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Student Perceptions Toward Intentional Empathy Curriculum in the High School English Classroom

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STUDENT PERCEPTIONS TOWARD INTENTIONAL EMPATHY CURRICULUM
IN THE HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe high school students' perceptions of intentional empathy curriculum in northwest Arkansas. In the study, the research participants were in their junior or senior year of high school. Using standard open-ended interviews, the eight student participants were asked a series of questions related to the four overarching research questions. This method allowed the researcher to categorize data along themes of teachers, tasks, classmates, and classroom environment. The major findings were that teachers who implemented strategies such as group work, rotating seating charts, and projects had more engaged and connected classes; tasks which required participants to engage in perspective-taking and being vulnerable with others created space for stronger connections within the class; classmates felt more bonded with one another because of the tasks and working dynamics; and the classroom environment overall was more conducive to learning and produced lasting relationships.

Keywords: empathy, education, curriculum, teacher, tasks, classmates, classroom environment

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Chapter I: Introduction

Background of the Problem

For many years, researchers believed brains were hardwired at birth with fixed

mindsets genetically controlling empathy (Eisenberg, 1989; Gallese, 2003; Iacoboni,

2007; Lipps, 1903; Meltzoff & Moore, 1977, 1997; Smith 1790/2002; Scheler,

1913/1954; Vischer, 1893). However, more recent studies began to explore and

demonstrate the idea that brains are not fixed or hardwired, and empathic abilities can

grow, change, and be manipulated (Atkins, Uskul, & Cooper, 2016; Davison, 2010;

Keskin, 2013; Keskin, Keskin, & Kirtel, 2019; Laird, 2015; Salmon, 2003; Schumann,

Zaki, & Dweck, 2014; Zaki, 2019).

Likewise, researchers have identified a decline in empathy, particularly in college

students (Hojat et al., 2004; Konrath, O'Brien, and Hsing, 2011; Ward, Cody, Schaal, &

Hojat, 2012). Konrath et al. (2011) measured empathy over a period of 30 years and

revealed sharp declines in empathic concern of college students. In addition, studies

found that declines in perspective-taking and empathetic concern were most pronounced

after the year 2000 (Konrath et al., 2011; Ward et al., 2012).

There has been a noted decrease in empathy and in subsequent empathic

responses over the last two decades (Konrath et al., 2011; Ward et al., 2012) with study

participants self-reporting a longitudinally decreasing level of empathy. Because of that

fact and since research demonstrates how brains are malleable after early adolescence

(Atkins et al., 2016; Jeffers, 2009b; Lor, Truong, Ip, & Barnett, 2015; Mikkonen,

Kyngas, & Kaariainen, 2015), it is plausible that empathy education could alter students'

empathic experiences and responses to produce more empathic members of society who

can insert empathy into their daily experiences. Thus, a growing number of states and organizations are developing empathy-inclusive standards and programs (Arkansas DESE, 2019; CASEL, 2018; New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association, 2017). With increased attention directed toward empathy and empathy-related studies, some researchers have explored the influence of empathy on students (Bradshaw, 2016; Brooks, 2011; Davison, 2010; Franzese, 2017; Jeffers, 2009a; Wagaman, 2011). However, this research focuses primarily on content-specific classes such as art and history (Davison, 2010; Jeffers, 2009a); the perspectives of teachers, younger adolescents, and college students (Bradshaw, 2016; Franzese, 2017; Lor et al., 2015; Mikkonen et al., 2015; Wagaman, 2011); empathy as a reactive intervention tool to address behavioral misconduct (Castillo, Salguero, Fernandez-Berrocal, & Balluerka, 2013; Castillo-Gualda, Cabello, Herrero, Rodríguez-Carvajal, & Fernández-Berrocal, 2018; Leppma & Young, 2016; Lor et al., 2015; Salmon, 2003); or empathy as a secondary or tertiary concern (Bradshaw, 2016; Davison, 2010). That is, empathy is not tradition in the educational setting.

Statement of the Problem

Though it is known that some states are beginning to adopt SEL programs, some of those programs do not include empathy-specific curriculum (Arkansas DESE, 2019; CASEL, 2018; New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association, 2017). It is also clear there is growing conversation and research around the value of empathy instruction (Bradshaw, 2016; CASEL, 2018; Davison, 2010; Franzese, 2017). However, there has been limited inquiry into this topic in secondary education and no inquiry into high school students' experiences with this practice specifically in Arkansas (Castillo et al., 2013). Because there is a gap in understanding students' perspectives with empathy

curriculum applied intentionally at the secondary level, research needs to be conducted to understand how high school students describe their experiences with intentional empathy curriculum.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine high school students' perspectives of intentional empathy curriculum received during the tenth grade in a northwest Arkansas high school. This study was guided by The Malleable Theory of Empathy, a conceptual framework that posits empathy is a measurable and teachable concept (Bradshaw, 2016; Brooks, 2011; Davison, 2010; Fields et al, 2011; Geng et al., 2012; Gerdes, Lietz, & Segal, 2011; Konrath et al., 2011; Preston & de Waal, 2002; Ratka, 2018; Salmon, 2003; Stout, 1999; Ward et al., 2012; Warren, 2015).

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this qualitative study, key terms were defined as:

- Phenomenological research refers to studies which describe the lived experiences of individuals who encountered the same phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

- Empathy is defined as having four attributes: perspective-taking (the ability to take the perspective of another person and see the world as they see it); staying out of judgement (being non-judgmental); understanding emotions in others (recognize and acknowledge another's feelings); communicating an understanding of those emotions (reflecting back and clearly expressing the other elements) (Wiseman, 1996).

- Curriculum is defined as the study of educational phenomena; more specifically, it is the content being delivered (Egan, 2003).

- Intentional, for the purposes of this study, refers to curriculum which has been purposefully created, prepared with deliverable content, and taught in the classroom.

- Intentional empathy curriculum, as defined by the researcher, is curriculum lessons and instructional strategies delivered to students with the specific intent of creating and/or increasing student's understanding of empathy and ability to respond empathically.

- Social and Emotional Learning (sometimes written as Social-Emotional Learning or SEL) refers to instructional programming or content including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness (including empathy), relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2017).

Significance of the Study

The information provided by this study will be useful to school administrators, teachers, parents, and students as they seek to address the lack of empathy in adolescents and to pursue a greater understanding of the role empathy plays in daily experiences. The content will help to justify and support the use of SEL content in secondary classrooms (Arkansas DESE, 2019; CASEL, 2018). The topic of empathy as intentional curriculum has been studied from the teacher perspective (Davison, 2010), from the younger adolescent perspective (Bradshaw, 2016; Keskin et al., 2019), and from the collegiate level (Franzese, 2017; Schumann et al., 2014), but researchers have not examined student participant perspectives at the high school level in northwest Arkansas. This study will

contribute to the body of knowledge regarding empathy and subsequent empathy-related experiences.

Additionally, The Northwest Arkansas Council, a private nonprofit focused on regional development, wants to create a community that will embrace the global workforce they bring to the area and that their children will attend schools where they will be accepted and not bullied (J. Morrow, personal communication, January 27, 2021). This study could produce program strategies to assist area schools in ensuring the goal of inclusivity and acceptance.

Research Questions

The research questions explored in this study are:

1. What are high school students' perceptions of the relationship with their teacher in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

2. How do high school students perceive the tasks associated with intentional empathy curriculum?

3. What are high school students' perceptions of their classmates in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

4. How do high school students perceive their classroom environment in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

Assumptions

The following assumptions existed for this study:

1. The inclusion criteria of the sample population were appropriate and ensured the student participants have experienced the same phenomena.

2. Each student participating in the interview answered the questions with a sincere and frank representation of his or her feelings and/or perceptions.

3. The intentional empathy curriculum was implemented with fidelity.

Limitations

Limitations of a study are potential weaknesses or criticisms as they relate to the reliability or validity of the research (Patton, 2002). Although some research seeks to achieve external validity in the form of generalizability, qualitative studies, such as this one, seek to achieve particularity in themes and descriptions as they relate to context and site (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research.

A limitation of this study was the small sample size derived from a convenience sample acquired from an accessible population (Gliner, Morgan, & Leech, 2017). The convenience sample existed within a large school district located in northwest Arkansas. The sample size is limited due to the requirement that participants must have experienced the intentional empathy curriculum, which only two teachers currently provide. Although the number of students in the school of study in the appropriate grade levels related to the study is approximately 1,000 students, the maximum qualifying population was reduced to approximately 150 students. This reduction occurred because of the requirement that participants were enrolled with one of only two teachers who provided intentional empathy curriculum, and the requirement that participating students were enrolled in the school for the entire duration of the school year to receive the required empathy curriculum, as well as still being enrolled in the same district during the period of the study. An additional limitation of this study is the lack of elaboration from participants. Participants did not provide strongly detailed responses for a greater depth of description even when given an opportunity by the researcher. In addition, it should be noted this data was collected during the COVID-19 Pandemic which impacted the data collection process.

Delimitations

Geographically, this research study was restricted to a high school located in northwest Arkansas. This public high school provided academic services for students in grades 9-12. The study did not expand beyond this school because participants must have received intentional empathy curriculum, which was provided by only two teachers in the district of study. In addition, the study ran for approximately five weeks, as that was the amount of time it took to interview the participants and conduct appropriate member checking. However, the empathy curriculum in question lasted for the previous school year. The researcher interviewed eight participants as recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018) and continued the interview process until data saturation was reached (Charmaz, 2006).

Summary and Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 includes the background of the study. Additionally, Chapter One introduced the purpose and significance of the study, research questions, definitions of key terms, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. Chapter Two provided a review of the literature including the importance and development of empathy, terms associated with empathy, benefits of empathy, empathy in education, current state initiatives for empathy curriculum, and the conceptual framework of the study. Chapter Three explored the methodology of the study with notes on research design, sampling, interview protocols, and methods for data analysis. Chapter Four presented the results of the study. Chapter Five provided a discussion of the results and proffered considerations for future empathy-related research.

Chapter II: The Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to examine and understand high school students' perceptions of intentional empathy curriculum. The study's setting was in a large suburban high school located in northwest Arkansas. The literature review included a historical exploration of empathy as an initial concept and a formalized term along with a thorough inspection of topic-related terminology and various components of empathy. As well, the literature review encompassed an assessment of the importance and development of empathy. This chapter involved an examination of empathy as it related to education and curriculum, including primary and secondary grades in addition to post-secondary and graduate levels. The review examined the importance and benefits of empathy curriculum. Finally, the review included an examination of The Malleable Theory of Empathy, the conceptual framework of the study, couched in the debate between fixed and malleable mindsets.

Importance of Empathy

Empathy was important to study for two primary reasons: the presence of empathy correlated to positive effects on people (Brown, 2013; Keskin, 2013; Rumble, van Lange, & Parks, 2010); the absence of empathy or even a decreased level of empathy correlated to negative effects on people (Bush, Mullis, & Mullis, 2000; Hepper, Hart, Meek, Cisek, & Sedikides, 2014). Empathy has been shown to deter and reduce aggressive behaviors in younger children and adolescents (Castillo et al., 2013; Castillo-Gualda et al., 2018; De Kemp, Overbeck, De Wied, Engels, & Scholte, 2007; Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoe, 2007; Joliffe & Farrington, 2006, 2011; Robinson, Roberts, Strayer, & Koopman, 2007; Seaman, 2012; Strayer & Roberts, 2004). Youth who were

convicted of committing crimes were more likely to have lower levels of empathy than youth nonoffenders (Bush et al., 2000). In addition, young adult males serving prison sentences in the U.K. demonstrated higher levels of narcissism and lower levels of empathy and empathic concern than control participants (Hepper et al., 2014). Therefore, empathy's value rested in its potential for positive effects on self and others and its ability to prevent negative effects such as aggression and crime which plague society.

Definition and History of the Term Empathy

To properly engage with a study of empathy, it was necessary to explore its history as a concept, as a named term, and as a field of study. Verducci (2000) noted the "difference and discord" associated with the history of the word *empathy* and the absence of a clear genealogy as contributors to the lack of clarity in meaning (p. 64). Singer and Lamm (2009) noted empathy's linguistic roots in ancient Greek (*empatheia* – in feeling) but acknowledge the scientific study of empathy has a short history. Friedrich Vischer (1807-1887) first posited the process of interjecting emotions symbolically into other forms and artworks (Verducci, 2000), but it was his son German philosopher Robert Vischer (1847-1933) who in 1873 formally named this foundational concept of interjecting emotions on works of art as *Einfuhlung* (Jeffers, 2009a; Verducci, 2000). Nonetheless, the word *empathy* still did not exist until Edward Titchener, a psychology professor at Cornell University, translated it from German to English in the early 1900s (Jeffers, 2009a; Verducci, 2000). From this point forward, empathy was distinguished, at least nominally, from sympathy.

Thirty years later, Professor of Psychology Theodor Lipps significantly altered the meaning of empathy from its "pantheistic and rather mystical underpinnings" to more

objectified aesthetic enjoyment (Verducci, 2000). While both Friedrich and Robert Vischer viewed the empathic process as a human instinct for unity and harmony, Lipps replaced this view with a desire for pleasure (Verducci, 2000). Apple (1993) made the point that concepts are not static; they move and shift in meaning. Thus, a study of empathy was complicated by changing conceptual meanings (Apple, 1993) and by researcher and philosopher interpretation (Jeffers, 2009a; Switankowsky, 2000; Verducci, 2000; Wiseman, 1996).

Many people oversimplified empathy or even confused empathy with other terms such as sympathy, compassion, and pity (Switankowsky, 2000; Wiseman, 1996). By examining existing research, it was clear researchers viewed the term empathy with a wide range of meanings and components (Brooks, 2011; Geng, Xia, & Qin, 2012; Jeffers, 2009a; Keskin, Keskin, & Kirtel, 2019; Wiseman, 1996). More specifically, concepts, such as acting, imagining, feeling, and understanding, were frequently substituted for empathy but, in themselves, do not constitute the full reach of empathy (Keskin, 2013).

Furthermore, some researchers delineated empathy as receptive (Noddings, 1997); some saw it as projective (Meier, 1996). Some researchers considered empathy to be an affective phenomenon (Lickona, 2001; Meier, 1996; Noddings, 1997; Verducci, 2000) whereas other researchers viewed empathy as an epistemological experience (Code, 1994; Deigh, 1995). Wiseman (1996) directly addressed this lack of clarity when she stated how instructors were unclear on what empathy means, leading to confusion. Wiseman (1996) continued with "research of empathy is complicated by the absence of an agreed theoretical framework and operational definition" (pp. 1162). Verducci (2000) explained how theorists have ultimately described numerous related concepts, not a

singularly unified one. Therefore, it was necessary to explore this confusion, to detail the various versions of empathy, and to discuss potential shortcomings.

Sympathy vs. empathy. Although sympathy and empathy are two distinctly separate concepts with separate terminology, researchers, philosophers, and psychologists had difficulty keeping the terms separate and being able to clearly differentiate a division of concept (Switankowsky, 2000). Therefore, it was necessary to clarify the meaning of sympathy and how it is independent from empathy. According to Svenaeus (2018), sympathy is a feeling involving knowledge and judgments. That is, one can recognize a feeling and even name the emotion a person is experiencing, but this emotional awareness might include judgements about another's emotional response, which propels disconnection; sympathy is feeling for someone but lacking in true connection (Brown, 2013). Also, sympathy involves "feeling sorry for the target of misfortune" whereas empathy involves imagining what it is like to be another person, to adopt his/her terms of reference, and to experience things as he/she does (Bove, 2019, pp. 32). Verducci (2000) added terms such as synchrony and emotional contagion under the umbrella term of sympathy. It should be noted researchers generally distinguished between sympathy, empathy, and compassion; however, researchers differed in their distinctions between these terms and thus complicated a study of empathy (Verducci, 2000).

Definition of comprehensive empathy. To properly engage in a study of empathy, there must be a clear definition from which to base the study. Keskin et al. (2019) defined empathy as "an individual's attempt to understand another individual's emotions and feelings" (p. 1). However, this definition was missing various elements keenly associated with empathy. Therefore, the conceptual definition for this study came

from a nursing scholar Theresa Wiseman. Wiseman (1996) formulated a comprehensive definition of empathy that not only includes perspective-taking but also involved viewing the world as others view it, being non-judgmental, and communicating emotions back to another person. This holistic summary of empathy served as the working definition for the purposes of this study.

