Understanding Preschool Teachers' Perspectives on Empathy: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract Empathy is a trait and skill necessary for teachers working with children and for partnering with families. This qualitative study focused on how teachers expressed empathy in the context of early childhood education. Diversity has increased in the United States and as diversity increases, the need for teachers to be able to empathize with children and families who are different from themselves also increases. Empathy in early childhood education partnerships is valued; however, the role of empathy in parent–teacher partnerships in early childhood is not well understood. Eighteen inclusive preschool teachers participated in interviews to understand teachers' values, beliefs, and language in relation to empathy and parent–teacher partnerships. Teachers whose statements conveyed empathy described their relationships with families in a positive way. One theme, expressing sincere empathy, and four sub-themes emerged that described how teachers express empathy with children and families in early childhood education. The sub-themes included (1) embrace inclusion as a philosophy, (2) be relaxed and balanced, (3) accept and respond to family culture, and (4) engage in meaningful communication with families. The interpretations of these themes provide an understanding of the complexities of empathy in parent and teacher partnerships. Implications for the development of empathy in preservice and in-service professional development are discussed.

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Introduction

Diversity has increased dramatically in the United States within the past 30 years. As diversity increases, the need for teachers or service providers to be able to empathize with children and families who are different from themselves also increases. Empathy in early childhood education (ECE) partnerships is valued; however, the role of empathy in family–teacher partnerships in early childhood is not well understood. The purpose of this article is to briefly discuss the need for preparing culturally responsive practitioners; to identify why empathy should be a critical component of all early childhood teacher education (ECTE) programs as a means to "bridge" relationships between teachers and families; and to share the results of a study that interviewed 18 ECE teachers to understand how they expressed empathy.

Diversity, in its many forms, including socioeconomic, cultural, and ability, adds great richness and vibrancy to our society's culture and schools. As diversity increases and our changing socioeconomic landscape continues to take shape (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000), the need for teachers to be able to empathize with children and families who are different from themselves also increases (Maude et al. 2009; 2011). Yet research indicates they are not prepared to do so (Han and Thomas 2010). Current research in the fields of ECTE (Horm et al. 2013) and professional development (Snyder et al. 2012) argue that we need to conduct research rigorously reexamining our ECTE programs to meet the needs of our twenty-first century practitioners. Along with data that have associated
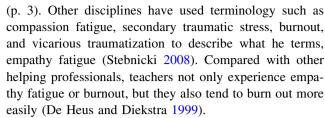
bullying with low empathy by high school students (Jolliffe and Farrington 2011) and evidence of a decline in empathy by college age students (Konrath et al. 2011), ECTE programs are in a unique position to impact future practitioners who may not have these essential dispositions or skills.

What Do We Mean by Empathy and Why is it so Important?

Empathy has been called an essential component to the human condition (Hojat 2007). The ability to empathize is critical in human relationships. It helps us feel connected with others, understand others' feelings and behavior, make predictions about future behavior, and then respond in appropriate ways (Allison et al. 2011). Empathy also helps us understand people whose values, views, and behaviors are different from our own (Calloway-Thomas 2010). Empathy is a complex topic that disciplines define differently.

Researchers in fields outside of ECE have recognized the need to understand and increase the empathic ability of its practitioners. In the health field, Larson and Yao (2005) argued for the application of empathy skills in the physician–patient relationship, asserting that empathic physicians are more effective healers. Williams and Stickley (2010) indicated that patients desire empathic nurses but often perceive empathy to be lacking within the nurse–patient relationship. From the field of social work, Gerdes and Segal (2011) emphasized that empathy helps practitioners become more effective and also aids in avoiding compassion fatigue or burnout. In the field of education, recent research on empathy has been focused mostly on the empathic ability of elementary or middle school teachers' beliefs related to students from culturally diverse backgrounds (Cooper 2004). In the field of ECE; however, the empathic ability of teachers, specifically in relation to building family/parent–teacher partnerships, has been limited in the research literature. The working definition for empathy from the perspective of the teacher in the context of ECE can be stated as the ability to: feel what the child or family member is feeling, understand what the child or family member is feeling, communicate that understanding to them, and then respond in ways that meet their needs.

