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Touching the Heart: Teachers' Pedagogical Empathy in Responding Learners' Diversity

Cecil O. Dali-On

Master Teacher I, Department Of Education – Labu-O Elementary School

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to determine the pedagogical empathy among the master teachers in Region XII. It employs the qualitative-phenomenology. Using the thematic analysis, it shows that they create an inclusive responsive learning environment through understanding and addressing diverse student needs and instructional strategies to meet diverse learners. They integrate pedagogical empathy through trainings and SLAC sessions as well as lesson integration.

INTRODUCTION

Global citizenship in education has become increasingly evident in the context of interconnected world. As humanity faced challenges, it is imperative to equip students with knowledge and skills crucial in responding to these issues. Educators are tasked with not only informing students about these pressing concerns but also showing a sense of shared responsibility and motivation to act for the future.

Previous studies revealed that pedagogical empathy promoting student engagement and emotional connection with various educational content, including social justice, civic responsibility, and environmental issues (Kingston et al., 2014; Krings et al., 2015; Scott & Graham, 2015). This has been shown to enhance classroom dynamics, promote inclusivity, and improve learning outcomes. When it comes to environmental education, empathetic teaching practices can help students connect more deeply with environmental issues.

This empathetic engagement is particularly crucial in classrooms with diverse student populations as stated by Mirra (2018). As teachers interact with students from different backgrounds and learning needs, their ability to understand and respond with sensitivity becomes essential (Yates, 2024). Teachers who practice culturally responsive teaching are not only aware of cultural differences but also adjust their teaching methods to reflect and respect these differences (Parker, 2016).

One of the key gaps in the current literature is the lack of focused research on how pedagogical empathy can respond to specific types of diversity in the classroom (Warren, 2018). Although there is general agreement that empathy is crucial in creating supportive and inclusive learning environments (Rowan et al., 2021). Most existing studies explore empathy as a personality trait or teacher quality but overlook how it is operationalized in daily teaching practices (Sharma et al., 2023).

Pedagogical empathy is directly aligned with the values of global citizenship. Teachers who practice empathy are better equipped to strengthen students' understanding of global issues. Therefore, studying how teachers can use empathy to respond to the diversity of their classrooms is an urgent step toward promoting global citizenship skills and preparing students to engage with the world in meaningful ways.

Research Questions

1. What steps can teachers take to ensure that their pedagogical empathy extends to students from diverse backgrounds and experiences;
2. How can the concept of pedagogical empathy be integrated into teacher training programs to enhance educators' abilities to connect with and support their students?

Research Design

This study employed both the quantitative and qualitative methodologies. In particular, this used the sequential explanatory. This began with the descriptions of the variables and followed by the testing of the hypothesis.

The sequential explanatory design typically involved three main stages. These are the data collection and analysis of quantitative data, interpretation of quantitative findings, and data collection and analysis of qualitative data to further explore or explain the quantitative results (Ivankova

et al., 2006). The use of this approach allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the topic. Thus, it offered opportunity to explore the richness of participants' experiences and contextual factors that may not be captured by quantitative measures alone (Ottman et al., 2020).

In this paper, the researcher first determined the level of responses of the respondents pertaining to pedagogical empathy and their global citizenship skills. After which, this was followed by the testing of the relationship and influence. Triangulating the findings with the qualitative data can be done through in-depth interview. This process made this paper sequential explanatory by nature.

Conversely, this involved teachers in the elementary level of the Department of Education from the Division of Cotabato, Tacurong, Sultan Kudarat and Kidapawan. Their selection will be based on the context of simple random sampling for quantitative and purposive sampling specifically the criterion-based sampling for the qualitative.

Locale of the Study of the Study

This study was conducted in two provinces and two cities of the SOCCSKSARGEN (Region XII). These involved the Province of Cotabato, which includes the Cotabato School Division and the Kidapawan City School Division, the Sultan Kudarat Province, which includes the Sultan Kudarat School Division, and the Tacurong City School Division. Hence, this excludes the Province of Sarangani, Province of South Cotabato and the City of General Santos. Generally, Cotabato and Sultan Kudarat are provinces located in the southern part of the Philippines. They are situated on the island of Mindanao, which is the second-largest island of the country.

