advocacy: Mitch's Experience. A reality of the American educational system is that success and failure can be rather capricious. Certainly, there are numerous well-documented factors associated with school success. Factors such as family socio-economic status, race, ethnicity all have been found, for a variety of complex reasons, to be directly connected to academic achievement (Volante, Schnepf, Jerrim, & Klinger, 2019). Yet, personal relationships are also highly significant in influencing the fate of students (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013; Collins, 1996). Sometimes a child may find themselves stuck with little capacity to move along without the assistance of an interpersonal "hidden hand" to intervene (Apple, 2013). Without an advocate, a student may well languish behind as peers apparently move seamlessly through the educational system. Of course, the willingness to advocate for a student depends in large part on an educator's capacity for empathy and awareness of equity issues (Neito, 2013). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that if an educator experienced the frustrations of a "stuck" student, even in simulation, insight on empathy and equity might be achieved. Such an opportunity came to the sample of participants through the experience of one of the players whom I have identified with the pseudonym of Mitch.

Mitch was struggling to get past Kindergarten due to an academic factor of zero. Twice he rolled a high enough number to move forward only to land on a "Grit" space that sent him

back to the place he had just left. His frustration grew after six or seven attempts to move forward (with little success). Finally, the Game Master allowed him to make a significant move forward due to a fictional scenario involving a principal and a teacher advocating on his behalf. This intercession completely changed the game for Mitch's character. Because of this intervention, he finished the game in the middle of the pack rather than in last place. This was also the first time that the Game Master explicitly changed the rules on behalf of a character (which is the prerogative of the Game Master). This generosity of the Game Master won a huge smile from Mitch who stated "I would like to know who that teacher was!" Obviously, Mitch embraced the scenario and character he was given and performed as if he wanted to express his gratitude to his benefactor. Interestingly, the other participants shouted "hooray" and clapped for Mitch's good fortune, congratulating him for being able to move forward.

This was not only an interesting moment in the game, but an insightful one as well. The participants viscerally experienced the importance of intervention from a disadvantaged student's point of view. Moreover, Mitch's unfortunate dilemma revealed that, though not his personal fault, his character was the victim of inequities built into the game. Put another way, Mitch was subjugated by systemic inequalities he did not create, resembling much of the same conditions as many American students. His circumstance could only be alleviated by an empathetic, personal hidden hand who recognized the unfairness of the situation.

Through the experience of Mitch's character and the resultant reactions of the participants, I identified the first theme: the power of teacher/student relationships. It almost goes without saying that teachers have tremendous influence on the fate of their students. There are myriad ways teachers can impact students ranging from the way they respond to their academic work to the manner in which they reinforce or dismiss students. All of these interactions

significantly impact students' self-worth (Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020). However, Mitch's case reveals another aspect to the power of teacher/student relationships. Namely, the ability to correct an inequity merely by being empathetic to a particular student's quandary.

By the reaction of the sample, all the participants, not just Mitch, experienced the relief in the corrective power of the teacher/student relationship. Simply put, they reacted empathetically to an inequity and applauded the personal advocacy of the fictional teacher.

Resignation to Structural Inequalities: Megan's Experience. Just as the "hidden hand" of personal advocacy can intervene to impact a student's circumstance, sometimes a student is subjected to more invisible interpositions that too directly influence their educational fate (Besen-Cassino, 2016; Lock & Sparks, 2019). We generally think of these more imperceptible influences as structural inequalities (Lewis-McCoy, 2020; Royce, 2015).

While structural inequalities are very real, they are abstract, frequently politically controversial, and thus there is a reluctance among some to accept their impact on educational achievement (Bomer et al., 2008; Gorski, 2008). Instead it is much easier to attribute academic success or failure to personal or familial traits such as grit or family dysfunctions (Duckworth, 2016; Payne, 2005). But the hesitancy to appreciate the significance of structural barriers inhibiting educational success has been met with scathing criticism. Regarding the immense power of structural inequalities on the educational endeavors of poor urban students, Ladson-Billings (2017) argues,

When we consider the many ways the entire society is arrayed against poor urban students—segregated housing, substandard schools with inexperienced and underprepared teachers, health threats, lack of access to healthy food, and inadequate healthcare—we cannot reduce their academic problems to individual failings. How could

being a member of a “culture of poverty” cause these problems, and how could having “grit” alleviate the reality of this dizzying list of life circumstances? The glaring inequities that characterize the school experiences of urban students explain how structural realities form the foundation of lack of achievement and poor school performance and why education scholars often describe schools as the locale of students’ problems, not the remedy. (p. 86)

Structural inequalities are built into Real Life game play. Without the intervention of the Game Master (acting as a personal benefactor) the player has little option but to accept the inequity of their circumstance. Obviously, how a player responds to the inequities largely depends on their personality (much like in real life). During this investigation, the participants had the opportunity to examine structural inequalities and the consequences of a “student” and display their reactions.

Megan found herself stagnated on the board with no hope of moving forward based on her gender factor. Megan used the chat box to ask her peers if she could cheat without considering that the chat was also being monitored by the Game Master. Megan was unable to move from this spot for the remainder of the game due to low rolls of the dice coupled with insufficient Grit chips to make up the difference. With every roll she was disappointed with the result. Ultimately Megan projected a finality or resignation attitude about the game. Her face exhibited disappointment and her small exclamations of “nope” or “uh-uh” revealed a fatalistic disposition. The Game Master chose not to intervene on Megan’s behalf. Consequently, Megan was doomed to accept the structural inequalities of her character’s circumstance.

While Megan was stagnated and unable to move forward, there was a lot of sympathy from the group. This was mostly acknowledged in facial expressions and non-verbal body

language that was observed on the screen. The group took Megan's cheating attempt lightheartedly in the chat. A feature of the Real Life simulation is that the Game Master cannot see the dice roll of a player. Thus, technically, anyone can cheat as long as the group cooperates (although this is difficult as the Game Master monitors the chat between players). Likely their peer relationship overrode any immediate concern that her behavior was a breach of game rules. It should be noted here, however, that during the debriefing session, a serious conversation did occur regarding the cheating as a strategy for students who get stuck and have difficulty moving forward with their peers.

Acquiesce of Education's Winners: Christine's Experience. If some students fall victim to structural inequalities they can't control, others seem to enjoy charmed lives. These students seem to glide through the educational system with little difficulty, supported by significant advantages (Demerath, 2009; Schulz et al., 2017). For these individuals, the schooling experience is vastly different from those who struggle with debilitating inequities.