For those in helping or person-centered professions such as nursing, psychology, and counseling, responding to and healing others through their own empathy can lead to empathy fatigue. Stebnicki (2008) described empathy fatigue for counselors as "resulting from a state of psychological, emotional, mental, physical, spiritual, and occupational exhaustion that occurs as the counselors' own wounds are continually revisited by their clients' life stories of chronic illness, disability, trauma, grief, and loss"

(p. 3). Other disciplines have used terminology such as compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, burnout, and vicarious traumatization to describe what he terms, empathy fatigue (Stebnicki 2008). Compared with other helping professionals, teachers not only experience empathy fatigue or burnout, but they also tend to burn out more easily (De Heus and Diekstra 1999).

LeCompte (2000) asserted that empathy is a necessary component of healthy relationships. Partnerships can be defined as "relationships between families and professionals in which they mutually agree to defer to each other's judgments and expertise" (Turnbull et al. 2006, p. 110). The basis of healthy partnerships includes collaborative relationships that benefit the child, the family, and the professional (Brotherson et al. 2010). Researchers have tried to identify which elements are the most important to partnerships (Dunst and Trivette 2010). The resulting traits, sometimes referred to as the "dimensions of partnerships" (Blue-Banning et al. 2004) often include respect, trust, reciprocity, open communication, equality, listening, and nonjudgment (Winton et al. 2008). But empathy has not been a major focus of investigation or discussion in partnerships. Healthy relationships between teachers and parents are a necessary precursor for family-school partnerships (Clarke et al. 2010). Therefore, engaging with and responding to the family's and child's needs with empathy may be an important aspect of partnerships and broader helpgiving practices. We can add to the existing knowledge base by understanding how 18 ECE teachers expressed empathy in their classrooms.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative constructivist design in which we gathered information from early childhood teachers to explore how they expressed empathy in their work with children and families. This study is grounded in a symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective. Fundamental to the symbolic interactionist perspective is the idea of "putting oneself in the place of the other" (Crotty 1998, p. 75). With its emphasis on seeing, from the perspective of the participants, their perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and interpreting their meaning, the symbolic interactionist perspective is appropriate for a study focused on empathy. The primary research question addressed in this study is: How do teachers express empathy in their relationships with young children and families?

The Research Team

We conducted this study as a collaborative research team. This study was part of a larger project focused on helping

teachers and parents work together to build skills related to self-determination. The team investigated how to support the foundations of self-determination through a partnership between ECE teachers and family members. The team included principal investigators and graduate students working at each of three universities. The team discussed data collection and analysis weekly via conference calls and individual research teams met at the three individual sites each week over a period of approximately 2 years. The research team collaboratively provided feedback and reflection in the collection, analysis and interpretation of data. Considering that qualitative researchers are the instruments of our research, it is important to understand the lens by which we collected and analyzed the data (Creswell 2013). The research team represented the perspectives of researchers, practitioners, parents of children with (and without) disabilities, and graduate students and included the disciplines of early childhood education, early childhood special education, human development and family studies, and elementary education.

Participants

Criterion and convenience sampling (Bloomberg and Volpe 2008) were used to recruit participants for the qualitative interviews with approval of Institutional Review Boards (IRB) at each of the three universities. Participants were invited to participate because they were early childhood professionals who, at the time of the interviews, were employed in inclusive preschool settings, serving young children between the ages of 3 and 5 years. Participants resided in five different states, one in the East and four in the Midwest who were employed in a variety of early childhood settings including urban, suburban, and rural locations. Flyers were e-mailed to administrators at preschools and childcare centers, who may have had a professional working relationship with one of the research team members. After receiving approval from administrators, the research team members were provided with names of teachers willing to participate in an interview. The sample for interviews included 18 teachers. Five of those teachers participated in a follow-up interview.

Participants were all female and ranged between 24 and 64 years of age. The majority of participants (15) identified themselves as Caucasian. However, one identified as African American, one as Puerto Rican and Caucasian, and one as Latina and Caucasian. Eleven of the teachers held master's level degrees, six held bachelor's degrees, and one was working toward an associate's degree. The preschools were a mix of both public and private schools offering full-day and half-day program options. Demographic information for participants is provided in Table 1. Most of the participants were preschool classroom teachers, although some were not. One participant was a kindergarten teacher and one was an assistant teacher who worked in multiple rooms within the preschool center. A couple of the participants had different roles within the early childhood classroom where they provided special education consulting services for preschool teachers who had children with special educational needs included in their classrooms. These teachers were itinerant and traveled to a variety of different classrooms each day.