Aspects of Empathy

There were four main aspects which were frequently cited as being equal to empathy but more accurately consisted of separate components of empathy. Those aspects were perspective-taking, historical empathy, emotional intelligence and emotional literacy, and emotion contagion.

Perspective-taking. In general, researchers defined perspective-taking as taking on or considering the perspective or viewpoint of another person (Davis, 1983; Geng et al., 2012; Longmire & Harrison, 2018; Lougheed, Main, & Helm, 2020; Todd, Bodenhausen, Richeson, & Galinsky, 2011). The perspective-taking aspect of empathy had been studied by Geng et al. (2012) as part of a quantitative study using the Basic Empathy Scale (BES) with 1,500 Chinese primary and middle school students. In addition, Jeffers (2009a) studied perspective-taking as a tool for creating empathy in art classes, and Keskin (2013) studied perspective-taking as a part of the cyclical process to achieving empathy. Some researchers viewed empathy as related and even limited to the concept of perspective-taking (Geng et al., 2012; Jeffers, 2009a; Keskin, 2013). Yet, researchers even differed in how they defined perspective-taking. That is, Geng et al. (2012) presented perspective-taking in which people first understand and then share in one another's emotional expression. Likewise, Keskin (2013) strictly defined

perspective-taking as sharing feelings. Lastly, Longmire and Harrison (2018) defined perspective-taking as an attempt to consider another person's viewpoint. However, Geng et al. (2012), Keskin (2013), and Longmire and Harrison (2018) all agreed in viewing perspective-taking as a cognitive function, separating it from affective function. Jeffers (2009a) defined a physiological type of perspective-taking which included the act of mirroring or "motor mimicry" (p. 8).

A potential shortcoming of perspective-taking was that it appeared to bring forward negative traits such as a penchant for scheming and unscrupulous behavior in some situations (Longmire & Harrison, 2018). That is, some perspective-taking actors engaged in more deceptive and unethical tactics during competitive negotiations (Pierce, Kilduff, Galinsky, & Sivanathan, 2013). In these instances, perspective-taking resulted in perceptions biased toward rewarding the self rather than the target of the action which is clearly not in line with empathic behavior (Longmire & Harrison, 2018).

Historical empathy. Another aspect of empathy is historical empathy, which had been studied by Barton and Levstik (2004), Brooks (2011), Foster & Yeager (1998), and Keskin et al. (2019). Historical empathy as a term is used to understand the position of historical figures and events by imagining justification for actions and outcomes (Keskin, et al., 2019). Brooks (2011) posited that historical empathy embodies both perspective recognition (an objective process) and care (a subjective process). Keskin et al. (2019) noted that historical empathy is a largely objective process in which students understand historical events and use historical thinking skills. Barton and Levstik (2004) defined historical empathy as caring about historical situations and the act of reconstructing their attitudes and beliefs.

One flaw of historical empathy is that it can be little more than imagining how people felt or acted without any true context and is viewed from a lens of already knowing the outcomes and results (Barton & Levstik, 2004). A particular issue Barton and Levstik (2004) explored is not only the recognition that historical people's perspectives were influenced by various social and cultural influences, but it was acknowledging and accepting how one's present perspective was also shaped by social and cultural influences which affect and alter one's response to historical situations. Barton and Levstik (2004) further noted "if we cannot remove ourselves from our beliefs long enough to recognize that these too have been influenced by societal factors, then we will never be able fully to entertain the possibility that they are as mutable as anyone else's" (p. 219); students were not able to explore historical perspectives without the impact of their own experiences. Although historical empathy might be considered central to "the construction of historical meaning" (Foster & Yeager, 1998, p. 1), it did not attain the depth of true empathy.

Emotional intelligence and emotional literacy. Other aspects of empathy are emotional intelligence and emotional literacy. Emotional intelligence and emotional literacy were often grouped into the same category as empathy. Emotional intelligence is a more recent model of a non-cognitive, or affective, aspect of intelligence (Camilleri, Caruana, Falzon, & Muscat, 2012). Emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to experience, perceive, and appraise emotion; generate feelings; understand and regulate emotions; reason about affect-laden input; and promote emotional growth (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). Additionally, emotional intelligence

had also been described as a trait of self-perceptions of affect-related behavior (Petrides,

Perez-Gonzalez, & Furnham, 2007).

Emotional literacy is understanding one's own emotions and the emotions of

others (Adams, 2011; CSEFEL, 2008). Camilleri (2012) differentiated emotional literacy

from emotional intelligence in that emotional literacy contains the idea of a continuous

process which leads to competencies and metacognitive awareness. Emotional literacy

includes communicating feelings which enhances empathic responses (Camilleri, 2012).

As both emotional intelligence and emotional literacy have been linked to interpersonal

functioning, it was clear how higher levels of each are connected to increased potential

for empathy but do not itself constitute empathy (Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003) and

lower levels of each were more likely to exhibit personality disorders including a lack or

absence of empathy (Krajniak, Pievsky, Eisen, & McGrath, 2017).

Nevertheless, emotional intelligence and emotional literacy only connected to the

affective side of empathy and denied or excluded the cognitive aspect (Camilleri, 2012).

Without both elements, one did not experience true empathy but an incomplete version of

it (Keskin et al., 2019; Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003; Wiseman, 1996).

Emotion contagion. Emotion contagion is the fourth aspect of empathy. Its

primary researchers included Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson (1994), Hatfield, Rapson, &

Le (2009), Liu et al. (2018), and Singer & Lamm (2009). Emotional contagion is the idea

that one can "catch" another person's feelings (Singer & Lamm, 2009) or be affected by

the emotional state of surrounding people assuming there is an emotionally affected space

(Liu et al., 2018). Singer and Lamm (2009) pointed out that emotional contagion is a

process related to empathy but is distinct from it. Emotion contagion was exampled when

a baby cried after hearing another baby cry; this primitive process occurred before babies

developed a separate sense of self (Hatfield et al., 2009; Singer & Lamm, 2009). Hatfield

et al., (1994) defined primitive emotional contagion as a "tendency to automatically

mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with

those of another person and, consequently, to converge emotionally" (pp. 19).

Accordingly, emotion contagion as an automatic process of mimicry cannot be confused

with the experience of empathy (Singer & Lamm, 2009).

Development of Empathy

This study was about high school students' perceptions of intentional empathy

curriculum. Therefore, it was important to understand how empathy skills develop and

why high school students represented the most appropriate participant group. In this

section, the researcher explored the theory of intersubjectivity as it related to human

development (Bornemark, 2014; Scheler, 1913/1954; Stein, 1917/1989), prosocial

behavior and sympathy in adolescence as a precursor to empathy development

(Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Roeser & Eccles, 2015; Roeser & Zelazo, 2012),

and stages for the cognitive development and abstract thinking necessary for empathy

(Erikson, 1964; Piaget, 1952; You, Lee, Lee, & Kim, 2018).

Theory of intersubjectivity. Because empathy—as a cognitive function, an

affective function or both—cannot exist until closer to adulthood, it was perhaps not

appropriate to study empathy until participants had reached at least the teenage level or

emerging adulthood. Intersubjectivity is a process in which other people are experienced

as subjects rather than objects of a separate world (Frie, 2013). The Theory of

Intersubjectivity outlines that people do not exist in isolation but are connected to other

people's thoughts and feelings through empathy (Cooper-White, 2014). Scheler (1913, 1954) described his theory of intersubjectivity and *Einsfuhlung* (the feeling of oneness) as present in infancy. However, Bornemark (2014) clarified *Einfuhlung* (empathy) was a different phenomenon and that empathy developed from a feeling of oneness, but it could not occur at such a pre-subjective stage (pp. 259). Bornemark (2014) continued by contrasting Scheler's theory of intersubjectivity to Stein's (1917, 1989) theory of intersubjectivity which included empathy as possible at a stage closer to adulthood. Bornemark (2014) concluded by explaining how a feeling of oneness in infancy was a complementary (not competing) precursor to empathy in adulthood, thus clarifying that empathy could not exist at such a young age.

Prosocial behavior and sympathy in young adolescence. Research indicated younger adolescents can begin to show positive prosocial behavior including sympathy but were not yet capable of empathy. Studies pinpointed a gap in empathy-related research by acknowledging that research on contemplative practices such as mindfulness, compassion, and empathy failed to examine the subject explicitly from a developmental life span viewpoint (Roeser & Eccles, 2015; Roeser & Zelazo, 2012). In addition, Roeser and Eccles (2015) added, "we know rather little about the naturalistic development of mindfulness and compassion in children and adolescents, or the processes by which parents can socialize these positive qualities in their offspring" (pp. 1). However, Roeser and Eccles (2015) attempted to provide empirical studies to fill this gap in research. Eisenberg et al. (2006) and Roeser and Eccles (2015) concluded positive practices and interventions, such as socialization, intentional compassion training, and authoritative parenting, were associated with the development of sympathy and prosocial behavior in

children and adolescents but did not go so far as to specifically name empathy as a resulting trait.

        Cognitive development and abstract thinking. Empathy requires complex cognitive skills and an ability to think abstractly. In a discussion of empathy development, one might consider Erikson's Theory Psychosocial Development and how it pertains to adolescent development and empathy. Erikson's (1964) fifth stage of psychosocial development occurs approximately between the ages of 12 and 18. This stage, known as Identity vs. Confusion, includes an exploration of independence (Erikson, 1964). Those adolescents who successfully navigated this stage also developed the ability to relate to others and form connections (Erikson, 1964), which are key elements in empathy.

        In order for people to completely empathize with others, they need "the ability to cognitively identify what others are feeling, to emotionally understand others' feelings, and to sensitively share their understanding of others' feelings" (You et al., 2018, pp. 2), which are not developmental functions an infant or younger child could fully accomplish due to limited language and emerging cognitive abilities. Piaget's (1952) Theory of Cognitive Development clearly designated the formal operational state of adolescence and adulthood (at 12 years and older) as the stage in which abstract thinking first occurs. As empathy requires abstract thinking, it must occur at age 12 or even higher. So, a study of empathy in high school students appeared to be appropriate in that they are in the right psychosocial stage (Erikson, 1964) and cognitive stage of development (Piaget, 1952) to empathize.

Benefits of Empathy

According to Keskin (2013), empathy was vital to positivity and seeing the good in others. Empathy fueled connection and understanding (Brown, 2013). Empathy can be used to enhance or increase cooperation by providing a tool for handling misinterpreted behaviors (Rumble et al., 2010). Empathy was found to be beneficial to individuals, groups and organizations, and society as a whole.

Benefits to self and individuals. Empathy can have positive impacts at the micro, or individual, level (Bove, 2019). Empathy assisted in motivating helpfulness (Axtell, Parker, Holmaan, & Totterdall, 2007), enabling social bonding (Norfolk, Birdi, & Walsh, 2007), and increasing social support (Devoldre, Davis, Verhoftstadt, & Buysse, 2010). That is, empathy enhances prosocial behavior to an individual in need even if the behavior caused a detriment to the common good (Batson & Moran, 1999; Bove, 2019). In terms of helpfulness in a service-oriented context, a person may choose to exceed expectations and persist in helping to solve a problem (Axtell et al., 2007). Empathy strengthened social bonding through rapport: it allowed others to more accurately perceive motivations thus reducing second-guessing, and it signaled solidarity (Bove, 2019). Empathy in the form of social support includes offering encouragement and assurance as well as giving suggestions, offering advice, and providing access to information (Bove, 2019; Delvodre et al., 2010). Moreover, empathy also positively impacted a student's self-esteem (You et al., 2018).

Benefits to groups and organizations. As stated by Bove (2019), empathy benefited groups and organizations. Empathy contributed to improved service and greater performance within an organization or group (Bove, 2019) resulting in increased profits

(Thompson, 2011). Empathic personnel were more aware of subtle cues indicating need or distress (Bove, 2019). Empathic bosses generated greater strategic and fiscal performance (Thompson, 2011). Empathy promoted forgiveness, reduced the motivation for revenge, increased conciliation, and restored damaged relationships (Bove, 2019; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Bove (2019) also noted how empathy empowered people to create the situational environment for restored trust. In addition, empathy for a group or an organization protected the organization from negative comments and reputational damage because people experiencing empathy were more likely to attribute a failure to a specific situational factor rather than a personal one (Bove, 2019). Empathy also benefited groups or organizations by providing space for innovative design thinking and served as an intervention for transgressed groups or populations (Bove, 2019). Finally, Goleman (1998) noted how empathy was an important to leadership for three reasons: the increased use of teams, rapid globalization, and the need to retain competent and talented employees. Therefore, empathy positively impacted the leaders, staff, and work productivity.

Benefits to society. Empathy also has numerous benefits to the larger society. According to Verducci (2000), empathy that persisted even when faced with people who are physically and morally different was a protection against widespread demoralization. Bove (2019), who considered empathy to be a moral emotion, highlighted how empathy improved moral decision-making and enhanced an individual's recognition of ethical situations. More specifically, empathy's impact on moral judgement created a greater awareness and concern for adverse effects of decision-making on others (Bove, 2019). Mencl and May (2009) emphasized how concern for others causes deeper reasoning and

evaluation of adverse effects, and people who empathize formed more ethical intentions. Bove (2019) argued empathy induces greater valuation of others and reduces prejudice and discrimination. In addition, empathy discourages anti-social behaviors including acts of bullying and aggression, and it reduces the likelihood of verbal attacks, lying, misrepresentation, and feigning emotions for manipulation (Bove, 2019). You et al. (2018) highlighted how a student's ability to empathize is connected to increased prosocial behavior and reduced social prejudice.

Empathy in Education

Empathy in the educational setting emerged in myriad ways: in fine arts content classes (Jeffers, 2009a; Lalama, 2016; Stout, 1999), as historical empathy in social studies classes (Davison, 2010; Keskin et al., 2019; Rantala, Manninem, & van Den Berg, 2016), as a behavior intervention tool (Castillo et al., 2013; Castillo et al., 2018; Leppma & Young, 2016; Lor et al, 2015; Salmon, 2003), and within collegiate and professional education (Dolby, 2014; Fields et al., 2011; Franzese, 2017; Gerdes, Segal, Jackson, & Mullins, 2011; Lor et al., 2015; Mikkonen et al., 2015; Ratka, 2018). In addition, empathy in education appeared in context of relationships with teachers (Hammond, 2006; Lopes, 2003; Mikkonen et al., 2015; Warren, 2015) and in relationships with classmates (Bradshaw, 2016; Deitz, 2014; Hammond, 2006; Huang & Su, 2014; Yun & Graham, 2018).

Initially, empathy was studied solely as a philosophical phenomenon, and then most of the research shifted to the field of social psychology (Singer & Lamm, 2009). It was not until much more recently that empathy became a focus of neuroscience (Carr, Iacoboni, Dubeau, Mazziotta, & Lenzi, 2003; Keysers et al., 2004; Singer & Lamm, 2009; Wicker et al., 2003). Empathy did not become a focus of education-based research

until the last decade (Bradshaw, 2016; Castillo et al., 2013; Castillo et al., 2018; Davison, 2010; Deitz, 2014; Dolby, 2014; Fields et al., 2011; Franzese, 2017; Gerdes et al., 2011; Huang & Su, 2014; Jeffers, 2009a; Lalama, 2016; Leppma & Young, 2016; Lor et al., 2015; Keskin et al., 2019; Mikkonen et al., 2015; Rantala et al., 2016; Ratka, 2018; Warren, 2015; Yun & Graham, 2018).

Fine arts classes. Existing research on empathy in education demonstrated how rarely empathy used as the primary objective of a course or even listed as a content framework. On the rare occasions it was, this objective originated in fine arts classes such as band and art (Jeffers, 2009a; Lalama, 2016; Stout, 1999).

You et al. (2018) noted when people viewed or created art, they increased their awareness of self and the world thus providing a greater opportunity for empathy and understanding. As well, art classes emphasized perception skills including reading emotions; students in art classes interacted with art and their classmates in such a way as to learn how to empathize with them (You et al., 2018). In visual arts, Stout (1999), a visual arts and language arts teacher, changed her curriculum after witnessing students' behavior with a neighborhood dog. She was able to cater her curriculum to focus on imagination, empathy, and care with art as the tangible product (Stout, 1999). As a non-tested (i.e., non-standardized assessed) subject, fine arts teachers had more curricular-design freedom and, perhaps, less oversight over their curriculum (Tutt, 2014). Lalama's (2016) study on empathy in band students measured empathy and caring as a result of class size, funding, and leadership roles. The study did not explore empathy as an intentional curricular goal but measured it as a by-product of other factors.