Bourdieu (1977, 1986) argues that some students enjoy the advantages of "cultural capital" that greatly assist in academic achievement. He asserts that mainstream society values certain attributes and American schools tend to, both subtly and overtly, reward these attributes. For Bourdieu, examples of cultural capital include such attributes as knowledge and understanding of mainstream cultural values and norms, socially accepted styles of dress and speech, even physical appearance. Thus, just as there are structural inequalities that present barriers to greater educational success for some students, others benefit from cultural capital dividends (Yosso, 2005). Interestingly, socio-cultural advantages can be just as unlikely to be recognized as structural inequalities (Roska & Potter, 2011). Indeed, frequently any discussion

that appears to include notions of “White privilege” (Rothenberg, 2002) are met with derision and dismissal (Solomona et al., 2005; Yosso, 2005).

The ease to which some students move through the educational system while benefiting from built-in advantages was illustrated in the game simulation with the experience of Christine. She successfully moved through the game with little to no struggle. As the lead player, she frequently paused to indicate her sadness for those that were struggling to get past the early stages of the game. A majority of her character’s factors had high numerical values and she rolled a high number of Grit chips at the beginning of the game. Her reaction to the game play is particularly revealing. Common were such remarks as “this is easy” and “I was lucky and avoided a lot of challenges because my low factors never influenced my movement in the game.” Her facial expressions throughout the game were of enjoyment and engagement. She self-reported that she is competitive by nature and wanted to win. Nevertheless, she evidenced empathetic concern for those not doing so well and related that she struggled with the idea of winning while other players found it difficult to move forward in the game. It is easy to extrapolate her various reactions ranging from enjoyment, a sense of accomplishment in “winning” the game, to empathy for those who were struggling as not that much different from many students who “win” at educational success largely as a result of unmerited sociocultural privileges.

During the game play, the group was fairly passive about Christine’s success. She was so far ahead for some time that it seemed as if they forgot about her as their focused on those struggling. There were the occasional “good for you” exclamations when she reached significant milestones (which occurred at a fairly rapid pace). No one questioned during game play or after what caused her to be so far ahead. She was the catalyst for the end of the game as she reached

post-graduate “Job” before anyone else. Interestingly, it was only during the focus group debrief when I specially asked about her character that Christine’s success was discussed at all. It was if the group merely accepted Christine’s success as natural and not unusual. No doubt similar unquestioned acceptance of the academic and latter-life success of socially advantaged students is pervasive among teachers, students, and parents (Roksa, & Potter, 2011; Volante et al., 2019).

Findings

In an effort to address each of the research questions and their subtleties, I present the findings related to Sub-Question A first, followed by a review of the findings associated with Sub-Question B. Although it a bit out of order, this discussion is concluded with a discussion on how the data informs the overarching general research question. This organization of the discussion of the findings allows for a layering of the context and will bring greater meaning to the insights related to the general research question.

Sub-Question A

Sub-question A asked, “How do the participants describe the nature of the shifts in their views on empathy and equity after engaging in the role-simulation game?” My objective in the data analysis was to document evidence indicating a line of distinction between empathy and equity perspectives. However, the data analysis did not reveal such a clear distinction. The responses and reflections were much nuanced. While the data analysis did reveal some reflection and shifts in equity perspectives, a much larger proportion of data suggests greater self-reported shifts in empathy perspectives over equity perspectives. This is a potentially significant finding and will be discussed in greater detail at the end of the chapter.

The analysis of the data revealed three themes associated with shifts on empathy and equity:

1. Need to diligently attempt to understand the life circumstances of students
2. Need to understand unseen forces impacting students' schooling experience
3. Need to be cognizant of faulty perceptions of students

These themes were especially evidence in the analysis of the focus group debriefing. The focus group dynamic can be best described as active engagement. During the debriefing, the participants exchanged comments, added their personal reflections, and offered their own commentary. Typically, the participants leaned forward, towards their screens and clearly engaged in active listening to each other in an attempt to share the emotions and thoughts they were experiencing. In short, the debriefing was a lively conversation with all participants engaged and facilitated by myself and co-game play facilitator/observer.

Theme one: Need to diligently attempt to understand the life circumstances of students. It became clear that one of the most salient shifts in views on empathy and equity was simply the recognition that the participants needed to more diligent and deliberate in appreciating the circumstances of their students' lives. By working through the game play and thereby witnessing each other's struggles and successes, and by engaging in honest conversation, a theme emerged in which the group began to focus on their own shortcomings in understanding the complexities facing their students. Table 2 presents sample responses and shifts in views associated with this theme.

Table 2*Theme 1 Sample Responses and Shifts in Views*

Views before game play...	Views after game play...	Nature of the shift in views
I didn't consider that students might be afraid to ask me questions.	I realize that they need a little encouragement.	Knowledge of the student moves from the head to the heart.
I thought I prepared OK when getting a new class of students.	I realized that I let other aspects of teaching take priority over spending time to determine which of my students might struggle more than others based on factors I can access in the system.	Empathy requires purposeful action.
I thought that I gave sufficient consideration to all people.	This game reminded me that other people's situations are different than mine.	Empathy requires self-awareness.
I didn't know how I compared to the other players.	I realized that students don't know how they compare to others and it takes time to see who has certain advantages and who does not.	Actions of equity first require acknowledgement of one person's advantage over another.

A significant moment during the focus group discussion occurred when Mitch expressed his frustration at his character's inability to move forward. He often would exclaim "that roll was no bueno" or "you got to be kidding!" when his roll did not get the desired number. He personalized the factors of his character which were very low and difficult to overcome without assistance. He began his statement by saying, "I think of my character, when I looked at the scores and I looked at the background...What she went through and everything like that. And I didn't have, you know, I had zero points on grade, I mean, I had nothing!"

As he listened to Megan talk about her experience at being stuck in one place due to her character factors Mitch said, "I rolled the dice, like I just kept going back, back, back to where I started." He associated this experience with his ELL students who must pass a language proficiency exam or risk losing electives in middle school until they do pass. He related,

It made me think of my ELL students with the exams and everything they have to do. It's like sometimes when they see their scores and they didn't pass the exam. I feel like that's how sometimes they feel like, it's like "really? I've studied so hard and I try to exit and I tried to do this, and it tells me that I didn't move, that I didn't pass. I have to go again? And do ELD again?"

He brought the conversation back to when he was given the opportunity to move forward through the fictional advocacy of a principal and a teacher.

I think first, they got a smile on my face and I think that is how some kid would feel as well if the counselor would come say to them, "Hey, we are going to remove you from testing even though you haven't passed because we want to do this for you." I think they would feel the same way I felt.

Mitch was animated and passionate as he talked about this connection between his character and what he sees as a real-life struggle with his students. His body language and voice modulations created the impression that his students feel the existence of a potentially insurmountable obstacle that controls their choices.

Jeanne also spoke about the factor cards and how that connects to her relationship with her students. She stated,

I like that you titled the game Real Life, that *is* real life. Our kids have all of those real issues. We don't know what's on their cards, we can't see all those things...They're not nicely listed for me on a piece of paper or a card when the student comes to my classroom.