The teachers served children with special educational needs (e.g., delays in speech and behavioral concerns to autism spectrum disorders). One criterion for the study during the initial interviews was that the teachers who were interviewed had at least one child with an established Individualized Education Program (IEP) or who was undergoing an evaluation for an IEP in their class. In both the initial interviews and follow-up interviews, the teachers discussed strategies and described situations that they used with all children and families, not only those they used with children who had disabilities and their families. Thus, for clarity, we discuss ECE in an inclusive sense and do not refer specifically to early childhood special education.

Interviews

Members of the research team conducted eighteen initial interviews over a period of approximately 2 years. The intent of the initial interviews was to gather more information about how teachers understood the foundations of self-determination and what strategies they were currently using in their classrooms. Research team members then contacted the potential participants, either by phone or e-mail, to schedule an interview. Interviews were conducted in person or by phone. Five interviews were conducted over the phone when a face-to-face interview was not possible because of distance or a schedule conflict. The participants were asked questions from an IRB-approved qualitative interview protocol, which included grand tour questions and follow-up probes such as, "Tell me about your classroom"; "How do your students manage their own behaviors and emotions?"; "What does a successful partnership with parents look like to you?"; and "What specifically do you do that helps to foster partnerships with parents?" The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min and were recorded and transcribed. Participants each were given an honorarium in the form of a $25 gift card at the end of the interview for their time. Each research team member completed an Interview Summary Sheet directly following each interview he or she conducted. The summary sheets included an overview of the main points of the interview, initial thoughts, analytic memos, and questions that arose during the interview. The summary sheets also were used as a guide during research team discussions on emerging data.

Table 1 Demographic information of teachers

Teacher	Age range	Ethnicity	Community size	Highest degree earned	Job title[a]	Teaching experience (years) Current job	Total	Program type (Private/public)	Class type (Full day/half day)	Children with IEP[b]
Katie	30–34	Caucasian	Small city	Masters	EC Consultant[c]	4	9	Both	Both	36
Jasmine	55–59	Caucasian	Urban area	Masters	ECSE inclusion facilitator[c]	13	13	Both	Both	15
Jade	60–64	Caucasian	Urban area	Masters	ECSE teacher[c]	2	22	Both	Both	29
Brenda	45–49	Caucasian	Urban area	Working toward associates	Teacher associate (floater)	3.5	25	Public	Full day	1
Blythe	24–29	Caucasian	Small city	Bachelor	Optional kindergarten teacher	4	4	Public	Half day[e]	1
Rosie[d]	24–29	Caucasian	Small city	Masters	Head teacher	2	3	Private	Full day	1
Esme	30–34	Caucasian	Urban area	Masters	ECSE teacher	1	8	Public	Half day[e]	17
Nora[d]	55–59	Caucasian	Urban area	Bachelors	ECSE teacher	6	8	Public	Half day[e]	17
Jaqueline	35–39	Caucasian	Urban area	Masters	Teacher	4.5	14	Public	Half day[e]	7
Raven	24–29	Caucasian	Urban area	Masters	ECSE teacher	7	7	Public	Half day[e]	7
Louisa	30–34	Latina, Caucasian	Urban area	Masters	ECSE teacher	6	6	Public	Half day[e]	15
Ella	35–39	Caucasian	Large city	Masters	Preschool teacher	4	4	Public	Half day[e]	0[f]
Paige	45–49	Caucasian	Urban area	Masters	Teacher	20	20	Private	Full day	1
Eva	24–29	Caucasian	Urban area	Masters	Preschool teacher	4	4	Public	Full day	5
Chelsea[d]	40–44	Caucasian	Urban area	Bachelors	Lead teacher	4	6	Public	Full day	2
Amelia	24–29	Puerto Rican	Small city	Bachelors	Teacher	6	6	Public	Full day	3
Nina[d]	30–34	Caucasian	Urban area	Bachelors	Lead teacher	4	11	Public	Full day	2
Brooke[d]	24–29	African American	Small city	Bachelors	Lead teacher	6	7	Public	Full day	1

Teachers' names are pseudonyms; all teachers are female

[a] Job title as described by teacher: *EC* early childhood, *ECSE* early childhood special education

[b] Total number of children with IEPs with whom the teacher works; *IEP* Individualized Education Program

[c] Teacher is itinerant

[d] Teachers who participated in follow-up interviews

[e] Half-day programs offer both AM and PM sessions

[f] Two children were undergoing evaluation for IEP services, 0 children had established IEPs at the time of interview

After reading and analyzing the transcripts of the initial interviews, five teachers from the initial interviews were included in follow-up interviews conducted by the first author. Four interviews were conducted over the telephone and one was conducted in person. Each interview lasted between 25 and 40 min. The five follow-up interviews were conducted with teachers who were identified through initial analysis as primarily empathic toward children and families. Sample grand tour questions included, "Tell me about your experiences with empathy for the children (and families) with whom you work." Follow up probes included, "What, specifically, has helped you to develop empathy for the children (and families) with whom you work?"