Jeffers (2009b) indicated how the art classroom provides a special environment for developing the capacity for empathy. An art class can incorporate instructional strategies specifically directed at developing empathic awareness and the capacity to care, resulting in better listening to the others' opinions (You et al., 2018; Stout, 1999).

Intervention tool. The use of empathy was also a means of behavior intervention, to be used as a reactive measure once a problem exists rather than a proactive measure to prevent problems from arising (Castillo et al., 2013; Castillo et al., 2018; Leppma & Young, 2016; Lor et al., 2015; Salmon, 2003). Castillo et al. (2013) explained aggression was linked to maladjustment, mental disorders, and decreases in prosocial behavior. However, empathy was important to combating aggression and negative behaviors in adolescents (Castillo et al., 2013; Castillo et al., 2018). In a study of eight Spanish public schools, students who received emotional intelligence training on aggression and empathy reported decreased levels of physical aggression, verbal aggression, distress, and anger (Castillo et al., 2013). This example of empathy as an intervention tool was applied to middle level and high school students to reduce already existing aggression and aggressive behaviors (Castillo et al., 2013). In Salmon's (2003) study, the PEACE Curriculum was an "Aggression Replacement Training" tool employed to address empathy failure and aggressive acts (pp. 167). Other researchers (Leppma & Young, 2016; Lor et al., 2015) specifically labeled empathy as an intervention tool and studied it in connection with students seeking post-secondary education as counselors and pharmacists. The downside to these interventions was that they occurred after a problem existed, after a student had developed aggression concerns, and might only be directed toward students with aggression.

Collegiate and professional adult education. As mentioned above, researchers commonly studied empathy as a necessary component of collegiate studies and adult education, especially as the subject related to the health care field (Dolby, 2014; Fields et al., 2011; Franzese, 2017; Gerdes et al., 2011; Leppma & Young, 2016; Lor et al., 2015; Mikkonen et al., 2015; Ratka, 2018). Indeed, it was from an exploration of various professions—including nursing—and other adult education programs where empathy education and research were particularly relevant that a comprehensive operational definition of empathy emerges (Brown, 2013; Wiseman, 1996).

In Dolby's (2014) case study designed for post-secondary students, the author created an exercise for multicultural awareness and empathy. Dolby (2014) expected collegiate students to be able to move quickly from sympathy to empathy but instead noted nearly the opposite result. In other studies, researchers examined empathy in nursing students (Fields et al., 2011; Mikkonen et al., 2015), in social work (Gerdes et al., 2011), in graduate counseling programs (Leppma & Young, 2016), in pharmacy students Lor et al., 2015), and general patient-centered care programs (Ratka, 2018). These collegiate-level studies and professional programs largely reserved intentional empathy instruction for adulthood, leaving a gap in years between when empathy could be developed (Erikson, 1964; Stein, 1917/1989) and when it was being developed.

Relationships with teachers. In the related research to empathy, there emerged a recurring focus on how empathy created and/or impacted relationships with teachers and teachers' abilities to empathize with their students (Carkhuff and Berenson 1967; Cooper, 2010; Hammond, 2006; Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003; Mikkonen et al., 2015; Warren, 2015).

Cooper (2010) highlighted how empathic relationships had effects on teachers, resulting in improvements in their craft caused by truly knowing their students. Hammond's (2006) instructional program concentrated on building positive relationships in the classroom which promoted tolerance, empathy, and cooperation. To create this environment, Hammond (2006) urged teachers to maintain clear communication with students, to facilitate free thought and speech in the classroom, and to remove barriers to full and complete participation in the learning process. Lopes et al. (2003) suggested that emotional intelligence and managing emotions positively correlated to relationship quality. In Mikkonen et al.'s (2015) study on nursing students, the participants indicated that empathy from their teachers promoted a more "constructive learning experience and a caring learning environment" but an absence of empathy obstructed their learning experience and had "negative consequences for their quality of life" (pp. 674). Similarly, Mikkonen et al. (2015) noted how empathy from teachers resulted in more student motivation to study harder and continue studies, to achieve better outcomes, and to become the best student in class. As well, Warren (2015) pointed out that empathy is essential for improving student-teacher relationships and raising learning outcomes. Additionally, Warren's (2015) study found that empathy is an important disposition for teachers of students of color, and student-teacher interactions benefit from a teacher's application of empathy.

Relationships with classmates. Not only did empathy positively impact student-teacher relationships, but it also had a positive impact on student-student relationships. Bradshaw (2016), Cooper (2010), Deitz (2014), Hammond (2006), Huang & Su (2014),

and Yun & Graham (2018) focused on examining how empathy affects relationships with classmates.

In Bradshaw's (2016) study on art integration and empathy in a middle school, the researcher found when students are taught through an art integration process that they created space for each other to contribute understanding, improved their collaborative skills, developed shared knowledge, and expressed empathy. Further, Cooper (2010) noted that the consolidated effects of empathy impacted pupil relationships including a sense of security, trust, and improved learning. Deitz (2014) shared his encounters in contributing to a class-sourced book about empathy and how revelatory the process was in learning to work as part of a cohesive team, to see others' contributions as different but still just as valuable, and how it increased his empathy by sharing stories with his classmates. Deitz (2014) explained "I learned about the struggles my friends have […] gave me insight into their lives that I did not have previously, which was one of the biggest rewards of writing this book with them" (para. 7). In addition, Hammond (2006) developed a citizenship-focused curriculum centered on creating equitable and harmonious classroom society's emphasizing tolerance and empathy. The researcher noted the students must be taught to value "pupilship" and contribute thereby confidence, trust, respect, and empathy increase (Hammond, 2006, pp. 2).

Two important studies focused on empathic student-to-student relationships in schools outside of the United States. Huang and Su (2014) studied the relationship between empathy and peer acceptance with Chinese students. Their study found that empathy does not always affect peer acceptance and relationships among adolescents in the same way: gender resulted in a variance between whether cognitive empathy

positively correlated to how much a student is liked versus classmates' social impact (Huang & Su, 2014). Nevertheless, Huang and Su (2014) demonstrated that empathy does impact peer relationships. In Yun and Graham's (2018) study, the researchers established that a South Korean student's level of empathy impacted whether he/she was more likely to participate in defending behaviors regarding bullies. Students with greater empathy and perceived popularity were more likely to defend victims (Yun & Graham, 2018). These studies highlighted varying yet positive connections between empathy and student-to-student relationships.

Effects on the classroom environment. Not only did empathy play a role in classroom relationships, but it also impacted the classroom environment. Cooper (2010), Mikkonen et al. (2015), and Tackett, Wright, Lubing, Li, and Pan (2017) examined the effect of empathy on the classroom environment.

Research indicated that the consolidated effects of empathy positively impacted the classroom (Cooper, 2010). Specifically, empathy powerfully affected the classroom climate, appearing "as much by non-verbal as verbal communication and in the stolen moments of time and personal interactions between lessons" (Cooper, 2010, pp. 91). Mikkonen et al. (2015) observed empathy had a positive impact on the learning environment including reduced stress, improved communication, and a sense of acceptance and trust.

Not only did empathy affect the classroom environment, but the environment had been found to affect empathy, particularly at the secondary level (Cooper, 2010). For example, constraints such as larger class sizes, lack of time, fragmented curriculum, and school policies impeded empathic environments (Cooper, 2010). However, it should be

noted that Tackett et al. (2017) examined the learning environment of medical students in Israel, Malaysia, and China and produced results which indicated empathy and the learning environment were not connected. That is, the study found positive perceptions of the learning environment were connected to improved quality of life and reduced burnout but not significantly associated with empathy in these countries and cultures (Tackett et al., 2017).

Empathy and SEL Curriculum

Konrath et al. (2011) noted an overall decline in college students' reported levels of empathy. This decline in empathy combined with a failure of empathy in empathy-designed courses such as Multiculturalism and Education (Dolby, 2014), and the increased need for empathy instruction at the adult professional level (Dolby, 2014; Fields et al., 2011; Franzese, 2017; Gerdes et al., 2011; Leppma & Young, 2016; Lor et al., 2015; Mikkonen et al., 2015; Ratka, 2018) underscored the need for intentional empathy curriculum before students exit high school. That is, if more students were exiting high school having received empathy-supported instruction and with increased levels of empathic concern, there might be a decreased need for colleges and medical programs to provide such content. To illustrate, Dolby (2014) observed research emphasizing how people need to focus on providing education "that increases our capacity for human empathy and mutual understanding, our actual practices are leading us in the opposite direction" and how education has failed to produce students as developed people "who understanding their place in the world, their perspectives and experiences, how their lives and reality intersect with others', how to begin to respect and empathize with others…" (pp. 42). Currently, students are graduating from high school

without the key skills to interact on a human-connection level with others. There is a clear need for intentional social and emotional learning curriculum with a specific focus on empathy.

In the subsequent sections, the researcher overviewed the benefits of social and emotional learning (NCSEAD, 2018), availability of social and emotional learning competencies in the United States (CASEL, 2018; NIEER, 2019), social and emotional learning competencies in the state of Arkansas (Arkansas DESE, 2019), tasks associated with empathy-specific curriculum (Bradshaw, 2016; Brooks, 2011; Davison, 2010; Franzese, 2017; Jeffers, 2009b; Kokal, Engel, Kirschner, & Keysers, 2011; Laird, 2015; Levine, 2005; Rabinowitch et al., 2012; Rantala et al., 2016; Stout, 1999; You et al., 2018; Ziff, Ivers, & Hutton, 2017), and intentional empathy curriculum in the district of study, specifically at the secondary level. This examination provided a clearer understanding of the gaps in empathy curriculum and how intentional empathy curriculum came to exist at the school of study.

National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (NCSEAD). The National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development's (NCSEAD, 2018) goal is to assist communities in reevaluating curriculum with a greater emphasis on social, emotional, and cognitive elements so students can succeed in school and in their lives. The NCSEAD (2018) report asserted that children need a broader set of skills including social and emotional competencies such as perseverance, integrity, empathy, and the ability to work in diverse teams to succeed in school, their careers, and in their daily lives; schools should provide more wholistic curriculum emphasizing not only math, science, and reading but also

emphasizing good citizenship and empathy. Additionally, NCSEAD (2018) referred to this type of education as a requirement, not an elective for educational leaders to decide to "either ignore that fact and accept disappointing results or address these needs intentionally and well" (pp. 6). The report further supported the need to increase social and emotional content by noting five key pieces of data:

- nine out of 10 parents believed schools should reinforce life skills;

- two-thirds of high school students thought attending schools with social and emotional content would improve their relationships, their learning, and their preparation for life post-graduation;

- nine out of 10 teachers thought social and emotional skills can benefit students;

- eight in 10 employers stated social and emotional skills are the most important in employees and yet the hardest to find;

- ninety-seven percent of principals believed an increased focus on social and emotional content will improve students' academic success (NCSEAD, 2018).

Collaborating States Initiative. The Collaborating States Initiative (CSI), opened in 2016, is part of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2018). CSI's purpose is to ensure all students are socially, emotionally, and academically prepared for school, life, and future careers (CASEL, 2018). Recently, CASEL (2018) produced the 2018 State Scorecard Scan which revealed that more states are developing SEL policies and competencies and are offering SEL guidance to schools. On this state scorecard, CASEL (2018) noted in 2011, 48 states already had social and emotional competencies at the preschool level. In 2013, 49 states had preschool social and emotional competencies, and in 2015 all 50 states had social and

emotional competencies at the preschool level. However, the National Institute for Early

Education Research (NIEER, 2019) established how just 34% of four-year-old children

participated in state-funded preschool and how that number has changed little over the

past few years. The NIEER (2019) report continued with acknowledging more federal

support was needed to prevent enrollment decreases and funding cuts after the most

recent recession. With only 34% of four-year-olds in publicly-funded preschools

(NIEER, 2019), it was clear the United States did not have a compulsory preschool

education program. With only 34% of students participating in publicly-funded preschool

where the majority of SEL programs exist, that meant as many as 66% of students in the

U.S. exit public high school without the benefit of social and emotional experiences,

including empathy (NIEER, 2019). As noted earlier in the section "Development of

Empathy," preschool children do not have the appropriate cognitive and psychosocial

development to fully comprehend such developmentally complex subject matter as

empathy-centered social and emotional skills (Erikson, 1964; Piaget, 1952; You et al.,

2018). That is, the 34% of preschool children who received SEL competency instruction

may not be capable of fully grasping the content. Therefore, it is important to have SEL

instruction throughout school, not just at the preschool level.

By the end of 2017, only eight states (Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, Nevada,

New Jersey, Rhode Island, and West Virginia) had social and emotional competencies in

grades K-12 (CASEL, 2018). Of those eight states, four of them did not have K-12 SEL

programs until 2017 (CASEL, 2018). Clearly, there was a gap in providing social and

emotional learning, especially empathy-centered curriculum at the primary and secondary

levels (CASEL, 2018; NIEER, 2019).

Arkansas Division of Elementary and Secondary Education's (DESE)

G.U.I.D.E. for Life. The Arkansas Division of Elementary and Secondary Education

(DESE, a division of the Arkansas Department of Education or ADE; 2019) believes all

Arkansas students should graduate with a solid foundation in academic learning.

Additionally, Arkansas DESE (2019) also believes students should obtain soft skills

needed to be successful in the workplace and in society. Arkansas DESE (2019) created

the G.U.I.D.E for Life program to address the soft skills aspect of Arkansas' educational

needs. The program contains five overarching principles which are "needed to thrive at

home, school, on the job, and in the community" (Arkansas DESE, 2019, pp. 3). These

principles are:

- Growth – includes managing oneself with problem solving, mindfulness, and
  perseverance as well as the ability to reflect on one's needs, manage emotions,
  and set goals;

- Understanding – includes knowing oneself with self-awareness, critical thinking
  skills, and knowing one's strengths and weaknesses in addition communicating
  emotions and data and identifying personal aspirations;

- Interaction – includes building relationships with respect, effective
  communication, and seeking/offering help while being an active listener and
  supporting others;

- Decisions – includes responsible decision-making by considering consequences,
  personal beliefs, and safety as well as being a self-directed learner and putting
  one's best self forward;

- Empathy – includes considering others' perspectives and valuing diversity and others' feelings while being socially aware of cultural issues and being a collaborative team member (Arkansas DESE, 2019).

The G.U.I.D.E for Life program's intent is to provide these real-world skills for all Arkansas K-12 students with the goal of producing well-rounded citizens and stronger communities (Arkansas DESE, 2019). As the G.U.I.D.E for Life program and its competencies was not introduced until the 2019-2020 school year, many high school students will graduate without having experienced the intended outcomes (Arkansas DESE, 2019).

Tasks associated with teaching empathy. There were many tasks associated with teaching empathy. Ziff et al. (2017) defined the process of teaching empathy by outlining three key aspects of an empathy instruction: engage students in improving their emotion-related vocabulary, encourage student to actively listen and pay close attention to verbal and nonverbal responses, and provide students with phrases to reflect others' emotions. As well, Levine (2005) noted that a teacher must model empathy for their students and provide empathy practice with the intent of "transferring empathy into a student's way of thinking and acting (pp. 35). These empathy lessons included using art (Bradshaw, 2016; Jeffers, 2009b; Stout, 1999; You et al., 2018; Ziff et al., 2017), perspective-taking and case studies (Brooke, 2011; Davison, 2010; Franzese, 2017, Rantala et al., 2016), music (Kokal et al., 2011; Laird, 2015; Levine, 2005; Rabinowitch et al., 2012), and empathic dialogue and storytelling (Franzese, 2017; Levine, 2005; Ziff et al., 2017).

Art to teach empathy. Using art-based materials and strategies is one way to teach empathy. Bradshaw (2016) studied how visual culture and art integration to foster empathy in the middle school classroom. Bradshaw (2016) began with a discussion of art in nature and then shows students the works of environmental artist Andy Goldsworthy and other ecological artists. Students were guided through the process of building shared knowledge through discussion, and building common ground based in persuasion and activism before collaborating to design an ecological art installation (Bradshaw, 2016). Jeffers (2009b) shared that having students give presentations on individually significant artworks and cultural icons to their classmates produced more resonant connections between classmates and generated greater empathy.