The provinces are bounded by Bukidnon, Davao del Sur, Davao Occidental, Maguindanao del Sur, and Maguindanao del Norte. Its landscape is diverse, featuring a combination of mountains, hills, plateaus, valleys, and coastal areas. The southeastern part of the province is characterized by rolling hills and plateaus, while the western and northern parts are more mountainous.

Research Instrument

The data gathering instrument involves the interview guides, recorder, and the consent-to-participate form. These provide structure to the data collection process. They help ensure that the researcher asks relevant questions in order to capture specific observations.

Research Participants

A simple random sampling was used in the selection of the respondents. It is an effective way to obtain a sample that is representative of the entire population (Sharma, 2017). By selecting items or individuals entirely at random, every element in the population has an equal chance of being included in the sample. This helps minimize bias and ensures that the sample is a fair reflection of the population.

To obtain the number of the informants to participate in the qualitative part of the study, the researcher applied the purposive sampling with the criterion-based sampling as the main basis for the selection (Denieffe, 2020). They were selected using the following criteria:

1. A teacher assigned in the DepEd;
2. Handling elementary pupils; and
3. Assigned in the Division of Cotabato, Kidapawan, Sultan Kudarat and Tacurong.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis. Thematic analysis was a widely used qualitative research method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within a dataset. It is a flexible and systematic approach that can be applied to a wide range of qualitative data, such as interview transcripts, survey responses, focus group discussions, and even textual or visual materials (Lawless & Chen, 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Steps teachers take to ensure pedagogical empathy extends to students from diverse backgrounds and experiences

Table 1 shows the steps that teachers take ensuring that pedagogical empathy extends to students from diverse backgrounds and experiences. There are two organizing themes which were identified based on the global theme.

Understanding and Addressing Diverse Student Needs. This theme suggests that teachers' ability to check the backgrounds of their students. It means looking beyond the surface-level interactions and truly engaging with the unique experiences, cultures, and personal circumstances that each student brings into the classroom. The ability to check and understand students' backgrounds allows teachers to fix their instructional practices and build stronger, more supportive relationships with their learners.

This is firmly stated by one of the teachers during the course of the interview, she confirmed that:

"First maam is we have our personal and social situations we need to consider the backgrounds of our diverse learners for us to see or paano natin i-address kung needs ng mga bata so... that's why we need to have a background check of their educational backgrounds of the parents, the... races of the parents then also ahh... what we call this kung ang bata bah is mahina or hindi hindi siya mahina kasi it runs to the blood kasi sometimes ng bata."

(First, we have our personal and social situation we need to consider the backgrounds of our diverse learners for us to see how to address their needs...that is why we need to have a background check of their parents' education and ethnicity. This is our way to knowing why they struggle). Informant 1

This highlights that students come from a variety of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, and these differences can significantly influence their learning styles, communication preferences, and perspectives. Teachers who take the time to understand the cultural backgrounds of their students are better equipped to create an environment where cultural differences are respected and valued. Furthermore, when teachers incorporate diverse cultural perspectives into lessons, students feel seen, heard, and validated, which enhances their engagement and motivation to learn.

Further, this has been validated by one of the informants, she revealed that pedagogical empathy is associated with knowing the diverse backgrounds of the students. Through this, teachers could be able to find specific strategies. As mentioned during the interview:

*"Pedagogical Empathy refers to the teaching strategies and learning styles – the question is the steps that how to ensure that the learning strategies extends to the students' diverse backgrounds. I guess being a teacher we should research and know first the different cultural...yes... cultural background of the teacher... ah of the student rather in order for us to target kung ano man ang needs nila inside the classroom." (whatever their classroom needs are...)*Informant 3

Students' socio-economic backgrounds significantly influence their learning experiences (Jetten et al., 2017). A student from a lower socio-economic background may face challenges such as limited access to educational resources which can affect their emotional and academic well-being. Every student learns differently. Some students may excel in visual learning, others in auditory or kinesthetic modalities. Understanding how students learn best allows teachers to differentiate instruction in a way that meets the diverse needs of the classroom. Additionally, learning about a student's academic strengths and challenges allows teachers to provide the right level of support and challenge, avoiding situations where students may feel frustrated or disengaged due to mismatched expectations.