Data Analysis: The First Two Cycles of Analysis

After all 18 of the initial interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy, we conducted a first round of open or initial coding for the interviews, interview summary sheets, and meeting minutes from research team conference calls. Each interview transcription and interview summary sheet was printed and coded initially by hand. Later this information was transferred to an electronic codebook and updated continuously during analysis. The codebook contained the codes, brief descriptions of the codes, and exemplar quotes from the data as they emerged (Saldaña 2013). We simultaneously used a combination of attribute, descriptive, and in vivo coding techniques during the first cycle as an open-ended approach to coding.

Attribute coding was used at the beginning of data analysis to note basic descriptive information about participants which is useful in aiding data management for qualitative studies with multiple participants and locations. Descriptive codes were used to note the topics of discussion in the interviews. Short words or phrases were used to identify the topics of a passage of text and in vivo coding was used to note participants' own words (Saldaña 2013).

After initially coding all of the interviews, the areas of empathy and partnership emerged as salient categories. The coding process became more focused, and a second cycle of coding was conducted (Saldaña 2013). Pattern coding (Saldaña 2013) was used to help develop the conceptual and thematic organization of the data. We continued to refine and code the initial interview passages of transcribed text that related to the categories and subcategories of empathy and partnership. The preliminary codes were recoded, reorganized, and categorized within the electronic files to further develop a theoretical organization.

A Third Cycle of Analysis

In order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of empathy and partnership, working from the electronic codebook, electronic tables were developed for each of the 18 initial interviews. These tables included passages of text that were categorized by the emergent patterns of empathy or criticism. The statements were categorized on three main levels (child, family or cultural practices) to more clearly distinguish the referent of the teachers' statement (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). An example of how the participants' statements were categorized is provided in Table 2. Personal biases were bracketed out as part of reflexivity during the analysis process (Finlay 2002). From the three cycles of analysis one theme, *expressing sincere empathy,* and four corresponding subthemes emerged: *embrace inclusion as a philosophy, be relaxed and balanced, be responsive to culture*, and *engage in meaningful communication with families*.

Validation of Analysis

Various strategies were used to ensure trustworthiness and rigor of the study. These included triangulation, peer-debriefing, member checking, memo writing, and an audit trail. Triangulation of data was achieved by collecting information from multiple sources (e.g., transcripts, transcript summary sheets, meeting minutes, memos) (Glesne 2006). Peer debriefing happened regularly between research team members. We discussed the interviews, interpretations, and research progress during weekly conference calls and kept minutes. Coded interview summary sheets were reviewed to check interpretations. Additionally, an outside peer perspective (former ECE teacher) was brought to the research to help examine assumptions and thoughts about teachers' statements. Member checks were conducted with five participants to review and reflect on the initial analysis of the data and to ask participants to share further information regarding empathy. Researcher understanding of analysis was expanded through member checks with participants during follow-up interviews. Participants had a chance to explain, clarify, or make changes to what they said in their initial interviews at the beginning of the follow-up interviews. Expansion of their ideas and comments were included in the reporting of the findings. Analytic memo writing (Maxwell 2012) both formal and informal, was used to document and reflect on several aspects of the research process: researcher biases; the coding process and choices made throughout analysis; how the inquiry process changed and formed; and emerging patterns of codes, concepts, and themes in the data (Saldaña 2013). An audit trail was kept through the coding and