In a separate study, Stout (1999) redesigned her course to focus on imagination, empathic awareness, and the capacity to care. Students examined art forms across various times frames and cultures and engaged in writing, drawing, and photography activities associated with the art (Stout, 1999). Students began to desire to learn about others' experiences, were more willing to listen to others, and were more tolerant of differences (Stout, 1999). In You et al. (2018), researchers provided art instruction using an empathy-based learning model in which students experienced the content while understanding others' emotions. This empathy-based learning model consisted of four stages: (1) empathic understanding of a topic including considering the feelings of characters and relating learning to students' background; (2) empathic exploration based on the understanding others' feelings and perspectives through writing and role playing; (3) relating art learning with one's own life and reconstructing thinking through reflection; (4) summarizing and reflecting on the learning process (You et al., 2018). In addition,

Ziff et al. (2017) utilized art to teach empathy by emphasizing the "imaginative process of dialoguing with art objects" (pp. 252).

Perspective-taking and case studies to teach empathy. Role-playing, re-enactment, and simulation are ways to utilize perspective-taking to engage empathy. Davison (2010) studied history classes in New Zealand in which two of the primary goals of the social sciences were to examine how people are shaped by perspectives and how people see themselves. This focus took the form of "critical re-enactment" to explore historical action using evidence from a historical event or agent's perspective (Davison, 2010, pp. 85). Brooks (2011) found how one teacher promoted historical empathy in the form of perspective recognition and care through the instructional tasks of structured lectures to establish the distance between current realities and history, primary and secondary source work to humanize perspectives and to highlight the multiplicity of viewpoints, and discussions to consider collective normalcy of historical beliefs and actions. In another study, Franzese (2017) found the important of role-playing to re-enact situations with real or perceived real risks was a powerful way to induce empathic pathways in a law school course. However, Rantala et al. (2016) examined Finnish high school students and determined simulated exercises about historical situations were generally unsuccessful as a tool for teaching historical empathy.

Music to teach empathy. Several researchers explored how music can be used to teach empathy. Levine's (2005) empathy curriculum includes a section on using music. Levine (2005) noted how performing songs is a way to bring students together while exploring challenging topics. Lyrics to the chosen songs created deeper emotional levels in students "opening them up to the complexities of human feelings and dilemmas, and

the power of empathic reflection and actions" (Levine, 2005, pp. 117). Musical

interaction led to group unity and harmony by making choices about melody and

composition thus growing both musically and empathically (Laird, 2015). Music allowed

people to express feelings and connect to others (Laird, 2015). For example, Kokal et al.

(2011) found that synchronous drumming increased prosocial behavior and commitment.

Additionally, Rabinowitch et al. (2012) demonstrated how long-term participation in

musical group interaction (MGI) promoted positive social and emotional capabilities

including empathy. In Rabinowitch et al.'s (2012) study, the MGI program provided

music students with various tasks in the form of musical games; the study revealed an

increase in two out of three empathy measures in participating students.

   Storytelling and empathic dialogue to teach empathy. Another task used to teach

empathy is storytelling and empathic dialogue. Franzese (2017) noted that storytelling

infuses a subject with emotion which is necessary for empathy. The emphasis on taking a

logical or linear subject and providing context in story form allowed students to

experience the situation from an affective state (Franzese, 2017). The researcher

continued by stating that storytelling "anchors" an experience; students' empathic

responses are "activated not only by firsthand experience, but also by listening to

another's firsthand experience" (Franzese, 2017, pp. 705). Levine (2005) explained

storytelling in reference to the idea of six degrees of separation; a story, though not

someone's actual lived experience, could be similar to another's lived experience

allowing the listener to connect and reflect emotions.

   Levine (2005) named storytelling as part of empathic dialogue or social discovery

in that a lesson includes a story which causes students to remember a time when they felt

a similar emotion or experienced a similar situation combined with empathic discussion. In addition, the researcher incorporated the idea that learning through storytelling and dialogue provided for a stronger sense of community and improved caring relationships (Levine, 2005). As well, Ziff et al. (2017) included the concept of imaginal dialogue using art or works of art as a way to produce "a relational resonance in which the listener attempts to communicate what both people experience in a shared human encounter" intended to generate empathy (pp. 252).

Empathy in the secondary setting. Empathy in the secondary setting applies to intentional empathy curriculum provided in grades seven through 12 (Arkansas DESE, 2017). The focus on empathy at the secondary level was three-fold: (a) as established previously, it was age appropriate (Erikson, 1964; Piaget, 1952; You, Lee, Lee, & Kim, 2018) and necessary as many students are exiting high school without having this type of curricular instruction (CASEL, 2018; NIEER, 2019); (b) the content has been created and was already being implemented in some high schools in the United States (Arkansas DESE, 2019; CASEL, 2018); (c) there was limited research on empathy at this school level.

Developmentally, high school students represented the appropriate age range for cognitive and affective development to achieve the abstract thinking necessary for components of empathy (Erikson, 1964; Piaget, 1952; You, Lee, Lee, & Kim, 2018). Although empathy frameworks and competencies were growing in popularity in the United States, many schools still did not offer soft skills instruction thereby causing students to exit secondary school without having received appropriate social and emotional training (CASEL, 2018; NIEER, 2019). In addition, Castillo et al. (2013) noted

a clear lack of research regarding empathy studies at the secondary level, especially in the high school setting. That is, only 13% of studies examined emotional intelligence programs among secondary students at the high school level (Castillo et al., 2013). The Castillo et al. (2013) study clearly supported the impact of social and emotional learning programs effectiveness in the high school setting (Castillo et al., 2013).

      Empathy curriculum in the district of study. The empathy curriculum in the district of study emerged over a seven-year time frame. In the 2013-2014 school year, the researcher of this study was accepted into the ARTeacher Fellowship. This three-year fellowship is an arts-integration program for secondary content teachers provided by the University of Arkansas Center for Children & Youth in partnership with Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and the Walton Arts Center (Center for Children & Youth). The program hosted arts-integration training sessions led by field experts from the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC; Trike Theatre in Bentonville, AR; Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts and Columbia University's Teachers College in New York, NY; and Experiential Theater Company in Somerset, NJ (Center for Children & Youth). Though not an explicit goal of the program, many of the strategies and lessons from this fellowship touched on or led to empathic responses. In 2014-2015, two additional teachers on the same English II professional learning community (PLC) team were accepted to the ARTeacher Fellowship.

      Also, in 2014, a member of the English II PLC and ARTeacher fellow began to examine how reading can make people more empathic after reading the article "Reading Literature Makes Us Smarter and Nicer" (Murphy Paul, 2013). The fellowship combined with the article became the first step toward developing empathy-driven curriculum. In

2014, students from high school English classes collaborated with students at a nearby middle school to create and present a civil rights museum focused on both historical content as well as empathy through perspective-taking, art, and storytelling (J. Griggs, personal communication, April 10, 2016).

Throughout the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years, members of that teaching team began crafting lessons designed to explore community, relationships, connection, and empathy (J. Griggs, personal communication, January 20, 2020). These lessons and activities included many strategies learned during from the ARTeacher Fellowship such as Actor's Toolbox, Cooperation Challenge, tableau, and portraiture (Center for Children & Youth, 2020). By 2018, more than ten teachers in the district had completed the three-year ARTeacher Fellowship and were actively integrating art and empathy-based strategies into their lessons, though the instructional goals largely remained content-oriented (Center for Children & Youth, 2020). In addition, two district teachers—the researcher of study included—were accepted as 2019 William Reese Company Teacher Fellows to create curriculum using the art, archives, and rare book collection at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. The final product was a website dedicated to empathy-based learning through art and research.

Research Questions

The research questions explored in this study are:

1. What are high school students' perceptions of the relationship with their teacher in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

2. How do high school students perceive the tasks associated with intentional empathy curriculum?

3. What are high school students' perceptions of their classmates in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

4. How do high school students perceive their classroom environment in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

Conceptual Framework

The Malleable Theory of Empathy provides a foundational framework in which to view the field of empathy (Schumann et al., 2014). This conceptual framework posits empathy is not only a measurable product (Fields et al, 2011; Geng et al., 2012; Gerdes, Lietz, & Segal, 2011; Konrath et al., 2011; Preston & de Waal, 2002; Ward et al., 2012; Warren, 2015), but empathy is also a component of brain function and action (Gallese, 2003; Gerdes et al., 2011; Jeffers, 2009a; Schumann et al., 2014) that can be created, manipulated, and increased (Atkins et al., 2016; Bradshaw, 2016; Brooks, 2011; Davison, 2010; Keskin, 2013; Keskin et al., 2019; Ratka, 2018; Salmon, 2003; Stout, 1999). Thus, empathy is a malleable or changeable product in both affective and cognitive forms.

Historically, researchers believed empathy to be an automatic and innate response (Eisenberg, 1989; Gallese, 2003; Lipps, 1903; Smith 1790/2002; Scheler, 1913/1954; Vischer 1893). Researchers argued empathy was a product of mirror neurons present in infancy which allow newborns to reproduce or mimic facial movements (Gallese, 2003; Meltzoff & Moore, 1977, 1997). This mimicry placed connection (including recognizing emotions in others and reflecting it back) as an automatic function or reflex (Eisenberg, 1989; Meltzoff & Moore, 1977, 1997). More specifically, Iacoboni (2007) characterized empathy as a biological drive. So, one might argue if infants are born with empathic

abilities there is no need to teach empathy nor should there be a decline or failure of empathy.

However, more recent research has concluded empathy to be malleable and teachable (Atkins et al., 2016; Bradshaw, 2016; Brooks, 2011; Davison, 2010; Laird, 2015; Rabinowitch et al., 2012; Salmon, 2003), with the possibility to decline (Konrath et al., 2011; Hojat et al., 2004; Ward et al., 2012), and able to fail given difficult scenarios (Mitchell, Macrae, & Banaji, 2006; Schumann et al, 2004). Wiseman (1995) indicated that empathy is not only a trait but is also a state which changes given individual circumstances. Konrath et al. (2011) organized a meta-analysis of college students over a 30-year period which demonstrated a noted decline in empathy. Similarly, Ward et al. (2012) studied empathy in nursing students during an academic year and found a significant decline in empathy when exposed to more patient encounters. An earlier study with medical school students also found significant declines in empathy and suggested the downward trend indicated empathy is changeable (Hojat et al., 2004). Schumann et al. (2014) based their research on the foundation of empathy's ability to change and even fail given challenging situations. Mitchell et al. (2006) highlighted empathic failures when one person or group interacts with a racially dissimilar person or group. Again, if empathy is innate and fixed, it could not change, decline, or fail.

For The Malleable Theory of Empathy to function, there are some basic assumptions one must accept. For example, one assumption is all people are capable of empathy, but situational dynamics determine whether people exhibit empathy (Wiseman, 1995). One assumes that empathy can be established and shaped by cultural, social, and physical boundaries (Atkins et al., 2016). Empathy is a highly flexible aspect of both

cognitive and affective functioning (Gallese, 2003; Gerdes et al., 2011; Jeffers, 2009a; Schumann et al., 2014). Finally, empathy requires greater effort when people are given challenging contexts (Schumann et al., 2014).

This conceptual framework informed this study by outlining empathy's malleable nature (Atkins et al., 2016; Bradshaw, 2016; Salmon, 2003; Wiseman, 1996) and the ability to learn greater empathic response (Bradshaw, 2016; Brooks, 2011; Davison, 2010; Laird, 2015; Rabinowitch et al., 2012). Therefore, a study in which intentional empathy curriculum is provided to increase high school students' empathic abilities is grounded in this conceptual framework.

Summary

Researchers have demonstrated through various studies an overall decline in empathy (Konrath et al., 2011; Hojat et al., 2004; Ward et al., 2012), and individual studies have uncovered numerous situations in which people demonstrate a lack of empathy (Bush et al., 2000; Dolby, 2014; Hepper et al., 2014) or in which their empathy fails (Mitchell et al., 2006; Schumann et al., 2014). However, other studies showed empathy as a malleable component of cognitive and affective functioning and can be taught (Atkins et al., 2016; Bradshaw, 2016; Brooks, 2011; Davison, 2010; Laird, 2015; Rabinowitch et al., 2012; Salmon, 2003; Schumann et al., 2014; Wiseman, 1996).

Nonetheless, there is a clear curriculum gap in SEL programs with most SEL instruction being directed to preschool-aged students who are not required to attend such programs, reducing the overall impact of such programs (CASEL, 2018; Castillo et al., 2013; NIEER, 2019). When an empathy curriculum was provided to primary and secondary students, it was generally localized to fine arts classes (Jeffers, 2009a; Lalama,

2016; Stout, 1999) or to adults in collegiate (both undergraduate and graduate) programs, particularly those in the medical or patient care-related fields (Dolby, 2014; Fields et al., 2011; Franzese, 2017; Gerdes et al., 2011; Leppma & Young, 2016; Lor et al., 2015; Mikkonen et al., 2015; Ratka, 2018). Thus, many students are exiting public secondary school without experiencing SEL curriculum with an empathy focus and bypass growing their skills of compassion, connection, and empathic concern (Dolby, 2014).

In Chapter Three, research methodology including specifics on participants, sampling, and data analysis are outlined, as well as, the credibility, reflexivity, and ethics of this study.

Chapter III: Methodology

This chapter covers the methodology used in this study. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine high school students' perceptions of intentional empathy curriculum during the tenth grade at a large high school located in northwest Arkansas. The research design and method, participants, sampling, data collection and instrument, credibility, reflexivity, research ethics, and data analysis were examined in detail in this chapter. This study followed all rules and regulations pertaining to research ethics and APA research guidelines and received approval from the Arkansas Tech University IRB (Appendix A).

Research Questions

This qualitative study addressed the following four research questions:

1. What are high school students' perceptions of the relationship with their teacher in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

2. How do high school students perceive the tasks associated with intentional empathy curriculum?

3. What are high school students' perceptions of their classmates in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

4. How do high school students perceive their classroom environment in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

Research Design & Method

This descriptive study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design to describe the participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2002). The study's qualitative nature was the most appropriate method because it seeks to

examine perceptions, feelings, and attitudes without attempting to quantify such perceptions; the data remained in text form and was analyzed for themes (Boeije, 2002; Gliner, Morgan, & Leech, 2017; Patton, 2002) without the constraints of predetermined categories of study (Patton, 2002). As opposed to the succinct summary quantitative studies elicit, a qualitative study allows for greater depth and detail of information (Patton, 2002). More specifically, this qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach because the research study focused on describing lived experiences through a series of interviews (Alase, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Giorgi, 2009). Phenomenology is a well-known tradition in qualitative studies (Alase, 2017). This approach allows researchers to transform the participants' experiences into more reflective and descriptive expressions (Alase, 2017). The researcher interviewed eight participants who had all experienced similar events or phenomenon as recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Polkinghorne (1989) to capture and interpret their commonality. The researcher continued the interview process until data saturation was achieved (Charmaz, 2006).

Context and Setting of the Study

The context, specifically referring to the physical and geographical setting, is critical to understanding the study, the participants, and their responses (Patton, 2002). The geographical setting was in a suburban high school in its 5th year of existence located in northwest Arkansas. The school enrollment is approximately 2,100 students in grades 9-12. However, due to COVID-19, approximately 500 students received 100% virtual instruction while at home. In addition, from mid-September to early December, anywhere from 200-600 students elected to work from home on two-week Home Permits.

Although the district is one of the largest in Arkansas (ADE Data Center, 2019b), the school building is located in one of several bedroom communities connected to the larger urban center (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Here, bedroom community refers to a town not within the primary urban jurisdiction but where half or more of its residents commute to the urban center for personal or employment reasons (Preston, 2013). The main urban area had an estimated population of 54,909 in July 2019 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a). The estimated population of the school's town was 16,244 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b). This school of study is a comprehensive high school (Kysilka, 2010). That is, it has unifying curriculum constants in the form of graduation requirements and offers curriculum variables such as free electives, vocational courses, and advanced placement options (Kysilka, 2010).