Mitch responded with a different perspective on Jeanne's comments about students' real life circumstances,

Sometimes we don't take the time to look at those cards, you know? In Elementary we do have pink and blue cards but most of the time...some of us, I include myself in it, we just kind of go straight to implementing our classroom management and teaching content.

The last thing we do is, you know, have I spent time in order to know, you know, Jose or Miguel?

Megan related a personal experience where she assigned a particular assignment to her class and a student used the chat box to ask if she could do something different. Megan indicated that her first reaction was "Were you even listening when I was giving directions?" She continued,

But I took a step back and I kind of checked out the student's profile because we have only been in class for two days. I saw that the person was on a modified diploma, they were receiving special education services. All right, give them grace, show some flexibility because they asked to make a cake which is super not the assignment. But then I noticed the little birthday icon in the corner of the screen and so I clicked on it and I was like, holy moly this weekend is their birthday. And I was like, "Yep, go ahead and make a cake that sounds like a great idea. I see that you have a birthday coming up," which opened a conversation between us, instead of just being like, well that's not the assignment, no you can't do that.

Using student information, Megan made a decision that enhanced her relationship with the student. Much like Megan, Tyler too discussed revisiting the information teachers have access to in order to look for known factors for each student. He related, "But over time you forget some of those details and it's really important to stay aware and keep kind of looking into

each of your kids and understand where they are...it just kind of deepens my, you know, my outlook, on what my relationship to my students and their family should be.”

Claudia connected to Tyler’s remarks. She related that teachers must be purposeful and intentional in their pursuit of knowledge around their students.

This also reminds me of how we don’t have all the information on our computer. You know you have to go down to the counselor, find a confidential file, or specifically go talk to, like, the health nurse to find out what is actually behind the red cross on the screen. It’s not just popping out at us. It’s not like you get the whole picture of the kid without a really active, like assertive, attempt from us. I am noticing more and more icons on every single kid’s page...there’s more to things than grades, you know.

Theme two: Need to understand unseen forces impacting students’ schooling experience. The participants also focused their discussion on the reality of largely unseen forces that shape the schooling experience of their students. Table 3 presents sample responses reflecting this theme.

Table 3

Theme 2 Sample Responses and Shifts in Views

Views before game play...	Views after game play...	Nature of this shift
I thought I knew the kids in my class.	I realize there is a lot I don’t know about them.	Self-awareness that more could be done to get to know students.
I didn’t consider that there are “unspoken rules” of school that can make it hard to navigate if you don’t know them.	I realize that the rules of school are confusing and we don’t have good systems to help kids navigate them.	Empathy being deepened as they realize the struggles are real for some students who might not have all the supports in place that they need.
I thought that I knew my students pretty well.	I realize that I only see the parts they want me to see.	Realization that factors can be invisible yet play a big part in a student’s success at school.

The participants agreed that most educators are not readily aware of these “invisible” factors but concluded that an essential part of being an effective teacher required the attempt to understand these complexities. Madilyn spoke about this issue with the lens of a high school teacher.

I think there are a lot of times when we have students that make it into our classrooms and they have been fortunate to always roll well or have their circumstances be where they have high numbers in life. Things have helped them succeed and we think, “Oh they are a success, everything is great.” But under the surface there might be some areas that are ones. Problems begin to show up and all of the sudden you just have this drop. I jump to the, “Oh my goodness, you’re hanging out with the wrong crowd, you are doing drugs.” That hasn’t just come up now, I need to be aware and receptive to them.

Emily, as a music teacher who sees hundreds of students, reflected on her choice to attend Student Services Team (SST) meetings at her school in order to find out what invisible factors some of her at risk students are facing. She stated, “I was looking at my card and thinking I wouldn’t know this if I wasn’t in these SST meetings...I get to know them better in a way that I wouldn’t necessarily get to as a music teacher.”

Megan, whose character became stagnated with little opportunity to move along in the game, brought up an interesting point on how students view their place in the system that, by all appearances, seem stacked against them. She related that during the game, she wondered about how fair the rules were and if it was reasonable to request a change,

At one point I thought about asking, can we roll more than one dice? I saw that as an option, but I was unsure about what the rules were and plus I had already made the comment about cheating and didn’t want a big black mark on my face to be the cheater.

So, I was just like, nope, here I am. This is me until the end of the game because I have nothing.

What is especially revealing about Megan's experience is that while she questioned the fairness of the rules and reasonableness of asking for changes, she also recognized that her previous attempt to cheat potentially cast a pallor of a troublemaker on her character. This raises the serious issue of how students can become stigmatized. Once a stigma is attached to an individual, it is extremely difficult to shed its connotations (Kwon, 2020; Mueller, 2019).

The unseen issues confronting students come in many forms. Some arise from mental or physical health challenges. Others are socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, or gender identity derived. These unseen difficulties can be extremely perplexing for students. Too often they can result in a resigned, fatalistic attitude. However, Megan pointed out that teachers can (and, indeed must) be aware of this kind of defeated disposition and be prepared to intervene on behalf of the student. She explained,

I see kids who are just sitting there and they're like, "Nope, this is my life." And I am like, "Well, like it can be a different way. Look at what you can do." But sometimes they don't know that they can ask for help; they don't know if they can ask to roll the dice twice, or what. They need a little bit of encouragement.

Claudia identified the unspoken rules of school as another set of invisible factors that can hinder student success. She related that, because she arrived to the beginning of the game a few minutes late, caused her confusion and required a little more time to become oriented. Her thoughts were, "Did I miss that much? What's actually happening? What are the rules? And then there is this whole like chance and luck happening as well. I didn't know what the rules really were." She continued to describe her marginally successful attempts to find patterns within the

game play. Her reflection on this experience led her to connect it with something that happens in a larger and more serious way for many students. Claudia stated, “I thought about different situations where they (students) don’t know the rules of the game in the educational system...but every first time you open up a game, nobody knows what the cards say.”

Theme three: Need to be cognizant of faulty perceptions of students. Educators frequently make assumptions about their students. These assumptions can be based on many considerations ranging from outward appearance, race/ethnicity, home language usage, gender, gender identity, even perceived intellect (Garcia et al., 2019; Landsman & Lewis, 2006; Redding, 2019). If educators’ biases are persistent and pervasive enough, students will suffer in innumerable way including degraded self-esteem and the self-fulfilling prophecy of stereotype threat (Kozlowski, 2015; Merillat et al., 2018). As a result, educators must be cognizant of any faulty perceptions they have possess about their students. The capacity to check one’s assumptions is not as easy as it sounds. However, as the participants in this study came to realize, such reevaluations about students is necessary in order to address issues of empathy and equity. Table 4 presents examples of responses associated with this theme.

Table 4

Theme 3 Sample Responses and Shifts in Views

Views before game play...	Views after game play...	Nature of this shift
I thought I was doing fine.	There is more I could do.	Shame at missing opportunities to be empathetic.
I thought my race factor would be an issue in the game play.	My race factor was not an issue that kept me from moving forward in the game.	One factor does not indicate overall success or failure in life.
I would look at a student’s factors and assume that they would struggle.	There are different factors that can help a student be successful.	Self-awareness that teachers should not assume student struggles based on known factors.