Instructional Strategies to Meet Diverse Needs. Teachers used differentiated instructions to meeting students' diverse needs. This means that differentiated instruction is not a single strategy, but rather a collection of strategies that teachers can use to modify the content, process, product, and learning environment to address the diverse needs of their students. The goal is to ensure that all students can succeed by offering multiple pathways to learning.

This theme reflects the statement of Informant 2. Having diverse students coming from different ethno linguistic groups showed the efficacy of differentiated instructions. This is further elaborated during the interview. The informant said that:

"Actually, ma'am I use differentiated teaching and through differentiated teaching strategy you can easily ahh give the activities to the different student they need... ahh... that kind of strategy. I have... I have many Muslim students or learners inside the classroom, I also have IP, that's why during observation, I say to Ma'am, my boss... I always use differentiated and ahh explicit teaching..."

In addition, one of the informants affirmed the aforesaid statements. Providing students with different activities underscores their commitment to transfer the knowledge. She conforms that:

"Yes... yes... so pwede natong ipasok and differentiated activities like that or pwede din kanilang...for other students din coming from different backgrounds ma-known din yung ibang cultures ng mga bata. Pwede din tayong mag inject ng mga ibang styles para maka transfer ng learning." (Yes we can inject differentiated instruction especially to students coming from diverse backgrounds. This is one way of identifying their cultures for the easy transfer of learning). Informant 4

Knowing the different backgrounds of the students would help teachers to provide specific strategies that suits to their needs. These differentiated instructions would allow learners to explore different fields of interest that enabled them to have the grasp of the lessons. Putting their cultures in the lessons would lead to the appreciation and integration of their own lives. Thus, learning would be fun for all.

Another key benefit of differentiated instruction is its positive impact on academic achievement. Multiple studies have demonstrated that differentiated instruction leads to improved performance, particularly in diverse classrooms where students have different abilities and backgrounds. In a study by, students in classrooms where DI was implemented showed higher levels of achievement on both formative and summative assessments compared to those in traditional, undifferentiated classrooms (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023).

Table 15

Steps teachers take to ensure pedagogical empathy extends to students from diverse backgrounds and experiences

Global Theme	Organizing Themes	Basic Themes
Creating an Inclusive, Responsive, and Supportive Learning Environment	Understanding and Addressing Diverse Student Needs	Identifying students' backgrounds and needs
		Reflective and Adaptive Teaching Practices

	Instructional Strategies to Meet Diverse Needs	Using differentiated instruction to meet students' diverse needs
		Creating an Inclusive and Collaborative Learning Environment

Integration of Pedagogical Empathy into training programs

Table 2 shows that integration of pedagogical empathy into training programs can easily be achieved through *School Learning Action Cell sessions* in schools. One of the primary functions of LACs is to create a platform where teachers can reflect on their practice in a collaborative environment. When teachers gather in LACs, they can share experiences, discuss challenges, and reflect on how they are meeting the diverse needs of their students. This process is particularly important when considering pedagogical empathy, as it encourages teachers to not only reflect on how they teach but also on how they emotionally engage with students.

This is reflected during the interview with one of the informants. She indicated in her responses that:

"I guess sa ano siguro Ma'am... sa SLAC session natin pwede po yan. Since doon naman talaga tayo nagkakaron ng conference ganun nagkakaron ng exchange of ideas and experiences which is applicable naman to every teachers since... ah... common naman sa lahat ng mga teachers ang magkaroon ng iba't ibang klase ng student opo. At saka doon Ma'am ah... halimbawa sa loob ng classroom ganito ang problema mo, you have to solve your own problem di ba? And then, pwede mo yun sya mashare sa... kasam mong teacher para... for them to learn also, vice versa." (We can integrate it during our SLAC session so that we can have the exchange of ideas and experiences which all are applicable to all teachers. Through this, teachers could be able to solve classroom problems). Informant 3

In support, the integration of pedagogical empathy into teacher training is not a singular, isolated effort but a systemic change that requires a supportive school culture. LACs help build this culture by encouraging teachers to work together to develop a collective understanding of what it means to be empathetic educators. Regular LAC sessions help reinforce the idea that empathy is a shared value within the school, where teachers collectively strive to create a more inclusive, responsive, and emotionally supportive learning environment for all students (Strong, 2021).