The school's profile included details such as a 95% graduation rate, 24% low income, and $9,931.36 per student expenditure (ADE Data Center, 2019a). For the 2018-2019 school year, the school earned an A rating by the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE Data Center, 2019a). This A designation means the school of study was considered to be a top performing school in the state, was not in need of state support, and was not underperforming in subgroups (ADE, 2019). Demographically, the student population consisted of 70.3% White, 14.7% Hispanic/Latino, 4.6% Black/African American, 4.6% Asian, 3.9% Two or More Races, 1.5% American Indian, and 0.4% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students (ADE Data Center, 2019a).

The intentional empathy curriculum being studied came into use at the school in two ways: (1) in conjunction with the course curriculum that included a focus on the motifs of community and individuality and (2) from student interactions (J. Griggs,

personal communication, March 3, 2020). The course motifs of community and individuality are explored throughout the year through anchor texts and writing tasks. During the 2014-2015 school year, a teacher who taught remedial reading classes used an article about how reading makes people nicer and increases their capacity for empathy (Murphy Paul, 2013), which started the first step into approaching curriculum from an empathy goal (Harmon, 2020). Implementing curriculum with intentional empathy goals did not occur in this district until the 2015-2016 school year (J. Griggs, personal communication, March 3, 2020).

Participants

The study included eight student participants. The research participants were chosen based on four criteria:

- All participants were current high school students in either their junior or senior year of high school.

- Participants were currently enrolled in the approved suburban high school in northwest Arkansas.

- Participants had been continuously enrolled in the approved high school for the entire school year of their sophomore year to have complete exposure to the required empathy curriculum.

- Student participants had been continuously enrolled in a specific teacher's class as there were only two teachers who provided intentional empathy curriculum as part of their content in the district of study.

    Population. The population for this study included a large, suburban school district located in northwest Arkansas (ADE Data Center, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau,

2020). The school district that included the school being studied is one of the top five largest districts in the state of Arkansas (ADE Data Center, 2019). The researcher applied the four selection criteria to ensure all participants met predetermined requirements for inclusion in the study and for quality assurance (Patton, 2002). There were approximately 1,000 students in the eleventh and twelfth grades and the maximum qualifying population was approximately 150 students.

Sampling method. Potential research participants were selected from a convenience sample acquired from an accessible population (Gliner, Morgan, & Leech, 2017). A convenience sample is purposeful sampling designed to provide information-rich cases which generate in-depth understanding (Patton, 2002). This sampling method was the most appropriate to the study because of the specificity of the population.

It was absolutely necessary for all participants to have completed a year engaged in an English II course which provided intentional empathy curriculum including tasks such as but not limited to Big Talk/Table Topics, quilt squares, Actor's Toolbox, Circle Check-In, Cooperation Challenge, Circle of Viewpoints, and empathy portraiture. Students who had not completed a course with intentional empathy curriculum were ineligible to participate in the study as their participation would not yield any appropriate or substantive data for the purposes of this study.

Prior to recruiting participants, the researcher requested and received written permission from the Executive Director of Secondary Education to conduct the interviews for a specific duration of time and noted the possible impact and outcomes of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). After receiving permission, the researcher invited

participants to join the study by contacting potential participants and their parents via

email with information regarding

- the purpose of the study;

- importance of the study;

- data collection interview process;

- a guarantee the participants could change their minds, refrain from answering

  individual questions, and/or end the interview at any time;

- any potential risks or rewards for participants; and

- an assurance of confidentiality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2002).

This list of prospective participants was determined by using rosters generated from the

eSchool Cognos system for five English Language Arts classes from the 2018-2019 and

2019-2020 school years and then reduced by the four criteria for participation. The list

was generated by the researcher after receiving building administrator and IRB approval.

Once the student participant and their parent(s) gave an initial affirmative

response, the researcher sent a follow-up email also containing the information bulleted

above as well as the appropriate consent and assent documentation form requiring

signatures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2002). The consent and ascent form

included the bulleted information listed above in addition to the name, title, and contact

information of the researcher and the name of the sponsoring institution (Creswell &

Creswell, 2018). It was necessary to have both consent from the parents and assent from

the participants as all participants were under the age of 18 (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

All willing participants were sorted into categories based on gender,

race/ethnicity, and GPA to allow the researcher to study a representative group with a

balanced demographic resembling that of the school. This purposeful grouping ensured

representation of gender and GPA (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). the researcher aimed to

sort the willing participants into the following eight categories:

- Female with 4.0+ GPA

- Male with 4.0+ GPA

- Female with 3.00-3.99 GPA

- Male with 3.00-3.99 GPA

- Female with 2.00-2.99 GPA

- Male with 2.00-2.99 GPA

- Female with 1.00-1.99 GPA

- Male with 1.00-1.99 GPA.

None of the willing participants represented the lowest GPA category of 1.00-1.99.

Students with GPAs less than 1.00 cannot progress to the sophomore level and therefore

would not have received the required intentional empathy curriculum. To prevent

selection bias, the final eight participants were chosen from willing participants who had

completed all appropriate consent and assent paperwork (Creswell & Creswell, 2018;

Patton, 2002) and who were randomly selected from the six usable groups listed above.

Although the number of participants might appear low, it is an appropriate sample size

for a qualitative study which seeks to obtain a depth of results rather than a large quantity

of responses. Upon selection, the researcher contacted each participant to establish a

mutually agreeable interview date and time.

Data Collection

Student participants who met the selection criteria listed in the Participants section and who provided all appropriate consent and assent paperwork were scheduled for a one-on-one interview session not to exceed 60 minutes on their school campus (if interviews can be conducted face-to-face) or via the online platform Google Meet (if interviews need to be conducted online due to COVID-19 considerations). Face-to-face interview sessions (if applicable) were conducted using the high school's building-wide Flex and Advisory work-time period to reduce, if not eliminate, missed instructional time and potential negative learning impacts.

Interview protocol. Each interview was scheduled via email. Face-to-face interviews were recorded using a battery-operated handheld voice recorder as well as a laptop computer as a backup method (Patton, 2002). Online interviews were recorded using the record feature in the online meeting platform as well as a battery-operated handheld voice recorder. The interview included open-ended questions designed to generate descriptive responses and opinions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The physical setting for face-to-face interviews was an office or small conference room, with the conference room being preferred because it is a more neutral space for both researcher and participant and does not denote ownership to any single person (Patton, 2002). When the interviews need to be conducted online, both the researcher interacted virtually from either the school of study or home, and the participants interacted virtually from their respective homes, making sure to establish a comfortable space that was optimal for recording. The interviews were conducted in a quiet space which allowed for a clear recording with as limited background noise as possible (Patton, 2002).

In addition to recording each interview, the researcher utilized field notes to capture the non-verbal aspects of each participant's interview (Patton, 2002). To refresh participants memories, assignment samples and task-related materials were offered as memory-stimuli to assist participants in recalling specific activities and tasks. Some participants were 12 months removed from their experience with the classroom-related activities and tasks, so it was important to have a visual reference on hand. These samples include the Big Talk and Table Topics discussion cards, Cooperation Challenge call cards, Quilt Square samples, a Circle of Viewpoints art print of *War News from Mexico* (Woodville, 1848), and self-portrait samples.

Prior to asking any interview questions, each participant was reminded of the purpose and importance of the study, his/her right to end the interview at any time, and an assurance of confidentiality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2002). At the end of each interview, the researcher stated, "This is the end of interview with ____" and named the participant (Patton, 2002).

During the interviews, the researcher utilized the interview implementation recommendations from McNamara (2009):

- verify the recording devices are working throughout the interview;
- ask only one question at a time and allow the participant to fully answer before moving on;
- remain neutral and do not show emotional reactions;
- encourage responses with head nods and verbal cues such as "uh huh";
- ensure notetaking does not betray sudden interest or reaction;
- transition between major topics; and

- maintain control of the interview.

Interview questions. The goal of the interview was to obtain rich descriptive data (Creswell, 2007; Turner, 2010). Interview questions, created by the researcher, were derived from the nature of the study, the literature review, and the research questions being explored. In addition, individual questions were created to address specific assignment tasks included in the empathy curriculum being examined. The researcher used the standardized open-ended interview format in which the participants were asked identical open-ended questions while also allowing the researcher to ask probing follow-up questions (Turner, 2010). This interview method permitted participants to express themselves in as much detail as they desire and provided the researcher with the intended rich, thick descriptions necessary (Creswell, 2007; Turner, 2010). The interview questions were aligned to the research questions for the study and provided the data necessary to ascertain themes and codes during the analysis phase (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2002). The interview questions for this study with the corresponding research questions are shown Table 1.

Table 1
Interview Questions and Corresponding Research Questions

Interview Questions	Corresponding Research Questions
1. What is/was your favorite class in high school and what makes it your favorite?	RQ1: What are high school students' perceptions of the relationship with their teacher in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?
	RQ2: How do high school students perceive the tasks associated with intentional empathy curriculum?
2. What is/was your least favorite class in high school and what makes it your least favorite?	RQ1: What are high school students' perceptions of the relationship with their teacher in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

		RQ2: How do high school students perceive the tasks associated with intentional empathy curriculum?
3.	Think about the groups of classmates you have had in each of your previous high school classes. What was your favorite group of classmates? Try to think of this group exclusive of the subject matter and the teacher.	RQ3: What are high school students' perceptions of their classmates in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?
4.	What does your favorite class look, feel, and sound like?	RQ4: How do high school students perceive their classroom environment in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?
5.	In your opinion, what things do you want in a classroom environment?	RQ4: How do high school students perceive their classroom environment in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?
6.	In general, do you know your classmates in each class?	RQ3: What are high school students' perceptions of their classmates in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?
7.	How do you know all your classmates? / Why don't you think you know all your classmates	RQ3: What are high school students' perceptions of their classmates in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?
8.	I want you to think about student-to-student interactions. Tell me about a class that had particularly negative classroom interactions between students.	RQ3: What are high school students' perceptions of their classmates in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?
9.	Tell me about a class that had particularly positive classroom interactions between students.	RQ3: What are high school students' perceptions of their classmates in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?
10.	What things do your teachers do to make you feel more comfortable with your classmates?	RQ1: What are high school students' perceptions of the relationship with their teacher in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

RQ3: What are high school students' perceptions of their classmates in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

11. Let's shift to specifically talk about activities and tasks from your English II class. Do you remember the Concentration Circle and Cooperation Challenge? Tell me about your experience with those activities.

RQ2: How do high school students perceive the tasks associated with intentional empathy curriculum?

RQ3: What are high school students' perceptions of their classmates in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

RQ4: How do high school students perceive their classroom environment in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

12. Tell me about your experience with the Quilt Square activity? (see artifacts for memory-stimuli)

RQ2: How do high school students perceive the tasks associated with intentional empathy curriculum?

RQ3: What are high school students' perceptions of their classmates in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

13. Tell me about your experience with Big Talk or Table Topics. (see artifacts for memory-stimuli)

RQ2: How do high school students perceive the tasks associated with intentional empathy curriculum?

RQ3: What are high school students' perceptions of their classmates in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

14. Did you hear or share anything surprising during Big Talk or Table Topics?

RQ2: How do high school students perceive the tasks associated with intentional empathy curriculum?

RQ3: What are high school students' perceptions of their classmates in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

15. Tell me about your experience with Circle of Viewpoints.

RQ2: How do high school students perceive the tasks associated with intentional empathy curriculum?

16. Tell me about your experience with the self-portraits and empathy portraits. (see artifacts for memory-stimuli)	RQ2: How do high school students perceive the tasks associated with intentional empathy curriculum?
17. Do you believe those activities (Concentration Circle, Cooperation Challenge, Quilt Squares, Big Talk, Circle of Viewpoints, and self-portrait) affected your experience in English II and with that group of people (students and teacher)?	RQ1: What are high school students' perceptions of the relationship with their teacher in a course with intentional empathy curriculum? RQ2: How do high school students perceive the tasks associated with intentional empathy curriculum? RQ3: What are high school students' perceptions of their classmates in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

Credibility

In a qualitative study, the researcher is the instrument, and the credibility of the study hinges on the researcher's ability to establish and to maintain competence and rigor throughout the study (Guba, 1981; Patton, 2002). The qualitative researcher trades some level of objectivity in order to "gain greater flexibility and the opportunity to build upon tacit knowledge" (Guba, 1981, p. 79). According to Guba (1981), the researcher identifies *truth value* or credibility as a major concern with installing trustworthiness in which the researcher should consider the following question: "How can one establish confidence in the 'truth' of the findings of a particular inquiry for the subjects (respondents) with which and the context in which the inquiry was carried out?" (p. 79).

After each interview, the researcher checked to verify the recording device properly recorded the interview, reviewed the recording and field notes, and constructed a post-interview reflective narrative of each participant's interview to strengthen the accuracy of the findings and to guarantee the quality of the data (Patton, 2002). If the

researcher had discovered any unclear statements or ambiguous notes, the participant would have been contacted as soon as possible for clarification (Patton, 2002). To build trustworthiness and credibility, the researcher utilized verbatim recorded responses and hand-written notes of non-verbal communication. The researcher also used member checking and reflexivity to establish credibility (Guba, 1981; Patton, 2002), which are discussed below.

      Member checking. Member checking is a process by which participants are given the opportunity to check aspects of the data they provided (Carlson, 2010). According to Curtin and Fossey (2007), it is a way of "finding out whether the data analysis is congruent with the participants' experiences (p. 92). As part of member checking, participants were provided a copy of the transcript and notes to verify for accuracy of representation of experiences (Carlson, 2010; Guba, 1981). To conduct what Doyle (2007) refers to as participative member checking, the researcher offered choices to each participant on how to proceed with member checking. The choices will include the choice of data format (e.g., hard copy, electronic copy, or audio copy) and the choice of whether to have the researcher present (i.e., face-to-face or virtually) during the member checking process (Carlson, 2010). Providing choices aided in participants' confidence levels during the member checking process (Carlson, 2010). Further, the researcher not only documented the date, time, and method of member checking for each participant but also documented participants' responses (Guba, 1981). This process was followed for each participant. However, none of the participants requested any changes or additions to their initial responses.

Reflexivity. The researcher is the essential research instrument in qualitative studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2002). Therefore, it is both important and necessary to explore personal and professional lenses which may influence any number of research elements in order to establish trustworthiness (Patton, 2002). Personal experiences, assumptions, and background can alter or skew one's perspective on research and data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2002). An examination of reflexivity revealed aspects of my life and profession which supported the desire for this study and the deeper understanding it would provide.

As a participant in a three-year arts integration fellowship which highlighted elements of connectedness (a key aspect of empathy), my perspective on the benefits of empathy-based curriculum and instructional practices have been influenced by the fellowship content and my cohort members. This fellowship provided insight and access to instructional practices which lend well to empathy curriculum. In the same way, my role as a creator of empathy curriculum for an Arkansas museum of American art demonstrated the assumption that empathy curriculum is not only important in the classroom but that the community has a role in developing and sharing those materials. It also demonstrated the belief that empathy curriculum can alter people's experiences and biases. I have, heretofore, witnessed anecdotal evidence that empathy curriculum in the content classroom was beneficial, but the research gaps in this area encouraged me to conduct this study to find deeper understanding of adolescent students' experiences with empathy curriculum.

As a former English Language Arts teacher, I utilized curriculum materials that incorporated empathy through discussion, readings, and writing activities than teachers of

content areas such as math or science. My proximity to empathy material affects the

value that I place on the role of empathy in the classroom. If I had taught a different

subject in which empathy were not as easily integrated, it might have altered my view on

the time and resources that I allocated to such classroom experiences.

In addition, my role as dean of students and coordinator of an after-school

program allows me to interact with students who need to forge stronger, more positive

relationships with their teachers and peers. They are often the students who are more

vulnerable and require more understanding from those around them.

All of these elements combined to support my understanding of empathy

education and to provide me with tools to implement it, but my personal access point to

empathy and why I see it as such a vital aspect of non-standard curriculum came from

2017 when I was diagnosed with cancer. It was a time in which my need for empathy

from my colleagues and students was greatly increased. Overall, I had a strong support

system, but I did encounter instances in which my students responded with an absence of

kindness in the form of laughter, trying to one-up my experience, lack of consideration

for my temporary limitations, and one instance in which a student used my cancer as a

way to insult me because he was mad about a classroom rule. I believe these personal

experiences highlighted for me the need to implement an intentional empathy curriculum

to explore the role empathy plays with adolescents and opportunities to increase empathic

responses. I curated the list of referenced activities from personal classroom experience

and professional development training which are mentioned in the interview questions.