Tyler shared about a situation he encountered in his classroom. In this case, he articulated that he had certain assumptions about a student that required to be reevaluated. His perception of a student began with “they are in a more privileged situation at home.” However, it evolved to “they were struggling more than I expected for someone in their situation.” He went on to share that when he looked up the student’s information online, the student had a documented head injury. His first impression of “your factors look fine” became an awareness of “I should have looked more deeply at my student’s files.” Tyler concluded, “I already have that ethic, I feel like I do, but I’m sure not doing enough to really know each individual student.”

Ellen shared a similar perspective to Tyler regarding assumptions about the factors a student owns. She commented “Where you might see a student that you would think would struggle but maybe they have a supportive family or something, that helps them through.”

Diane summed up the general conclusion of the group on the need for educators to fully be aware of their own perceptions by linking them to real life consequences for students. She related,

As the game was progressing on and you saw people who struggled early on get left behind. The ones that didn’t have situations that would be able to move them forward. When statistics were being read to us, if such and such doesn’t happen by third grade, if such and such doesn’t happen by the time you’re five. If we are not proactive from the beginning...and we’re not empathetic to the situations and everything going on, we are going to lose them as we go down the road.

The participants understood that being honest about their assumptions of students is critically important and goes to the heart of being an empathetic educator. The game play simulation only served to highlight and reinforce this understanding for them. Even Megan’s

desire to “game the system” by either cheating or questioning the rules of the game illustrates her yearning to have someone understand her quandary. She wanted someone to challenge the prevailing assumptions and take corrective action. One can only guess how many students experience Megan’s dilemma in a much more consequential manner every day in American schools.

Sub-Question B

Sub-question B asks, “What specific features of the game do the participants identify as especially important in generating deeper and more critical consideration of their preexisting attitudes around empathy and equity?” This is a rather straightforward, albeit important research question. The Real Life simulation game is a new tool designed to enhance awareness of issues of empathy and equity among preservice and practicing educators. As such, this research sought to identify what specific features of the simulation role play were deemed particularly effective among the participants. Based on the actual game play observation and the focus group debrief, three features of Real Life stood out as especially useful. These features include the life event research cards, the Game Master controls, and the Grit chips.

The first feature the participants identified as highly effective is the life events research cards. The game incorporates current research contained on cards which influences choices and play throughout the game. Each life event card, from preschool to end of the game, contains information derived from scholarly research that is read out loud. Moreover, each card is purposefully designed to be appropriate for the developmental level it represents. The purpose for this feature is to bring awareness of cultural, academic, economic, racial and gender related research to the players as they contemplate a particular life event. The research is updated regularly in order to reflect current statistics or other pertinent information that could impact

perspectives around empathy and equity. An example of how this feature influenced the views of the participants can be found in Emily. She specifically mentioned the impact of the information contained life event research card regarding the onus on teachers to not let any student fall behind. Her intensity in taking the research to heart was reflected in the tone and sincerity of her statement.

The second important design feature of Real Life identified by the participants is the ability of the Game Master to have ultimate control over the board. The Game Master can change the rules at any time based on their discretion to help, hinder, or discombobulate the players. Allowing the Game Master this kind of power is a design feature that prevents participants from becoming complacent. Essentially, the Game Master can intercede by creating a sense of disequilibrium. A second purpose for this type of control is to show the unpredictable reality of life. The disequilibrium established due to this design feature is purposeful and creates a sense of uncertainty that attempts to mimic what a student might feel in an educational setting. It is important to note that all participants are given a set of rules prior to game play that indicates the Game Master has ultimate say within the play of the game. This instruction is often overlooked by players until they become a recipient, positive or negative, of the Game Master's intervention.

While Mitch was the only recipient of the Game Master's intervention during game play, it was to his favor and was noticed by all players. His reaction upon receiving the unexpected gift of moving forward without necessarily earning it, contributed greatly to his reflections within the focus group. It was also discussed by the other participants who reflected on the implications of having "fate" in the form of the Game Master imposed on a player and what that would mean in actuality in the life of a student.

The third design feature the participants focused on was the Grit chips. Grit is the only character factor of the game that students can personally influence through the roll of a single die. The rules state that Grit is non-transferrable and can only be acquired prior to the start of the game. The purpose for making Grit non-transferrable is to keep players from bailing each other out of tight spots during game play though the rules can change at any time at the Game Master's choosing. Grit chips hold a value of 1:1 when used to make up a point difference during the game. There is no stated rule regarding any benefit for using or hoarding Grit. Grit chips force participants to make decisions based on gut values of priority in moving forward or saving them for a worse-case scenario within the game. This is another way to cause a sense of uncertainty or disequilibrium during game play. This feature of the game required that the player think and act strategically when spending grit chips, much like a student who must decide when and where to demonstrate personal innovative or resilience in which the result of the effort may or may not pay off.

Megan mentioned when she received only one Grit chip at the beginning of the game she was prepared to "fight it out and take what comes to me" over the course of the game. Ellen on the other hand had four Grit chips and decided to hold onto them. As she put it, "Thinking that life might get more tricky." Christine felt like her Grit score "gave her a little bit of control" (and a lot greater advantage) while Tyler, who had the highest Grit score in the game, used all of his chips and determined that "aside from Grit you are pretty powerless" in accomplishing the life events required to progress through the game.

Taken together, these three features were prominent during both the game observation and the focus group discussion as particularly impactful in influencing views on empathy and equity. Each of the participants may not have personally been impacted by the intercession of the

Game Master and some used the information contained on the life event research cards, but they all witnessed the effects of these features on the fate of their peers. The Grit cards, however, proved to be the most directly impactful on all the players and was the subject of much conversation.

General Research Question

The general research question, which served as an umbrella question for the investigation asked, “Do the participants report a shift in their thinking on issues of empathy and equity after engaging in the role-play simulation?” The short answer to this research question is that the participants did in fact report a shift in their thinking on empathy and equity issues. However, while that is the bottom-line conclusion, the answer is more nuanced. Namely, the data reveals a great deal more discussion on shifts in views surrounding empathy. However, there was a lot less attention paid to equity issues. Thus, it seems that while participating in the Real Life role game simulation generated reflections on and even shifts in attitudes on empathy, it is not as clear that was the case for shifting views on equity.

Aspects of empathy were consistently addressed throughout the focus group discussion. As the themes emerged through personal reflection between before game play and after game play, shifts were documented around these themes. Listed below are some of the most articulated shifts as seen in the data.

Theme One: Need to diligently attempt to understand the life circumstances of students.

- Knowledge of the student moves from the head to the heart.
- Empathy requires purposeful action.
- Empathy requires self-awareness.