Table 2 Example of third cycle of analysis

2. Rosie		Exemplar
Empathy		*I want to do home visits before the beginning of the school year with all my kids. It was such a great time. It meant a lot to the families. It meant a lot to me. I think everyone was a little apprehensive at first. Pg. 8. [family].*
Child	✓	
Family	✓	
Culture	✓	
		Memo: empathy focused on **family perspective/feelings**- can tell home visits meant a lot to families. Also shows understanding that there may have been **feelings** of apprehension prior to home visits by families.
		[understanding that home visits may cause apprehension for families - but that in the end meant a lot to everyone - influences practice with children/families - she wants to do home visits with all families next year]
		We had a child at the beginning of the school year who had just moved here from China and that culture experience was a lot for her to take on. I think it was a lot for the whole family. Dad said, "What we do is we're with the child for the first three days of school. So we want to be here from beginning to end." You have to respect that because you want the child to be successful. But obviously it's something that they both needed. I think he ended up staying for like 5 days. It was working on the individual level of what everyone needs. Parents can always come for lunch or volunteer activities. Pg. 28. [child, family, culture]
		Memo: Teacher empathy on child, family, culture levels- shows **understanding** in child's and parent's experiences with new culture (**family circumstances, challenge of a new culture**); that respecting family culture is necessary for success of the child - but also for the parent. Shows consideration for needs of child and family.
		[**Empathy influences teacher's practices** in classroom- accepting family is for the success of the child]
Critical statements		None found

Elements in Table 2 include: teacher pseudonym; exemplar statements interpreted as either empathic or critical in nature; the corresponding level of the statement's referent; researcher memos (including synthesis statements and interpretations of the quote); and the initial emerging codes

analysis process by saving each day's electronic work (e.g., codebook, interview coding documents, memos). This kept track of changes made each day and showed not only how the analysis process was evolving, but also how the data transitioned from raw data to codes, categories, and then themes.

Limitations

There were a few limitations in this study including a lack of diversity among participants, the absence of observational data, and lack of validation from family members. Despite efforts to recruit participants with diverse characteristics, most practitioners in special education tend to be Caucasian and from a middle income socioeconomic status (Tyler et al. 2004) and this was evident in our participants. It is possible that participants of varying income status or ethnicities not represented in these findings may have other perspectives and experiences regarding empathy with families. The lack of observational data neglects the part of expressions of empathy in which nonverbal behaviors are displayed. A great deal of observational data could be gathered from witnessing a teacher interacting with children and families. Observing for nonverbal expressions of empathy in the classrooms would enrich and build upon this research. Similarly, the research lacks validation from family members to support the teachers' perceptions about partnership. The information here represents teachers' perceptions of their relationships, but data from parents could triangulate or refute the teachers' perceptions that they indeed had positive partnerships. However, the purpose of this research, as is the nature of qualitative research, was not to generalize the findings to other situations but to represent the perspectives of the participants involved in interviews.

Findings

To answer the question of how teachers expressed empathy, we examined and interpreted the language they used, behavior they described, and the values they expressed. The four sub-themes captured the unique behaviors and dispositions of how teachers conveyed sincere empathy and

the perceived meaning it held for their partnerships with parents and family members. Teachers discussed how they understood (or attempted to understand) and/or share the feelings of a child, family members, and/or their cultural practices. We also learned much about how teachers did not express empathy, but the focus of this analysis is on what teachers understand and *do* to express empathy.

Embrace Inclusion as a Philosophy

The teachers' philosophy was inclusion of all. This included children with disabilities, and children of diverse ethnic, socioeconomic, or family backgrounds. Teachers manifested sincere empathy by embracing and including everyone who came into their classrooms. Inclusion extended to parents, siblings, grandparents, teacher assistants, substitute teachers, building administrators, and all others who came to the classroom. Teachers tried to create a welcoming atmosphere for everyone and celebrated differences of all types. They created an overall sense of community in their classroom that extended beyond their classroom walls. They were nonjudgmental and were looking ahead to the children's future and wanted to prepare them for life beyond the classroom. Teachers were able to take the perspectives of the children, families, and community members and act in a way they perceived as welcoming to others. They felt it helped to build the partnerships with families and relationships with other staff and community members. One teacher spoke about her willingness to include the families and how it can build relationships. She said, "We accept the whole family. Anybody… It's also important to learn about their families. I know all of the siblings' names… to build that relationship and that rapport… it's about us working together." Another teacher stated,

> I think it also helps with our classroom structure that you have to be really empathetic to all the other people that come in our classroom… I let my co-teacher have a lot of involvement and feel like it's her room. She gets to structure things and have a lot of say. When our administrator comes in, we make sure to introduce her to the kids…if I'm helping other people feel like it's their classroom and feel like they have a say in it then I really feel like we have a community…