Finally, the state of Arkansas recently implemented the G.U.I.D.E for Life

standards (Arkansas DESE, 2019) with the E standing for Empathy. These standards

made social-emotional learning a required component of public-school education in the state of Arkansas (Arkansas DESE, 2019). Therefore, the state has made empathy-related learning a priority for schools throughout the state.

I purposefully chose a qualitative study because empathy is such an issue of feeling and connection which might be oversimplified or underrepresented if studied in a quantitative manner. There are many quantitative empathy-based studies (Bush, 2000; Fields et al., 2011; Geng, 2012; Gerdes, 2011; Hepper, 2014; Konrath, 2011; Lor et al., 2015; Warren, 2015), but they seem to be quite limited in their scope and understanding of people and motivations. Allowing for detail and depth in this qualitative study affords not only the researcher but consumers of the data (i.e., administrators, teachers, parents, and other researchers) a larger window to view the data and its implications.

An assumption that I brought into this study was that students would ascribe positive commentary to their experiences with empathy curriculum. This assumption derived from my belief in and commitment to the topic. To establish trust and clarity, it was necessary for me to reflect on this assumption and acknowledge that my examination of the subject is not objective.

Research Ethics

To protect this study from potential ethical issues, the researcher consulted the Code of Ethics for Arkansas Educators and the American Educational Research Association Ethical Standards and submitted a proposal for Institutional Review Board approval (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). All participants were provided a clear understanding of the study's purpose, an assurance of confidentiality, and the right to end all involvement in the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2002). The researcher gathered appropriate paperwork in the form of consent and assent from all participants

prior to conducting the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher assigned a fictitious name to each participant to achieve anonymity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants were informed of their right to participate in the member checking process and their right to know the results of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Guba, 1981; Patton, 2002).

Data Analysis

The data for this study was generated from one-on-one standardized open-ended interviews with student participants. The audio recorded interviews were turned into textual data using the transcription service Rev.com to generate a verbatim transcript of each interview.

After the data from each interview was formatted into verbatim text, the researcher utilized the transcription input and coded the information to determine emerging themes through an immersive approach to analysis (Boeije, 2002; Patton, 2002). This inductive process exemplified the constant comparative method in which data is broken into units of information that will define categories and themes; initial themes are tested through additional comparisons with further data and clarified by establishing a qualifying rule (Boeije, 2002; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). This process of comparing data is important to analysis. That is, Tesch (1990) stated "the main intellectual tool is comparison. The method of comparing and contrasting is used for practically all intellectual tasks during analysis" (p. 392). The researcher compared the data in two primary stages: comparison within a single interview and comparison among all interviews (Boeije, 2002). The first comparison stage allowed the researcher to develop categories and create labels for emerging codes; the second

comparison stage produced code extensions until no new codes were needed to address the themes (Boeije, 2002). Similarly, the researcher reviewed and considered data from the interview field notes and from member checking (Guba, 1981; Patton, 2002).

Summary

This chapter described the research methods and process used to answer the four guiding research questions related to the study on intentional empathy curriculum. The chapter outlined the qualitative, phenomenological nature of the study and includes details regarding participants, sampling, and the data collection process. The chapter included an examination of credibility and researcher reflexivity as well as a section pertaining to research ethics. The chapter described the data analysis process for clarity and transferability.

Chapter IV: Results

Because there is an increasing focus on social and emotional skills in schools with more states adopting associated standards and competencies each year (CASEL, 2018; DESE, 2019; NCSEAD, 2018), there is a need for a closer examination of related programs and a deeper understanding of their potential impact on students' ability to develop empathy. With that need in mind, the purpose of this study was to examine and understand high school students' perceptions of an intentional empathy curriculum. This study focused on collecting data from student participants who are those most directly affected by SEL programs and initiatives.

The first chapter of this study detailed the background and purpose of the study, key terms and definitions, and the significance the study holds for educators, parents, and other researchers. The second chapter included a comprehensive review of existing literature and the conceptual framework that guided the study. The third chapter outlined the methodology, data collection process, and checks for credibility. This chapter encompasses the findings of the study regarding student perceptions of empathy curriculum embedded into their coursework.

The results of this research were collected through standardized open-ended interviews and analyzed using the constant-comparative method (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). The guiding questions for this study were as follows:

1. What are high school students' perceptions of the relationship with their teacher in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

2. How do high school students perceive the tasks associated with intentional empathy curriculum?

3. What are high school students' perceptions of their classmates in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

4. How do high school students perceive their classroom environment in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

Sample

Respondents were recruited through a convenience sampling technique. Due to the nature of this study, there was a limited pool of potential participants who met the criteria for participation in this study. Considering the number of potential participants and their concentration in the northwest area of Arkansas combined with the study's limited timeline, convenience sampling was the best choice for this study. The researcher contacted 20 potential participants and requested their participation in the study but encountered barriers of time, willingness, and ability to gain parental consent. Ultimately, eight student participants were interviewed for this study. The researcher would have continued the interview process had the respondents not provided similar responses and thus evidenced data saturation. The term saturation in reference to data stems from grounded theory in which the researcher no longer collects data when the themes or categories are saturated, and additional data reveals no new insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Sims, 2017).

Participants

Table 2 summarizes key demographic information for the eight student participants. Of the eight total participants, four were male and four were female (n=4).

In terms of ethnicity, seven participants were not Hispanic (n=7) and four participants were White/Caucasian (n=4). Although the researcher aimed to have a full range of GPA's represented, the lowest ranges were not found among willing participants. Thus, no participant had below a 2.0 GPA with the largest concentration of participants in the 3.00-3.99 range (n= 4). The eight participants were assigned pseudonyms in the form of participant numbers to protect confidentiality.

Table 2
Demographics of Participants

Category	Value Label	N	% of Total (N=8)
Gender	Male	4	50%
	Female	4	50%
Ethnicity	Not Hispanic	7	88%
	Hispanic	1	12%
Race	White/Caucasian	4	50%
	African American	1	12%
	Native American	1	12%
	Latino	1	12%
	2+ Races	1	12%
GPA	4.0+	2	25%
	3.00-3.99	4	50%
	2.0-2.99	2	25%
	1.0-1.99	0	0%

Note: Data obtained from interviews with on-level/regular education students

Findings

The findings for each of the four research questions in this study are represented below. The four research questions provided data already aligned to specific categories or themes: teacher relationships, tasks, classmates, and classroom environment.

Research Question 1: Perceptions of Teacher Relationships

The first research question in this study was: What are high school students'

perceptions of the relationship with their teacher in a course with intentional empathy

curriculum? During the interviews, participants were asked four questions with potential

to engender responses corresponding to Research Question 1:

- What is/was your favorite class in high school and what makes it your favorite?

- What is/was your least favorite class in high school and what makes it your least

  favorite?

- What things do your teachers do to make you feel more comfortable with your

  classmates?

- Do you believe those activities (Concentration Circle, Cooperation Challenge,

  Quilt Squares, Big Talk, Circle of Viewpoints, and self-portrait) affected your

  experience in English II and with that group of people (students and teacher)?

Interview responses. When asked about their favorite classes, four participants

(n=4) gave responses including commentary on the teacher of the class. These four

participants generally agree that the teacher/coach was at least a contributing factor in

their positive feelings about a favorite class. Participant 2 shared her favorite class was a

film and audio class "because the teacher was really chill." Participant 3 shared that

Physical Science his freshman year was his favorite class because his football coach, who

was his teacher, "helped a lot, especially if I ever needed it." Participant 4 noted his

favorite class was English II:

> because of the environment that [the teacher] made, everybody seemed like they
>
> felt super comfortable with the class and everybody was really good about

participating in it and no one really felt judged in that class. And I think [she] kind

of made that really clear in the beginning, that she wanted her class to be like that.

And I think she did that really well.

Participant 8 stated basketball was his favorite class because "I'm close with my coach.

I've had him as a coach for three years now." Four participants (n=4) did not mention the

teacher in connection to their favorite class.

When asked about a least favorite class, teachers also played a role for three

participants (n=3). Participant 1 listed the teacher as the negative element in her least

favorite class. She stated, "Uh, the teacher, first of all… I did not like the teacher. Um,

she just wasn't very good at explaining things. And when she didn't explain them, I just

didn't really get [the material]. Participant 3 noted his least favorite class was Advisory

because "the teacher just made it not enjoyable." When asked about her least favorite

class, Participant 7 referenced Geometry because "it was very hard to understand the

teacher."

The remaining five participants (n=5) provided answers indicating the teacher did

not play a role in determining their least favorite class. In fact, all five participants linked

their dislike to course-related tasks. For example, Participant 2 said "it's also, like, with

the fact that we were in front of a computer all day, where I like to tinker with my hands

a bit more." Her statement suggests the type of tasks given had an impact on why it was

her least favorite class. Participant 4 stated US History was his least favorite class

because it felt "like a lot of busy work, and I know that it's not, but it just feels a lot more

tedious" and "there's only so much you can do, especially with US History, and it gets

boring after a while." Again, this statement implies the content and tasks were the source

for his dislike of the course. Participant 5 said the course content "was just hard for me." Participant 6 noted his least favorite class had a "lot of like definitions and everything to remember" which made the course "difficult." Participant 8 added he "didn't like the required reading." These statements imply the teacher is generally removed as a contributing source for the dislike of the classes.

Regarding things their teachers did to make them feel more comfortable, participants overwhelming (n=7) mentioned instructional and classroom management strategies focused on group work and seating arrangements as affecting their comfort level in the class.

Table 3
Strategies Teachers Used to Create Comfort with Classmates

Category	Participant	Comment
Group Work	1	"group activities"
	2	"projects, like, without picking your group"
	3	"work with different people"
	4	"group work"
	5	"assign different group members for projects"
	7	"work in groups of people we don't know"
	8	"group work"
Seating Charts	2	"seating"
	3	"seating charts"
	5	"seating charts"
	8	"assign new seats or to move around"

The participants shared how group work and changing seating charts allowed them to interact and speak with more classmates than if they had only one seat throughout the year and were assigned more independent work. To illustrate, Participant 5 explained:

A lot of the time they assign different group members for their projects, and I feel like that somewhat does help because it gets you to talk to people that you usually wouldn't have to talk to. They use seating charts. I feel like sometimes my

teachers sit me next to people they think I would work well with or help each

other.

Participant 7 responded:

Having us work in groups and trying to work in groups of people we don't know

so we can actually get to know other people in the classroom and feel comfortable

with people in their life, if we just work in the groups of people we know and we

only feel comfortable with two or three people and you just walk into it. I

sometimes walk into a class and feel like I don't know these people.

Participant 8 stated how new seats, moving around, and games helps with the comfort

level. Specifically, "Group work…um, hands on things. Not just taking notes or working

on Chromebooks. Moving activities and games. Give us a chance to actually talk to teach

other. Don't demand we're quiet all class." Clearly, giving students a chance to interact

through work tasks and conversation allows for a more relaxed environment in which all

present in the classroom can get to know one another.

Additionally, Participant 2 added that talking and interacting should not be

restricted to just their classmates. Teachers should

Talk to us like ... Don't talk to us like we're just students. Like, at least try to have

a lot of conversations with us instead of being like, "Oh. Your paper's due this

week" and that's about it. Just, like, trying to get to know us on a personal level.

In the same vein, Participant 4 commented that students have better relationships with

teachers when the teacher

[tells] jokes himself or herself, just kind of at the front of the classroom, letting everybody laugh and kind of bond on that funny moment that just happened. Everyone shares that experience and can relate to each other on that.

The final interview question related to Research Question 1 focused on the impact of intentional empathy curriculum. All participants (n=8) stated a positive experience with intentional empathy curriculum. Participant 1 specifically added how the empathy tasks allowed students to "grow trust with our teacher" and thus "being able to learn more." Participants 2 and 3 referred to the course as a "good experience." Participant 4 said "I don't think I ever bonded to strongly with any other class." Participant 5 called the course "engaging and fun." Participants 6 and 7 said the course impacted them in a "good way." Participant 8 said "I know people a lot better than in any other class" and added "I learned so much about them so quickly that it kind of feels like I've known them forever. Um, and like I said, it was more comfortable."

Overall results for Research Question 1. After reviewing the cumulative participant responses, it is clear the high school participants in this study perceived their teachers as a positive force in the classroom who had the ability to create a fun and supportive environment of learning and growing. No participants expressed negative sentiments regarding the teacher who provided intentional empathy curriculum. Only Participant 1 provided a response which indicated her classmates' maturity level affected the success of the intentional empathy curriculum. She added that with a different group of classmates she would "envision it going well" and would have enjoyed the overall experience more.

Research Question 2: Perceptions of Empathy Tasks

The second research question was: How do high school student perceive the tasks associated with intentional empathy curriculum? To evaluate this question, participants were asked up to nine questions during the interview which might elicit relevant information. One or two questions might have been eliminated due to COVID-related school closures resulting in a reduction of assigned tasks. Those nine questions are as follows:

- What is/was your favorite class in high school and what makes it your favorite?

- What is/was your least favorite class in high school and what makes it your least favorite?

- Tell me about your experiences with Concentration Circle and Cooperation Challenge.

- Tell me about your experience with the Quilt Square activity.

- Tell me about your experience with Big Talk or Table Topics.

- Did you hear or share anything surprising during Big Talk or Table Topics?

- Tell me about your experience with Circle of Viewpoints.

- Tell me about your experience with the self-portraits and empathy portraits.

- Do you believe those activities (Concentration Circle, Cooperation Challenge, Quilt Squares, Big Talk, Circle of Viewpoints, and self-portrait) affected your experience in English II and with that group of people (students and teacher)?

Interview responses. Most participants (n=7) used similar positive words to describe the specific empathy-related tasks mentioned during the interview process. Participant 6 was the only participant not to use words or phrases like the ones presented in Table 4.

He could not recall specifics on some activities but did indicate the activities were a good

method to get to know people. None of the participants used negative terms to describe

the empathy tasks.

Table 4
Perceptions of Intentional Empathy Curriculum Tasks

Participant	Responses	Reference to Specific Task
1	"fun"	Quilt Square
	"good experience"	Big Talk/Table Topics
	"enjoyed them"	All tasks
2	"really fun"	All tasks
	"enjoyed it"	All tasks
3	"liked it"	Circle of Viewpoints
4	"fun"	Quilt Square
	"enjoyed it"	
	"pretty fun"	Big Talk/Table Topics
	"liked it"	
	"fun"	Circle of Viewpoints
5	"fun"	Concentration Circle and Cooperation Challenge
	"fun"	Self-Portrait
	"fun"	All tasks
7	"relaxing"	Quilt Square
	"fun"	All tasks
8	"fun"	Concentration Circle and Cooperation Challenge
	"fun"	Quilt Square

Six participants (n=6) commented on empathy or how tasks engaged them in

facets of empathy including perspective-taking, staying out of judgement, and

understanding emotions in others, which increased their impact and created a lasting

impression. Although the remaining participant (Participant 6) offered generally positive

commentary regarding the tasks, he did not provide the depth or clarity of response to

include their commentary. Participant 1 noted how the Quilt Square activity was

> a good way to, like, get to know other people. You know? And, um, like, what
>
> they like and stuff like that. Um, it also was, like… I feel like it was a way to get
>
> to know yourself better because you had to, like, go in and find what you liked
>
> about yourself or what you like to do.

Participant 1 later commented

> One time, I shared some ... I can't remember what it was, but I shared something,
>
> and the whole group that I shared it to was just, like, shocked. Like, they couldn't
>
> believe that that ... that I ... that came out of my mouth.

Participants 2 and 3 provided more comments which focused on hearing other people's

opinions and taking on or considering different perspectives. Specifically, Participant 2

noted, "I remember hearing different people's opinions" and "I thought it was interesting

to see other people's views." Participant 3 states one of the tasks was "kind of looking at

it and taking on their perspective" because "you were kind of just like free to think about

what they would think of in that moment." Their comments about considering other

perspectives is a key piece of empathy. Although participants were not explicitly told this

was the primary goal of the task, they were able to reflect on the experience and

extrapolate that component from the whole of the activity.