- Actions on behalf of equity first require acknowledgement of one person's advantage over another.

Theme two: Need to understand unseen forces impacting students' schooling experience.

- Self-awareness that additional efforts is needed to truly know students.
- Empathy is deepened as teachers realize that struggles are real for students who might not have all the supports in place that they need to navigate the educational system.
- Realization that factors can be invisible yet play a big part in a student's success at school.

Theme three: Need to be cognizant of faulty perceptions of students.

- Shame at missing opportunities to be empathetic.
- One factor does not determine overall success or failure in life.
- Self-awareness that teachers should not assume student struggles based on known factors.

Overall, the role-play simulation game and focus group discussion were catalysts for shifts in perspective as relayed by the participants. Tyler, Christine, and Jeanne all made direct mention of their own perceived sense of empathy before the game and then related a shift within their own thinking. While others were less explicit, the inference within the context of their remarks revealed their focus to be on ways to be more empathetic towards students.

Conclusion

The role play game Real Life has been designed to encourage preservice or current educators to take the role of an assigned character of a student. The character is imbued with characteristics that either assist or hinder the player who must maneuver through the educational system from preschool to a career. Its' objective is to encourage educators to gain a fuller understanding of the inherent advantages and disadvantages facing students. Thus, the

participant not only experiences the game as a particular character, but witnesses the successes and frustrations of their peers. Thereby, issues of empathy and equity are unavoidable regardless to the particular attributes of a player's character.

This study sought to examine the dynamics of a simulation event with a group of practicing, classroom teachers followed by a focus group debriefing. Although, an outbreak of COVID disrupted the original research design plans and made the investigation more challenging, the study, nevertheless, yielded important findings. The participants clearly evidenced a shift in views surrounding empathy issues. They self-reported that the game helped them focus more on the need to be empathetic with students. Moreover, they discussed the various dimensions of empathy. For example, they identified the need to be more purposeful, actively attempt to discover the more unseen factors impacting students, and evidenced greater self-awareness that they needed to do more to know students.

Ultimately, I identified three themes specifically associated with shifts in view surround empathy. These include the need to diligently attempt to understand the life circumstances of students; the need to understand unseen forces impact students' schooling experience; and the need to be cognizant of faulty perceptions of students.

While shifts in views on empathy were relatively easy to identify, this was not the case for equity issues. The participants had much less to say about the myriad inequalities that shape and mold the fortunes of students in their schools. There may be many reasons for this lack of attention. Perhaps, equities are built into society, and thus schools, and the participants regarded them beyond their personal level to control. Yet, that is not the case for empathy. Empathy is a personal matter. It is a choice and, thus, an individual can elect to be more or less empathetic. In

the end, likely the participants focused on what they could do (actively work to be more empathetic) and less on what they could not alone correct (societal inequalities).

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study examined the experiences and perceptions of a sample of teachers who engage in a role-play simulation on shifts in views on empathy and equity. Data were derived from observation documented with notes taken by myself and a second observer of the game play event and a focus group debriefing with the participants. The design of the study was deliberately created to allow the participants to engage in critical reflection “[I]n order to facilitate the transformative learning, participants are asked to create links between RPG’s (role play games) specificities, their personal journey, their own meaning schemes, and four dimensions of learning – knowing, doing, being, and relating” (Daniau, 2016, p. 439).

In this chapter, I provide summative answers to each of general research questions and the two sub-questions. In addition to these considerations, I discuss some of the implications of the findings in relation to scholarship and educational practice. I will also suggest areas for further research on the issue of teachers’ empathy and equity.

Interpretation of the Findings

Each participant in this study brought a unique set of values and perspectives into the game play session. Their educational backgrounds and specialties varied, representing elementary and secondary levels of the public school K-12 population. Their willingness to engage in transparent reflection was a strength of this study. The participants made no attempt to paint themselves as perfect educators. They were willing to acknowledge the perspectives they held prior to the game which, as was later demonstrated, were at times out of alignment with those they expressed following the game. The power of a role-play simulation for transformative

learning comes in the reflection process after game play that allows participants “To explore the meaning of their practice...” (Daniau, 2016, p. 424) and to “Enrich and extend the player experience beyond a momentary instance of gameplay” (Mekler, Iacovides, & Bopp, 2018, p. 9). There was a humbleness represented within their individual and collective reflections that suggested a true shift in views had occurred. Indeed, each of the participants shared their own experiences and spoke frankly about how their perspectives were challenged through the scenarios presented within the game. All brought a sense of commitment and willingness to learn into their shared experience of game play.

General Research Question

A general research question served as a more global query to frame the investigation. This question asked, “Do the participants report a shift in their thinking on issues of empathy and equity after engaging in the role-play simulation?”

The data provided documentation that the participants did report perspective shifts on issues of empathy and equity after playing the Real Life game. Reflection amongst the participants evidenced the importance of knowing a student on a more intimate level. They regarded a greater understanding of students would allow for more opportunity to exhibit empathy when needed. It was noted that while they perceived themselves to be empathetic as people in general there was a realization that this could be improved upon within the classroom.

The importance of holding a holistic view of an individual is key to developing an empathetic posture towards that individual. The participants consistently redirected their comments to this understanding. What a student’s life is focused on outside of school is important and should not be negated as insignificant to their academic successes.

However, while the data analysis supports the conclusion that the participants indicated a shift on empathetic views, the data are less clear in the case for equity. The participants offered fewer comments on equity issues and focused most of the comments on issues of empathy. As was mentioned in the last chapter, this may be due to the fact that issues of empathy were more immediately experienced during the role play simulation and, thus, more concrete in the minds and activities of the participants. On the other hand, while the role play game includes built-in issues of equity, the participants did not focus on these issues perhaps because they are more abstract and more difficult to address in the timeframe given for the game and focus group debrief.

Sub-Question A

The first sub-question posed, “How do the participants describe the nature of the shifts in their views on empathy and equity after engaging in the role-simulation game?”

Playing as a character that was diverse and potentially different from themselves allowed participants to see how an educational journey could be impacted by factors outside of a student’s control. Most players reported they were concerned with at least one of the factors held by their character and experienced challenges in moving along in the game. Moreover, they reported feeling badly for those who were struggling more than themselves and expressed surprise at their feelings of resignation and frustration when faced with challenges directly related to such factors as ethnicity, gender, or family. This is supported by the work of Kilgour et al. (2015) who stated, “It would appear that the multi-cultural role-play exercise allowed for students to be immersed in a social scenario that has caused many of them to experience feelings and realities that they may not otherwise be exposed to” (p. 17).

The analysis of the data discovered three specific shifts in view related to empathy and equity among this sample of participants. First, they indicated that participation in the game enhanced their understanding on the need to diligently attempt to understand the life circumstances of students. Second, the game assisted to help them realize that unseen forces frequently impact the schooling experience of their students. Third, the dynamics of the game play simulation illustrated to them the necessity to be aware of their own faulty perceptions of students.