Lesson Integration. This theme suggests that in order for teachers to integrate pedagogical empathy into training programs, they practiced it through integrating on their lessons. It entails that these teachers are particular with the concept of the lessons. This can be done across learning areas which is fundamental in strengthening the contexts of the lessons.

The informants shared this by saying that she modelled it through demonstrations:

"So... yung sa amin so... mag integrate po tayo ng lesson... example sa different learning areas na kung baga... tawag nito... example ang lesson po sa English na mayrong na maintegrate din sa EsP na talagang magbigay ng good values, yun sya Ma'am. Then, example kanina kasi nagdemo po kasi ako Ma'am so nag demo po kasi ako, so ang ginawa ko sa lesson ko is describing words. So doon, mayron doon mga... syempre when we say describing words naga describe din po tayo sa mga attitudes and... tawag nito not only attitudes so di ba nai-integrate ko ang mga values doon sa EsP na subject po. So okay... anong dapat at saka hindi dapat." (We integrate this across learning areas. During the demonstration, although the topic is about the words descriptions but I was also describing attitudes which is the core of ESP). Informant 4

Training programs should emphasize that effective lesson planning involves not just meeting academic standards, but also considering the emotional and social context of students. For instance, lesson plans can be structured to accommodate different learning styles, emotional responses, and levels of comfort (Ezzani, 2021). Teachers can integrate strategies such as differentiated instruction, where tasks are designed to meet the varied needs of students, allowing for individualized support.

Table 2

Integration of Pedagogical Empathy into training programs

Global Theme	Organizing Themes	Basic Themes
Trainings for teachers in integrating Pedagogical Empathy	SLAC session	Providing learning opportunities for teachers to integrate pedagogical empathy
		Informing other teachers through mentoring where there is an exchange of ideas
	Lesson Integration	Integrating the contexts in the lessons.

Implications for Practice

The practice of pedagogical empathy is rapidly gaining recognition as a vital component in addressing the diverse needs of students within today's classrooms. One of the most significant implications of practicing pedagogical empathy is the ability to create an inclusive classroom environment where all students feel valued, respected, and understood. Teachers who demonstrate empathy are more likely to build strong relationships with their students. This is particularly important in multicultural classrooms where students may experience cultural dissonance.

Empathetic teachers can actively work to counteract exclusionary practices by adapting their teaching strategies to reflect and incorporate students' diverse cultural perspectives. This might involve integrating culturally relevant content into the curriculum, using diverse teaching materials, and employing inclusive pedagogical strategies that allow all students to see them represented in the learning process. Such practices not only validate students' identities but also promote a sense of belonging in the classroom, which has been shown to positively affect academic engagement and achievement.

Implications for Future Research

One important avenue for future research is the examination of pedagogical empathy across various educational contexts. While existing research has primarily focused on Western educational settings, classrooms in different parts of the world, and particularly in developing countries, may face unique challenges and opportunities when it comes to integrating empathy in teaching. Future studies should explore how cultural, societal, and institutional differences influence the practice of pedagogical empathy.

Concluding Remarks

Teachers who practice empathy acknowledge and respond to the unique experiences, challenges, and aspirations of their students. This understanding allows for more personalized and effective instruction that speaks to the diverse needs of students, particularly those from marginalized or vulnerable backgrounds. Empathy, in this regard, is not just a tool for enhancing relationships, but a means of promoting academic success and emotional well-being.

Furthermore, the impact of pedagogical empathy extends beyond individual students to the entire classroom dynamic. Empathetic teaching cultivates a classroom culture built on trust and mutual understanding. This sense of belonging is essential for academic engagement and motivation, particularly for students who may otherwise feel alienated due to differences in culture, language, or socioeconomic status. An inclusive classroom environment, underpinned by empathy, also encourages peer relationships based on respect and collaboration, helping to break down barriers and promote social cohesion.

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