Participant 4 noted, "It was definitely out of the ordinary. I don't think I've done

anything else like that in my classes. And it was fun to kind of let your creativity flow a

bit." In a subsequent response, he used the word empathy regarding the Circle of

Viewpoints task. He stated, "I do think it was kind of a fun practice of empathy to kind of

see maybe what those people's perspectives might have been." Participant 5 declared "I think it's helpful to get people to open up, and it was easy for me to talk about most of the things."

Participant 7 provided a similar response by saying "It was a good way to start conversations with my classmates." Certainly, it is difficult to connect empathically with another person if you do not first engage in dialogue. Participant 7 continued with

And we shared an artwork, and we wrote down the different viewpoints. It was very interesting to see how other people's minds work when you give them a viewpoint of someone else and just see everything that they came up with.

Participant 8 explained how the tasks gave students the opportunity to share about themselves.

When people wanted to, they would really share. Like really share. You learned things you wouldn't have just come across during the year. It was kind of like sharing and confessing about yourself. I remember one person telling about their family and stuff that happened in their family. Kind of deep stuff. Made me see people a little different.

Overall results for Research Question 2. The data presented above makes it clear how participants viewed their experiences with the empathy-related tasks. The high school participants perceived intentional empathy curriculum tasks as overwhelmingly positive. As with Research Question 1, no participants expressed negative perceptions of the intentional empathy curriculum tasks. Some tasks (such as Cooperation Challenge and Big Talk) created the space for classmates and the teacher to connect more, and some

allowed the participant the opportunity for self-expression, reflection, and perspective-taking (Quilt Squares, Big Talk, and Circle of Viewpoints).

Research Question 3: Perceptions of Classmates

The third research question for this study was: What are high school students' perceptions of their classmates in a course with intentional empathy curriculum? Of the 17 prescribed questions used in the interview, ten questions generated useful data for Research Question 3.

- Think about the groups of classmates you have had in each of your previous high school classes. What was your favorite group of classmates? Think of this group exclusive of the subject matter and the teacher.

- In general, do you know your classmates in each class?

- How do you know all your classmates? / Why don't you think you know all your classmates?

- Tell me about a class that had particularly negative classroom interactions between students.

- Tell me about a class that had particularly positive classroom interactions between students.

- Tell me about your experience with the Concentration Circle and Cooperation Challenge.

- Tell me about your experience with the Quilt Square activity.

- Tell me about your experience with Big Talk or Table Topics.

- Did you hear or share anything surprising during Big Talk or Table Topics?

- Do you believe those activities (Concentration Circle, Cooperation Challenge, Quilt Squares, Big Talk, Circle of Viewpoints, and self-portrait) affected your experience in English II and with that group of people (students and teacher)?

Interview responses. After reviewing all the data, 75% of participant responses (n=6) acknowledged not knowing their classmates in all their classes. When asked about knowing her classmates, Participant 1 stated, "Probably not all of them. Maybe, like, a select few." Participant 2 gave an adamant "no." When asked what percentage of her classmates she knew, she qualified her answering by explaining some students she might "not know, but like, just like 'Oh, hi. Like I acknowledge you're in my class.' Then, probably 85%." Participant 3 said, "not really" when asked if he knew his classmates. Participant 6 responded with "No, not really. I know, like, obviously the people that I play sports with and hang out with, but then like, oh, know some here and there, but like, I don't like, actually know them." Although Participant 7 made it clear she does not know her classmates, she elaborated to include some level of responsibility for that outcome due to her own level of interaction.

> No, and that's kind of on my part because I am very introverted, so I don't talk to new classmates until I am put in a group and then I get to know my classmates slowly. So by the end of the year, I should know all my classmates' names.

Participant 8 explained "Some I do, some I don't. If we have the same interests or understanding of the work, then we get to know each other more. It just depends on the class and the students."

The two participants (n=2) who said they did know their classmates, their responses were included having "a general idea of personalities" (Participant 4) and

knowing classmates "for the most part" (Participant 5). However, all participants (n=8) expressed positive views of classmate relationships and interactions in the course with intentional empathy curriculum.

Four participants (n=4) provided brief commentary to their classmate experience. Participant 1 stated the empathy curriculum activities were "a good way to, like, get to know other people." Participant 3 noted how "everyone was involved. […] And you could have better connections with people that you probably didn't know before." Participant 5 declared how the empathy curriculum helped to create "a sense of relating to one another and that you're kind of friends now that you have something in common." Participant 6 explained, "we just learned a lot about each other […] And like you just learn about people if you listen."

Three participants (n=3) offered more descriptive responses regarding their perceptions of classmate relationships and dynamics. For example, Participant 4 greatly elaborated on his experience.

> I don't think I have ever bonded so strongly with any other class than [that] class, and I do feel like it had to do with those activities that you had to do, whether some of the students noticed it or not. It was a huge, huge way to bond with the people, to see what they're like, get an idea of what their personality is, and just have genuine human interaction and human cooperation with a group of people that you didn't know previously. I'm still super great friends with some of those people to this day. And I do think it was because a lot of that stuff.

Participant 7 shared how her group struggled with an empathy assignment because of a student with disabilities and overcame the barriers together.

It was a little difficult at my table because we did have a student who I think has Autism. So, it was a little bit of a struggle because we had to try to get him to include himself and talk about it. But once we started with the actual conversation and got everyone to include themselves, it actually was very good.

Participant 8 stated that the empathy curriculum was

a good way to, like, get to know other people. I learned things people like. Their interests. It was a way to get to express yourself and had to share about personality traits, values, and interests. Other people asked me about my square, and it made me want to know about theirs. I guess we shared without realizing it. Like it didn't feel forced. […] I know people a lot better than in other classes. Except for basketball. I know the most people in that class because I got to know them so much in our class last year, um, even with COVID. Like, even people I didn't know before I learned so much about them so quickly that it kind of feels like I've known them forever. Um, and like I said, it was more comfortable. More connections maybe. The room just felt better.

Participant 2 did not provide a response which added clarity or depth to this research question, either positively or negatively.

Overall results for Research Question 3. After experiencing a year-long course with an intentional empathy curriculum, participants noticed greater connections and more bonding with their classmates in the intentional empathy course compared to their other classes. Participants were able to get to know their classmates quicker and felt more comfortable with each other. Overall, seven participants (n=7) perceived the intentional empathy curriculum as having a positive impact on their experience and relationships

with their classmates. One participant (n=1) simply did not provide a response which added useful data to this research question.

Research Question 4: Perceptions of Classroom Environment

The fourth research question of the study was: How do high school students perceive their classroom environment in a course with intentional empathy curriculum? Of the interview questions asked, four questions supplied data related to Research Question 4.

- What does your favorite class look, feel, and sound like?

- In your opinion, what things do you want in a classroom environment?

- Tell me about your experience with Concentration Circle and Cooperation Challenge.

- Do you believe those activities (Concentration Circle, Cooperation Challenge, Quilt Squares, Big Talk, Circle of Viewpoints, and self-portrait) affected your experience in English II and with that group of people (students and teacher)?

Interview responses. The interview responses for Research Question 4 revealed how participants were impacted by their classroom environment by highlighting more tangible items such as windows, lighting, decorations, and furniture arrangement and spacing. In addition, seven participants (n=7) noted how the overall feeling or atmosphere in the classroom played a role in their perceptions of intentional empathy curriculum and its connection to the learning environment.

Table 5
Elements Affecting Classroom Environment

Category	Participant	Comment
Windows	3	"Windows open. Let sunlight in a little."
	5	"I like windows."
Lighting	2	"not too bright but not too dark, either"
	3	"Not dim. More like bright"
	5	"…natural lighting"
	6	"bright enough…but not annoying"
	8	"I like to be able to see but not full brightness."
Decorations	1	"Decorations. Like, um, something that represents the teacher"
	2	"Uh, a lot of posters. Not too extra, but not too bland, either."
	3	Decorated. Neat, but not too much. Organized."
	4	"looks lived in"
	7	"decorations that are inspirational"
Furniture and Spacing	2	"There would be a good amount of space, so you could move and walk around."
	3	"Desks are connected, groups of four"
	5	"I like space."
	8	"some group seating' sometimes spread more apart"
Feeling	1	"every time you walk in, you get a feel for [the teacher] and their personality"
	2	"comfortable"
	3	"energetic"
	4	"friendly"
	6	"laid back"
	7	"safe place"
	8	"fun, energetic" and "the room just felt better"

All participants (n=8) identified elements of the physical space and noted how those

elements impacted their perceptions of a classroom environment and their ability to work

comfortably.

In addition, some participants further expounded on their classroom experiences pertaining to the environment. To illustrate, Participant 1 clarified that she likes decorations that represent the teacher "so that, um, every time you walk in, you get a feel of them and their personality, too." Participant 2 stated:

> I don't know if this is weird, but, to me, if I'm not in a room with a window, I feel like it's always dark or, like, I can't breathe or even if like- even if the door's, like, slightly closed, it just makes me feel a little eerie because I can't, like ... I feel like I can't see the outside world.

She further explained how the intentional empathy curriculum "just impacted the environment because it felt more comfortable." Participant 3 noted "hopefully, the room smells good if there's windows, and the windows open."

Participant 4 added:

> It's just a real friendly class. It's a class where everyone can kind of be themselves and is friends with everyone to some point or another. No one feels overly awkward or like they aren't respected. And that's… that's kind of the main thing is everyone has mutual respect for each other and everyone kind of is able to not only get the work done, but have a good time doing it. It's not an overly energetic class. It's not too overwhelming, too loud. It's very kind of mellowed out. But there are points in time where you can take some time and kind of do your own thing. […] A nicely decorated room that looks a little more home, home like it looks lived in. It's not just plain eggshell walls and bright reading lights and desks and stuff like that, thinking posters and maybe different furniture, just kind of

stuff that makes it feel more like a lived-in class than just another one of the

classrooms in the school.

In the same way Participant 3 commented on the classroom's smell, Participant 6 also

noted stated "If it smells bad in there, it's got to have some perfume." Participant 7

provided extended commentary on her perceptions of the classroom environment and

how that impacted her experience.

> Probably understanding teacher who understands that everyone learns at a
>
> different pace like you did. You always made sure everyone was on track and
>
> everyone knew everyone was at a different place. There's always the kids that
>
> make class a little harder. So probably none of them are there in just a classroom
>
> where everyone can feel like it's a safe place to be. And you don't have to feel like
>
> you have to just keep where you are on the inside because you're scared to
>
> actually be yourself in a classroom. A lot of classrooms here have stuff like you
>
> have [in the interview room] be kind, work hard, those types of things, I believe
>
> helps kids like having decorations that are inspirational instead of just having
>
> blank walls going well until it just makes. Kind of makes us kind of slower
>
> because it's just a dull classroom and we just feel you don't want us to be there,
>
> and we won't focus as much.

Participants 5 and 8 did not expound upon their initial responses, located in Table 5, with

further details or notes related to the physical environment or feeling associated with the

classroom.

Overall results for Research Question 4. After considering the participant

responses, the data shows how the classroom environment not only consists of concrete

items such as lighting, posters, and furniture but is also just as impacted by the feeling or atmosphere in the space. The high school participants' perceptions of their environment were highly affected by their relationships with their teacher, classmates, and tasks which had the power to promote or suppress a positive environment. Overall, all participants (n=8) identified classroom environmental elements from the course with intentional empathy curriculum as being positive attributes.

Summary

Chapter 4 summarized the findings of this study from the interview process and corresponding participant responses. Although participants had varying degrees of experiences with intentional empathy curriculum, it is clear they all expressed some level of positive connection to the course. The responses related to Research Question 1 revealed how the teacher's ability to utilize instructional strategies such as changing groups and using hands-on tasks can promote a greater sense of connection and thus foster stronger positive perceptions from student participants. When considering responses to Research Question 2, participants overwhelmingly viewed the empathy tasks as fun, enjoyable, and relaxing. Additionally, they perceived those tasks as vehicles to creating greater connections with their classmates and to supporting a more positive overall experience. The data from Research Question 3 demonstrated the association between intentional empathy curriculum and classmate relationships. Essentially, the tasks directly impacted participants' exposure to interactivity and their ability to engage in relationship-building and perspective-taking. Research Question 4 focused on the classroom environment. Based on participant responses, it is clear that they perceive their environment to be more than just the physical space in which they are located.

The four research questions provided categories with which to sort the data. From those categories, though, it is apparent that there is a noted interconnectedness among the elements of teachers, tasks, classmates, and environment.

Chapter V: Discussion

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore and understand high school students' perceptions of intentional empathy curriculum encountered during the tenth grade at a large high school located in northwest Arkansas. Although states are increasingly developing and adopting SEL programs, both with or without empathy components (Arkansas DESE, 2019; CASEL, 2018; New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association, 2017), and there has been increased focus on empathy-related research (Bradshaw, 2016; CASEL, 2018; Davison, 2010; Franzese, 2017), there has been limited attention directed toward empathy in secondary education and has been no inquiry into high school student's experiences in Arkansas. Thus, this study sought to qualify and understand experiences through the lens of high school students in northwest Arkansas. Specifically, this study aimed to understand these experiences as they related to teachers, classmates, tasks, and classroom environment. Participants (n=8) in this study were all actively enrolled in the school of study in either blended (face-to-face) or virtual instruction models and had been enrolled for their entire sophomore school year.

The following four research questions were the focus of this study:

1. What are high school students' perceptions of the relationship with their teacher in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

2. How do high school students perceive the tasks associated with intentional empathy curriculum?

3. What are high school students' perceptions of their classmates in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

4. How do high school students perceive their classroom environment in a course with intentional empathy curriculum?

Summary of Findings

Although more potential participants were contacted, a total of eight participants (n=8) completed the interview process: four participants (n=4) were male and four (n=4) were female. Four participants (n=4) were Caucasian; one participant (n=1) was African American; one participant (n=1) was Native American; one participant (n=1) was Latino; one participant (n=1) was two or more races. All participants were enrolled in the school of study and had experienced the course with intentional empathy curriculum. Participants all expressed positive experiences and perceptions of intentional empathy curriculum and its related impacts.

Regarding Research Question 1: What are high school students' perceptions of the relationship with their teacher in a course with intentional empathy curriculum, seven participants (n=7) mentioned the instructional and classroom management strategies of group work and seating charts used in the intentional empathy course as beneficial to the overall course experience. One participant (n=1) did not comment on instructional strategies or classroom management in his response. Four participants (n=4) noted the teacher as a factor in their favorite class; four participants (n=4) did not mention a teacher as a factor in their favorite class. Three participants (n=3) mentioned a teacher in connection to a least favorite class; five participants (n=5) did not mention a teacher when asked about a least favorite class.

Research Question 2 is How do high school students perceive the tasks associated with intentional empathy curriculum. Nine of the interview questions generated data for

Research Question 2. Concerning their experiences with the various empathy tasks, seven participants (n=7) used words such as "fun," "good," "like," and "enjoy" describing their experiences with the specified empathy-related tasks. Participant 6 did not provide a response which included one of these words, but his responses regarding the tasks were positive. None of the participants expressed negative associations or perceptions of the empathy tasks.

For Research Question 3: What are high school students' perceptions of their classmates in a course with the intentional empathy curriculum, ten of the interview questions provided useful data. 75% of participants (n=6) acknowledged not generally knowing their classmates. However, seven participants (n=7) expressed having greater knowledge of their classmates and stronger relationships in the course with intentional empathy curriculum compared to other courses. Again, one participant (Participant 6) did not provide a response or commentary which added any depth or clarity to this research question.

Research Question 4 asks How do high school students perceive their classroom environment in a course with an intentional empathy curriculum. Four of the interview questions connected to this research question. All participants (n=8) commented on tangible classroom elements in the intentional empathy course positively affecting their experience. Those elements were windows, lighting, furniture and spacing, and decorations. In addition, seven participants noted the intangible element of a feeling or the general atmosphere of the classroom as affecting their experience. Participants perceived the classroom environment of the course with intentional empathy curriculum as a positive space.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine high school students' perceptions of intentional empathy curriculum in a school in northwest Arkansas. The data generated three primary findings: a) intentional empathy curriculum yielded positive experiences, b) the positive experiences did not necessarily result in the course being a favorite among research participants, and c) participants noted closer connections not only during the course but also extending up to a year after the course had ended. Each major finding is discussed in detail below.