The nature of the shifts reported by participants can be described as knowledge that moves from head to heart. Several of the participants noted that while the reality of life as a teacher includes a lot of work that has nothing to do with teaching, this cannot be a deterrent to the goal of knowing their students and viewing them through a holistic and relational lens.

Sub-Question B

The second sub-question asked, “What specific features of the game do the participants identify as especially important in generating deeper and more critical consideration of their preexisting attitudes around empathy and equity?” As indicated in the previous chapter, because the role play game simulation Real Life is designed as a means to foster awareness and discussion on empathy and equity among educators and preservice teachers, the intent of this question was to document the specific elements of the game that are more effective in achieving the simulation’s purpose.

Before the research study, it was unclear what (if any) elements of the role game simulation may have greater impact on players. However, the data revealed that the game, to the participants in this sample, does include specific features that appear to be especially effective in generating focused discussion and critical reflection on issues of empathy and equity. Most

specifically, the participants, both during the actual game play and the focus group debriefing, the life event research cards, the discretionary ability of the Game Master to intervene in the game play, and importance of the Grit cards.

Participants identified the factors on the live event research cards as being a critical feature within the game. They reflected on how the individual factors assigned to each character impacted their educational journey positively or negatively. A few participants made comments regarding their personal assumptions of certain factors their character owned. Prior to the beginning of the game, they held a preconceived notion that a certain factor would more greatly impact their character during game play than other factors. These assumptions were not always confirmed which surprised the participants. The life event research cards, which provide important background information based on empirical research, assisted to bring contextualization and meaning to the game flow. The experience of the participants in finding the life event research cards important is supported by the work of Bullough (2019) who asserts that empathy for teachers has become more challenging due to the increasing numbers of diverse students in the classroom. Teachers are under increasing pressure to sort out the needs of individuals but frequently lack the knowledge of greater social, cultural, and personal circumstances necessary to respond effectively. Recognition of the arduous nature of this task was noted by participants who felt that there is little time to contemplate the complexities of students' lives in conjunction with all other tasks they are asked to complete.

Another significant factor within the game was the power the Game Master held to moderate the rules at any given time and for any reason. They were struck by the fact that the Game Master has complete discretionary power over the simulation process. This feature created some angst among most of the players who were self-reported rule followers. Most notably, they

focused on the sense of uncertainty created by the unexpected intrusion of the Game Master. The result in this ability was that the participants reported being confused and uncertain about the rules of the game. They also noted that although this feature of the game was at time disconcerting, it actually duplicated to a certain extent, the uncertainties of what happens in the life of students.

Grit is also a dynamic feature of the game that caused participants to make choices that were related to their characters' factors. Grit is a unique element of the game as it involves both chance and skill. Although the amount of "grit" possessed by a character was determined by the chance of the roll of dice, the choice of when to spend grit points was the one feature of the game that the participants had the greatest amount of control. In exercising the choice to use grit, they could operate in a strategic manner. Some of the participants held onto grit in anticipation of future challenges while others freely spent with no thought as to what event might be coming that could impact their character's fate. For them this feature of the game was important as it duplicated the actual life experience wherein students frequently must make choices on when to exert themselves and when such exertion may not produce the intended results in their educational experience. In this regard, grit in the game works much like personal resilience as described by Duckworth (2016).

Implications

The findings of this research have importance to both educational scholars and educational practitioners. A number of important implications are identified and discussed.

Implications for Scholarship

The results of this study align with the current literature that connects personal relationships to empathy (Dobrasky & Frymier, 2004; Hojat et al., 2002). Warren (2014)

discusses the relevance of empathy as integral to the teacher and student relationship. Striving to understand the life circumstances of students allows teachers to express empathy and equity through the differentiation of needs as exhibited by each unique scenario, much as exemplified by Mitch's game experience. Stories from the classroom shared by both Tyler and Megan are consistent with the research of Baston et al. (1997), Gomez and Marklund (2018), and Kaur (2012) that suggests empathetic involvement with others strengthens an individual's awareness and appreciation for their own and others' humanity.

Empathy has been a consistent topic of research for several years and there is a body of evidence demonstrating the importance and need for empathy within the helping professions of nursing, education, and social work. However, a continued debate among researcher regards the definition of empathy within these professions and how to best address the inconsistencies (Bullough, 2019). It is likely the participants in this study too held varying notions of empathy. Nevertheless, they all demonstrated an intuitive need to relate, understand, and ultimately meet students at their level of need. Regardless to the various scholarly debates on the meaning of empathy, the participants acknowledged that the role play game enhanced their personal understanding of empathy in their professional lives.

Whereas the participants clearly engaged in discussion on empathy, the findings did not generate a strong connect with the current literature on equity issues. Namely this was because the participants focused their attention almost entirely on empathy. This fact of the research raises important considerations about how educators perceive equity issues. Is it perceived solely as a systemic problem that can only be addressed through avenues outside of the general educator's classroom control? As discussed previously, likely the participants focused their attention on issues they could personally impact and largely ignored those they associate with

larger social structural arrangements beyond their immediate ability to affect. The teachers in this study talked a great deal about empathy and what it could look like and sound like in their classroom. However, if we had a greater amount of time for this investigation (given the limitations imposed by the COVID pandemic, this was not possible), likely greater discussion could have revealed the complex equity issues underlining the conversations on empathy. That is, I believe that issues of equity would potentially arise as a contributing root to several of the issues addressed by the participants.

Of course, there is another possibility for the reluctance of the participants to address equity issues. Tanner (2016) and Titu et al. (2018) suggest that culturally dominant teachers are frequently cautious about publicly discussing issues involving diversity, which they regard as too sensitive. These researchers found that white teachers are sometimes unwilling to speak on equity issues feeling they have no real authority to address them or they might be criticized and rebuked for their views. As this sample included ten white participants and one Hispanic participant, it is possible they were reluctant to take on equity issues in a group setting for the same reasons as identified by Tanner (2016) and Titu et al. (2018).

Implications for Educational Practice

Empathy is an action that is closely related to the teacher and student relationship and represents an important pathway to responsive classroom management (Balli, Basari, Kan, 2020). While this study's participants voiced the need to be more empathetic, some of the individuals acknowledged already possessing an empathetic nature. The game simply highlighted that more could and should be done within their classrooms. This disposition is similar to the inclinations of many teachers, especially those who recognize the complex challenges facing today's students (Barr, 2011; Rodriguez et al., 2020).

The study participants reported a desire to understand the more difficult to recognize factors that impact the lives of students. They made reference to reimagining how they might respond to students based on the activities of the game. They discussed the necessity of slowing down and asking more questions before making a decision about a student. They emphasized the desire to better help them by serving the whole student and not just address a singular issue (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Within the examination of role-play simulations and their potential as a transformative learning tool the concept of ethical gaming must be discussed. While this study indicated a shift in participants' perspectives on empathy the concept of ethical game play should also be addressed. Waskal and Lust (2004) state "Role-playing games can be described, explained, and understood as an activity that exists in the unique interstices between persona, player, and person." The question becomes "who" is playing the game? The persona that has been delegated through the game, the player who recognizes the rules and how they impact gaming choices or the person who manages the attributes of the persona and the dispositions of the player within the role-play game itself. Combining this with Simkins (2008) discussion on the power of the role-play game as "powerful spaces for practicing and developing skills in critical ethical reasoning" it is recognized that the person playing the character within the game may not be making choices as their authentic self but as a player or the persona acquired for game play. When considering transformational shifts in this context it can be difficult to determine from which unique perspective the shift took place and how temporal or permanent the shift may be.

The process of learning is one of inquiry, action, reflection and application. Active learning allows anyone, especially educators, to engage with content on different levels of immersion (Kilgour et al., 2015). The role-play simulation allowed the participants in this study

to view a side of students that is often not available to them. The ability to spend time exploring the educational journey of a student with diverse backgrounds allowed the educators to explore their own perspectives and biases in a non-threatening way (Murphy et al., 2018; Seaton, 2018; Warren, 2014) which suggests having time to explore and reflect on personal biases is a critical step in building empathy. The results of this investigation reveal how important an exercise designed to build empathy can be for education. Thus, serious consideration should be given to including empathy building activities into the professional development of practicing educators and preservice teachers (Kilgour et al., 2015).

Suggestions for Future Research

Common to exploratory research, the findings of this study suggest several areas of future research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While this exploratory study included a small sample size and the perspectives and experiences relate to significant issues and are noteworthy for additional investigation.

Building upon the role-play simulation experience, further research could explore the possible changes in perspectives on empathy and equity that occur when a group plays the Real Life game over an extended period of time, such as with an interval of two weeks. This would allow time for the participants to reflect and subsequently to then return later to perform the simulation once again. This arrangement would likely generate deeper reflection and richer discussion. Moreover, this type of research arrangement may well produce deeper conversations on equity issues that were largely missing from this current study.

Another aspect to consider for additional exploration could focus on the concept of playing twice over a span of time as two different characters. This could potentially influence a participant's views on empathy and equity when given a comparison of two journeys. In addition

to this idea of space and time between game play and reflection and additional research focus could explore if the shifts noted at the time of game play are transient or permanent in nature.

It would also be beneficial to duplicate the essential nature of the Real Life simulation with a diverse group of educators. Injecting different perspectives and experiences into the game situation would likely create more wider discussion both within the game play event and during the focus group debriefing. Once again, this modification would likely produce greater focus on equity issues. Noteworthy in this regard would be the inclusion of bilingual elementary and secondary teachers who work in high impact schools as compared to a similar group of monolingual elementary teachers who work in a more affluent public school setting.

Another qualitative study that would add insight into the finding of this work could be centered around public school teachers' perceptions of equity and their own efficacy in promoting an equitable classroom environment. This study offers some documentation on personal efficacy among some of the participants. That is, the participants in this simulation were drawn to discuss their own efficacy and recognized the need to improve their personal empathy in order to be better teachers. This finding needs to be probed more deeply in further investigations.

Finally, future research could include a qualitative study on student perspectives of teacher empathy and equity in the classroom. A student voice would by highly benefit toward gaining a fuller understanding on how empathy and equity perspectives of teachers are perceived by the students.

While the demographics of this study were comprised of nine women and two men, a similar study of role-play simulation on topics of empathy and equity with a sample of only male educators could prove to be insightful. Warren (2014) suggests there are important gender

differences in the way educators respond to issues of empathy. Additional research would assist to bring greater understanding on that possibility.

Finally, while this study focused on veteran teachers, there should strong consideration given research on empathy and equity with preservice educators. This is especially important as the Real Life game simulation is also intended as training tool with preservice teachers.

Similarly, a comparison study involving preservice teachers and current classroom teachers would be intriguing.

Conclusion

This exploratory study sought to engage veteran teachers in discussions of empathy and equity through a role-play simulation game call Real Life. The discussions were focused on shifts in perspective from before game play to after game play and connect to the simulated journey through the educational system of a character they were required to role play. The overall results of this study suggested that shifts in views on empathy did take occur among the participants. These shifts constitute three themes that came from the data collected during the direct observation of the game play event and, more importantly, from the focus group discussion:

1. Need to diligently attempt to understand the life circumstances of students
2. Need to understand unseen forces impacting students' schooling experience
3. Need to be cognizant of faulty perceptions of students

While it was relatively easy to document shifts in views associated empathy, changes in views on equity issues were much less obvious. There are a number of situational (e.g., limitations imposed by the COVID pandemic), methodological (e.g., forced to use Zoom for game play and focus group debriefing) and social psychological (e.g., reluctance for white

participants to engage in sensitive conversations on diversity) reasons for this lack of focus on equity. Yet, the absence of obvious changes in views on equity is itself an important finding and points to the need for greater research.

Empathy and equity are complex concepts. Every teacher has a choice of how they will view and act upon these concepts within the classroom. The insight gained through this research study supports the contention that empathy perspectives can be altered and even enhanced. Unfortunately, the findings of this study are silent as to whether these changes in view are long term or temporary, how substantial or how superficial. I am hopeful that through engaging in an experience of transformative learning through the role-play simulation some permanent and significant shifts in views may occur, similar to those displayed by the participants in this investigation. I am also hopeful that students will be the recipients of those shifts in positive ways.

Education is not a stagnant profession. Inquiry and innovation are core precepts of this profession. Our exertions, those of scholarly inquiry and those of professional development, should provide opportunity to learn, to reflect and to build a stronger foundation for our students.

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APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Letter for Participants

Informed Consent Form

“Exploring Educators’ Perspectives on Empathy and Equity Through a Role-Play Game Experience”

INTRODUCTION

The purposes of this form are to provide you (as a research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research and to record your consent to be involved in the study.

RESEARCHERS

- Jennifer Kleiber, Principal Investigator
 - Doctoral Student, George Fox University

STUDY PURPOSE

The purpose of this exploratory case study is to investigate the personal perspectives of elementary educators who engage in a role-play game designed to elicit issues related to empathy and equity.

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH STUDY

If you decide to participate, then you will join an unfunded study. The protocol for this research includes the following commitments and your consent to be audio recorded in these activities:

1. Observations/field notes of the role-play game session by myself and a second observer.
2. A focus group interview with the you and the other participants at the conclusion of the role-play game session.

The volume and nature of the data collection necessitates audio recording. Your participation in the study connotes agreement to this.

RISKS

There are no known risks from taking part in this study, but in any research, there is some possibility that you may be subject to risks that have not yet been identified. It is important to know that the localized nature of this study makes it difficult to guarantee complete confidentiality. It may be possible that others will know what you have reported.