Intentional Empathy Curriculum Course

The course with intentional empathy curriculum provided the overarching environment and focus for this study. From this course, the data as it relates directly to the curriculum yielded four major takeaways: a) participants experienced better relationships with the teacher; b) participants enjoyed the empathy tasks; c) participants experienced better relationships with their classmates; d) participants perceived the course to have a better classroom environment.

Better relationships with teachers. One major finding from this study was how participants perceived their relationship with the teacher, which is absent in existing research. This finding is important because previous research on empathy utilized the concept as a reactive intervention tool used to address problems after they arise (Castillo et al., 2013; Castillo et al., 2018; Leppma & Young, 2016; Lor et al, 2015; Salmon, 2003). By considering how intentional empathy curriculum can positively affect student-teacher relationships, it places empathy programs within the bounds of a proactive method to address negative behaviors before they manifest. Participants acknowledged

having a more trusting relationship with the teacher who implemented intentional empathy curriculum. In addition, participants responded that the teacher went beyond the norm to ensure students understood what was expected and felt safe in within the learning space. The value of safety in the learning environment is noteworthy in context of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in which safety needs must be met before belongingness and love needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs can be met (Schmutte, 2018). The finding of stronger relationships with teachers is important to consider because it has not been a focus in previous studies on empathy and related social and emotional programs.

In addition to the previous research findings of benefits of empathy curriculum programs (outlined in Chapter 2), such as increased social bonding and social support (Devoldre et al., 2010; Norfolk et al., 2007) and decreased antisocial behaviors and criminalization (Bove, 2017; Bush et al., 2000), this study found that empathy curriculum improved student-teacher relationships can potentially reduce classroom disruptions and disciplinary action. However, it should be noted that although participants had a positive relationship with the teacher of intentional empathy curriculum, that teacher was not necessarily their favorite high school teacher.

Students enjoyed the assignment tasks better. Other research studies as they relate to content promoting empathy do not concentrate on specific tasks or activities but rather speak generally to a subject matter such as band or art (Jeffers, 2009a; Lalama, 2016; Stout, 1999). For this study, participants were asked to weigh in on six intentional empathy-directed tasks (Concentration Circle, Cooperation Challenge, Big Talk/Table Topics, Quilt Squares, Self-Portraits, and Circle of Viewpoints). All participants

expressed positive connections to the tasks, referring to them as fun and/or enjoyable. The concept of learning being enjoyable is key because this concept has been connected to studies which state that learning should not only be enjoyable, but students must have enjoyment in order to learn (Griffin, 2005; Lumby, 2011) and that an absence of enjoyment is a main reason for students failing to reach their potential (Goetz et al., 2006; Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003).Therefore, it is a valuable finding that intentional empathy curriculum promotes student enjoyment because that inherently promotes more learning.

Participants also elaborated on how such tasks resulted in greater self-awareness and self-exploration, vulnerability with classmates, stronger relationships, and a more positive environment. This finding is important to the current body of literature because it coincides with developmental stages which include empathy (Erikson, 1964; Schmutte, 2018), and demonstrates that the tasks go beyond creating enjoyment; they promote self-awareness and empathy. By exploring specific tasks and how each influenced the participants' perceptions, the data divulged a clearer understanding of how intentional empathy impacts the overall experience and what types of tasks are more likely to generate empathy and enjoyment. This clarity of information provides educators and future researchers with specific collaborative, hands-on, and conversational tasks to utilize for success.

Better relationships with classmates. Another significant finding related to the intentional empathy curriculum is how students interacted with their classmates and the bonding which occurred as a result. Again, greater bonding has the potential to generate more learning enjoyment resulting in greater learning gains (Goetz et al., 2006; Griffin,

2005; Lumby, 2011; Shernoff et al., 2003). Previous studies have explored empathy as it relates to a group of students varying in age from adolescence to adulthood; however, most of these studies focus on growing empathy in a general sense but do not engage with how it affects fellow learners experiencing the same phenomenon (Davison, 2010; Fields et al, 2011; Franzese, 2017; Stout, 1999). When studies have focused on inter-classroom empathic connections and dynamics, they have been outside the age range and geographic scope of this study (Bradshaw, 2016; Cooper, 2010; Deitz, 2014; Huang & Su, 2014; You et al., 2018). Both Erikson (1964) and Piaget (1952) make it clear that adolescents before the mid-to-late teens are not equipped to fully understand and demonstrate empathy from a cognitive or affective dynamic, and thus those studies of younger participants are premature.

In this study, all participants were sixteen to eighteen-years-old as opposed to previous research which has focused on younger adolescents or on post-secondary adults (Bradshaw, 2016; Dolby, 2014; Fields et al., 2011; Franzese, 2017; Gerdes et al., 2011; Keskin, et al., 2019; Lor et al., 2015; Mikkonen et al., 2015; Ratka, 2018; Schumann et al., 2014). The researcher specifically centered interview questions on how the empathy curriculum affected participants' relationship with their immediate learning peers as this appears to be a gap in the existing body of knowledge. Participants in empathy-focused classrooms addressed knowing their classmates more compared to other classes and were able to develop stronger bonds with one another. Not only were classmates more familiar with each other, but the intentional empathy curriculum provided space for those relationships to move beyond surface-level connections to a greater depth of understanding and friendship. The fundamental importance of this finding is that it marks

an improvement of relational interactions in actual peer relationships and not simply with

nebulous, potential relationships as was the case with other studies (Davison, 2010;

Fields et al, 2011; Franzese, 2017; Stout, 1999).

      Better classroom environment. This study's results align with previous research

which found that the consolidated effects of empathy in the classroom have a positive

impact on the learning environment (Cooper, 2010; Mikkonen et al., 2015). All

participants in this study noted elements from intentional empathy curriculum as having a

positive impact on their perception of the environment. Additionally, 87% of participants

specifically commented on the mood or feeling in the room as a positive factor in their

experience. As noted earlier, an improved learning environment has the potential to affect

the participants ability to find enjoyment during the learning process, thus promoting

even more learning (Goetz et al., 2006; Griffin, 2005; Lumby, 2011; Shernoff et al.,

2003). In fact, Cooper (2010) noted how empathy had a "powerful effect on the climate

and hidden curriculum and gives the message of value, care and concern" which

optimized learning and had significant impacts on assessment (pp. 91). This connection

between classroom environment and learning achievement via assessment is noteworthy

within the context of the current national focus on high-stakes standardized testing

(Ladson-Billings, 2016; Lewis & Hardy, 2015; Wheeler-Bell, 2020). The potential

benefits of empathy as they relate to the classroom environment include greater learning

outcomes (Griffin, 2005; Lumby, 2011) and greater overall academic success (Suleman,

2019).

      However, the data in this study contradicts the findings of Tackett et al.'s (2017)

study which found the learning environment and empathy did not have a close relation

and any influence between the two would be modest at best. It should be noted Tackett et al.'s (2017) study examined medical school programs in Israel, Malaysia, and China; it did not include participants of the same age or geographic location.

The Tackett et al. (2017) finding does not seem to consider or involve the conceptual framework of The Malleable Theory of Empathy which is the conceptual framework for this study. The Malleable Theory of Empathy posits the idea that empathy is a malleable trait that can be produced and enhanced (Atkins et al., 2016; Bradshaw, 2016; Brooks, 2011; Davison, 2010; Keskin, 2013; Keskin et al., 2019; Ratka, 2018; Salmon, 2003; Stout, 1999). Perhaps researchers could expand the Tackett et al. (2017) study to evaluate or measure how changes in the learning environment could impact empathic responses as those responses are capable of being manipulated.

Closer Connections Extended Over Time

As noted in the previous section, the participants expressed having better and stronger relationships with their classmates. However, an additional finding from this study is that the participants also commented on the longevity of those relationships. That is, up to 16 months after completing the course with intentional empathy curriculum, participants still noted those relationships as having stronger connections than they had or have with other classmates. This finding indicates a long-term impact on peer relationships which extends after the course has ended, participants have separated, and left the environment of study. If these positive relationships do indeed result in greater learning (Goetz et al., 2006; Griffin, 2005; Lumby, 2011; Shernoff et al., 2003), then the presence of intentional empathy curriculum has the capacity to stimulate more than one school-years' worth of learning gains for participants. Previous studies related to empathy

in the classroom setting rarely focus on teen peer relationships in the United States, but all fail to consider those relationships over an extended period of time.

Positive Outcomes but not Favorite Class

It is important to note that although participants viewed the course with intentional empathy curriculum as a positive experience in terms of teacher relationships, classmate relationships, task enjoyment, and environment that they did not necessarily consider it to be the favorite class of their high school experience. Some participants did list it as a favorite class. The participants who did not mention a course's subject matter and their relative interest in that subject matter as weighing significantly in determining a favorite class noted elements such as classmates and friends as the overarching determinant. In Kessels' (2005) study, a connection was found between peer relationships and liking a specific course subject. The Kessels (2005) study could indicate that peer relationships play a larger role in shaping perceptions of a particular course. In addition, as much as a participant might associate positive associations with the course of study, it was not always a strong enough experience to overrule personal preference and academic affinity: the efficacy of the course could not offset a participant's penchant for basketball, film, or art classes. The course of study is an academic core subject and graduation requirement (Arkansas DESE, 2017). As such, it is a course all secondary students are required to take rather than a course they choose to take. If the intentional empathy curriculum were to be situated in an elective course, it is possible that more students would view it as their favorite, but additional research is required to delineate any truth to that assumptions. As well, participants' responses regarding their favorite class are

possibly affected by individual learning styles and/or gender-stereotyped perceptions, but more research is needed to make that determination.

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Implications

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After reviewing this study's findings, it is necessary to consider the implications housed therein. The implications for practice and for future research are discussed below.

Implications for Practice

The qualitative data sourced from this study has numerous implications for practical application. In particular, the researcher believes this study possesses commentary relevant for the state of Arkansas, for administrators and teachers, and for schools with an existing advisory program or schools intending to institute an advisory program.

      State of Arkansas. In 2019, Arkansas implemented the G.U.I.D.E for Life program (Arkansas DESE, 2019). As districts and schools across the state evaluate the various components of G.U.I.D.E for Life and prepare for classroom implementation, the data from this study can be useful in understanding key elements of environment and tasks which can lead to greater success. Indeed, this study can be used for schools to make decisions regarding tangible details affecting not only social and emotional learning but learning in a broader sense. As well, the literature review in conjunction with the study itself can be supportive in decision-making regarding at what age to incorporate such a program. Schools should consider classroom dynamics such as spacing, lighting, and decoration as well as ways to create a positive mood. Across the state, schools can use the data as a source to support implementation of empathy-based programs as the

data is not only relevant to a broader understanding of empathy education but is specifically relevant to Arkansas.

Administrators and Teachers. Using this study as a data point provides an important evidence-based explanation and justification for adding an empathy-based curricular element to a school's already loaded curriculum. Administrators can utilize the data to express how such a program could potentially result in improved classroom dynamics, increased learning outcomes, and reduced disciplinary issues. Administrative support of new professional development opportunities with a shared vision for success is important in any new programs, and the data from this study can assist in administrators clarifying how empathy has a valuable role to play in public schools.

Additionally, public education encounters myriad professional development opportunities each year. For any school to attempt to employ an empathy program without buy-in from staff is to set that program up to fail. The findings of this study can help teachers understand why an empathy program is beneficial to the whole school. As well, teachers can view the results of this study to see how empathy curriculum has the potential to change their classrooms in a notably positive way not from a theoretical consideration of empathy but from a practical investigation of an actual program. Practical applications provide some of the strongest evidence for teachers to readily accept change.

Advisory programs are only a beginning. As an increasing number of states act to implement various interactions of social and emotional programs and competencies to their public schools (CASEL, 2018), it can be tempting to allocate such programs to advisory classes only. Advisory as a place for mentorship and support is a likely place to

add social and emotional programming. However, the benefits of empathy-curriculum are far-reaching enough that they should not be limited to single class or teacher. As the data shows, intentional empathy curriculum can have multiple benefits for teachers and students. Thus, it should be implemented more broadly within a school. Certainly, advisory programs are a great place for significant focus on social and emotional learning, especially with an empathy focus, but should not be an isolated access point to empathy instruction.

Implications for Future Research

This study provided three significant implications for future research: (a) replicating the study; (b) expanding the scope of the study; (c) improving the interview protocols for student participants. Based on the presence of these implications, it is evident more research would provide a greater understanding of empathy curriculum program sand their effects on participants.

Replicate the study. To provide greater strength and validity to the results, it is necessary to replicate the study as a means of ensuring the results hold true. One possible replication would be to conduct a similar study at a nearby school or in a school with a similar empathy-based social and emotional program. Replication could increase the transferability of the findings and contribute a greater depth of knowledge to the existing body of literature.

Expand the scope. Another major implication for future research is to expand the scope of the study. This study could be expanded to include more participants and more schools, to cover a longer period of time, and to examine a different geographic location. By including more participants, the data would be less impacted by a single participant.

Incorporating more school schools would make the data less teacher dependent and strengthen the transferability of the results. Examining a longer time period of intentional empathy curriculum would showcase the data to be consistent, reliable, and sustainable; the impacts would not be limited to the initial implementation phase. Finally, schools and students in different geographic locations such as urban areas or areas with different socio-economic would better inform educators and researchers on the perceptions and outcomes of intentional empathy curriculum.

Two additional considerations with an expanded scope would be (a) to study intentional empathy curriculum as part of an elective course and (b) to identify each participant's learning styles and compare those to the instructional styles offered by their favorite teachers. Researchers might also consider including an examination of stereotypes as they pertain to gender and subject matter preferences when evaluating favorite teachers/classes and whether that element impacts the findings of any future studies.

Strengthen protocols for student participants. The final implication for future research is to improve the interview protocols used with student participants. That is, researchers should imbed follow-up questions with teach initial question. It would be beneficial to standardize asking for specific examples and details in order to secure even greater descriptive value from student participant responses.

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Summary

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Participants in this study included eight students in the eleventh and twelfth grades attending the same public high school in northwest Arkansas and included face-to-face and virtual standardized interviews. The purpose of this phenomenological

qualitative study was to examine high school students' perceptions of intentional empathy curriculum encountered during the tenth grade at a high school located in northwest Arkansas. The conceptual framework for this study was The Malleable Theory of Empathy (Atkins et al., 2016; Geng et al., 2012; Gerdes et al., 2011; Konrath et al., 2011; Schumann et al., 2014; Ward et al., 2012). This chapter included a summary of findings in addition to a discussion about the major findings as they relate to the four research questions related to participant perceptions of intentional empathy curriculum as it relates to (a) teacher relationships; (b) empathy tasks; (c) classmate relationships; and (d) classroom environment. Based on the interview data and the findings, which were detailed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 respectively, there was a positive association between intentional empathy curriculum and student-teacher relationships. In addition, participants noted a connection between the empathy tasks and participants' enjoyment level. Participants also expressed a prominent positive rapport with their classmates in the course with intentional empathy curriculum. Finally, the data demonstrated a beneficial relationship between participants of intentional empathy curriculum and their perception of the learning environment.

This chapter concluded with an examination of the findings as they pertain to implications for practice and for future research. The implications for practice include the state of Arkansas, administrators and teachers, and advisory programs. The implications for future research acknowledge a need for replication of the study, expansion of the scope, and additional interview protocols for student participants.

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Appendices

Appendix A: IRB Letter of Exemption

ARKANSAS TECH UNIVERSITY

**Office of Sponsored Programs
and University Initiatives**
Administration Building, Room 207
1509 North Boulder Avenue
Russellville, Arkansas 72801

Office: 479-880-4327
www.atu.edu

September 14, 2020

To Whom It May Concern:

The Arkansas Tech University Institutional Review Board Chair has deemed the application for Heather Hooks' proposed research, entitled "Student Perceptions Toward Intentional Empathy Curriculum in the High School English Classroom," to be exempt under Category 1. Research activities in which the only involvement of human subjects will be in one or more of the exempt categories defined by the federal regulations are given an exempt determination rather than IRB approval. Thus, no IRB approval number has been assigned to this study. The IRB approves for the researcher(s) to proceed with the class project.

Please note that, in the event that any of the parameters of the study change, the researcher may be required to submit an amended application.

Sincerely,

Tennille Lasker-Scott, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Vice Chair
Arkansas Tech University