Because of this, you will be free to strike data or information from the record, should you feel concerned about any adverse impact to you.

BENEFITS

The primary benefit of your participation in the research is the opportunity to support your own learning and reflections around empathy and equity considerations. Beyond the benefits to you personally, this research has the potential to benefit the educational field through a deeper understanding of how educators perceive their personal perspectives in relation to empathy and equity and how those perspectives manifest themselves within your individual decision making processes.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Due to the nature of this small, qualitative study, the researcher cannot guarantee complete confidentiality of your data. It may be possible that others will know what you have reported. The results of this research study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications, but the researcher will not identify you by name, unless you so choose. I will assign each participant a pseudonym and use these codes in working with and discussing the data. I will also attempt to report the findings in such a manner that no individual's identity can be decoded.

WITHDRAWAL PRIVILEGE

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. It is ok for you to say "no." Even if you consent now, you are free to withdraw consent later, and withdraw from the study at any time. Your decision will not affect your relationship with George Fox University or otherwise cause a loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. If you choose to withdraw from the study, the researcher will discuss your preferences for any data in which you were a part.

COSTS AND PAYMENTS

There is no payment for your participation in the study.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT

Any questions you have concerning the research study or your participation in the study (before or after your consent), will be answered by Jennifer Kleiber (503-510-5419).

This form explains the nature, demands, benefits and any risk of the project. By signing this form, you agree knowingly to assume any risks involved. Remember, your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefit.

In signing this consent form, you are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies. A copy of this consent form will be given (offered) to you.

Your signature below indicates that you consent to participate in the above study. By signing below, you are granting to the researcher the right to use your contribution for presenting or publishing this research.

Participant's Signature _____

Printed Name _____

Date _____

APPENDIX B

Game Rules for REAL LIFE Game

A role-play game focused on empathy and equity in education.

Creator: Jen Kleiber

REAL LIFE!

Purpose of the game:

The antidote to systems that oppress marginalized populations is to build empathy. This game highlights inequities that already exist within our society and in a small way allows each player to experience a level of privilege that may be different from their own.

Essential Questions:

1. Are we born with grit, if so, how does grit impact our decision-making processes?
2. In what way can empathy training impact the educator's role in the classroom?
3. Is empathy influenced positively or negatively by environmental factors such as ethnicity, family dynamic, SES, or life experiences?

Proposed Outcomes:

1. Consider systemic inequities through an empathetic lens.
2. Consider the impact grit has on life factors and to what degree it influences decision making processes?
3. Connect observations and game play experience to the expectations of a professional educator.

Needed Supplies:

- Game piece for each player

- CHARACTER cards
- GRIT cards
- LIFE EVENT cards
- THIS IS YOUR LIFE cards
- 6-sided die
- 12-sided die
- REAL LIFE! game board

Game Master will randomly assign character cards and players may choose their game piece.

Overview – Game Master: *Today's game is all about life. The events, factors and decisions influencing each person's journey through this life determine what we do, who we become, and how we behave. How will you be impacted in Real Life?*

Rules

Each person will receive a character card which reflects factors around gender, SES, race, family dynamics, and GRIT. Numbers reflect levels as follows: 4 is the highest factor and 0 is the lowest factor. These factors will be used within the game so be aware of them as you read the cards.

Players will be given cards when they land on a life event requiring them to combine their factor with a roll of the die. If a player receives a card that has already been read aloud, they should move to the directions at the bottom of the card.

As the first action of the game, each player will roll a die and receive GRIT chips according to the number rolled. These are non-transferable.

Please NOTE: LIFE EVENT spaces are designated with a pictorial representation as well as yellow stars.

- As players take their first turn on the board, they roll the die and move their token to the corresponding tile. This continues until the player comes to the first LIFE EVENT space where they must stop regardless of roll.
- When a player reaches the life event space, they will receive a LIFE EVENT card. The player will then roll to determine if they are eligible to move forward on their NEXT turn.
- If the player does not achieve the desired number to move forward, they have two choices:
 - The player may use GRIT chips to achieve the correct number to move forward on their next turn OR
 - They may wait and roll again on their next turn in which they will get an additional roll.

Getting started:

- The Game Master will give a brief description of the board and its components.
- The Game Master will randomly assign a CHARACTER card to each player.
- All players start at Headly Hospital and receive their GRIT chips based on a single role of the six-sided die.
- The Game Master will choose a token color to start this game. This player will be the first player in the game and play will continue in a clockwise manner around the table.

- As players take their first turn on the board, they roll the die and move their token to the corresponding tile. This continues until the player comes to the first LIFE EVENT space where they must stop regardless of roll.

Life Event Spaces:

- When a player reaches the life event space, they will receive a LIFE EVENT card. The card will be read aloud and the player will then roll to determine if they are eligible to move forward on their NEXT turn.
- If the player does not achieve the desired number to move forward, they have two choices:
 - The player may use GRIT chips to achieve the correct number to be eligible to move forward on their next turn OR they may wait for their next turn and roll again in which they will get an additional roll.
 - If a player is stuck on the same space for more than two turns, they continue to receive two rolls per turn until they are able to move forward.

NOTE:

- If a player is required to move backward based on a GRIT card the player moves the allotted spaces. If the roll requires the player to move back over a LIFE EVENT, they have already accomplished they will stop there regardless of the roll of the die. The player will be allowed to move forward on the next turn.
- Players continue around the board stopping at each LIFE EVENT space regardless of roll until the player reaches the final
- GRIT spaces are marked. When a player lands on a GRIT space, they will receive a GRIT HAPPENS! card and follow the directions on the card.

Ending the Game:**THIS IS YOUR LIFE**

When a player finishes the game by landing on the QUESTION MARK, they are allowed to choose a THIS IS YOUR LIFE card. They will hold the card silently until the game has been completed in its entirety. Each player will then read their card aloud to the group in the order they completed the game. Should the Game Master choose to end the game before all players have reached the end, each player will get the opportunity to choose a THIS IS YOUR LIFE card in the order they are represented on the game board.

APPENDIX C

Focus Group Debrief Interview

Focus Group Debrief Questions:

What are your initial thoughts pertaining to your character's journey through the game?

What did/did not surprise you about your characters journey? Why?

What did you find most challenging during the game? How did that event make you feel?

Do you see any connection between students in the classroom and the characters on the cards?

Do you see any of the issues portrayed within the game in your school or classroom?
Within the game, did you feel you had any power to influence the issues your character encountered?

What is your perspective on your ability to transfer and/or mitigate these issues within your school site?

Final Debrief Questions:

Did you experience a shift in your thinking on issues of empathy and equity after engaging in the role-play simulation?

If so:

How would you describe the nature of the shifts in your views on empathy and equity after engaging in the role-simulation game?

What specific features of the game can you identify as especially important in generating deeper and more critical consideration of your preexisting attitudes around empathy and equity?