Be Relaxed and Balanced

Teachers who expressed sincere empathy were responsive to the needs of children and families in a relaxed and balanced manner. They shared personal stories of their own parenting experiences to help bring down the professional barriers. Teachers thought those acts contributed to families' trust in them and therefore thought families were more willing to partner with them. Being relaxed and balanced meant that there was an ease to partnerships with teachers often taking a "live-and-let-live approach." Teachers felt connected to their families and perceived that parents felt understood by them. This was evident in their approach to partnership and in how they tried to meet the needs of both the children and family members. Many teachers felt their role was primarily to listen to parents; they relaxed their impulse to try and solve problems for families and offered advice only when asked. They treated parents as capable decision makers who knew their child's strengths and needs but may also desire support at times. When parents asked for suggestions, teachers were happy to problem solve and discuss the strategies that were tried in the classroom. The key, however, was listening. As one teacher indicated,

> Listen more than you talk…as a teacher, whether working with students or the parents, just being an open ear and being able to listen to them and see what their needs and concerns are…listen to them first before you even say anything.

Teachers also tried to balance being seen strictly as a professional by bringing elements of friendship into the relationship with parents. Some teachers thought that an overly professional attitude was a deterrent to some families and that it made them seem unapproachable and intimidating. Some teachers balanced the professional role by offering home phone numbers in the hope that parents would see how invested they are in building relationships—both with children and with families. Another teacher described the importance of being relaxed about meeting times or scheduling activities, saying that it built relationships. She said,

> The more you can include parents in the activities and experiences that their child is having, the better. And if it has to be things that happen at night, or if you have to make accommodations for working families, then it pays to do so because the reward of the relationship that you have in the end is so great.

Accept and Respond to Family Culture

Teachers who expressed sincere empathy were also accepting of and responsive to a family's culture. This meant that teachers incorporated families' cultural practices and ideas into learning experiences and were able to then share the feelings of the family members. Teachers shared the joy and the pride families described when they were able to express their cultural practices in their

children's classrooms. Sharing these feelings built relationships between parents and teachers. Teachers perceived that parents would be more likely to trust them with personal information and partner with them again in the future, not only around positive feedback about their children, but also that parents would open up to them about problems their child was having at home or at school. With this perception of a trusting relationship, teachers and parents would work together to find ways to help the child or family. The following quote describes a project a teacher did with her students and the response she received when she welcomed and incorporated a family's cultural tradition into the class. It is also an exemplar of empathic happiness on the part of the teacher whereby she describes her joy in sharing the feelings of the family.

> This is one of the best years for me because we actually did another holiday which I've never had. We did Ramadan. The parents were absolutely, I can't even tell you how prideful, how happy they were that their culture was being expressed. One of my children's father just said to me today, 'I can't even thank you enough,' he said, 'to tell you how much it means… because I want [my son] to learn that there is a whole world out there and yet still remain in that cultural background that we have.' So, we did Ramadan, which bases itself around the phases of the moon because it's a whole month-long Muslim holiday. We did an art project of each of the phases of the moon on beautiful black poster board with a gold paint and then we drew the moon with chalk… and then after that we painted the different crescents as it gets bigger up until the full moon with gold paint. So it really stuck out and we hung it around the room.

Engage in Meaningful Communication with Families

Empathic teachers used many different methods to communicate with families. They used e-mail, wrote newsletters, made phone calls, wrote handwritten notes, and spoke with parents—in-person, before and after school. Teachers who were engaging in meaningful communication with families also described more success in their partnerships and improved the quality of their communications with families.

One of the most powerful methods of meaningful communication that informed teachers' empathy was going on a home visit. It provided information about the child, the family, the dynamics, and cultural practices that personalized the experience for the teachers in a way that no other form of communication could. Communication with families in a meaningful way, particularly in the form of the

home visit, informed teachers' empathic responses to children and families in the classroom. It also allowed the families to see the teacher outside of the classroom and begin a relationship in a less formal way. In many cases, it was the first step in parents trusting the teachers and building partnerships with the child and the family.

Discussion

The findings presented highlight the need for empathy in the early childhood classroom. Teachers who made empathic statements reported more successful partnerships with parents and a finely attuned understanding of the behavior of children in their classrooms. Their ability to make empathic inferences about how children and families felt was a powerful tool to inform the way they responded to meet the needs of children and families. Empathy enabled teachers to understand, to feel, to communicate with, and to respond to the needs of the children and families with whom they work.

Empathy is a trait and skill necessary for teachers working with children and for partnering with families. As Goleman (1995) stated, "For all rapport, the root of caring, stems from emotional attunement, from the capacity for empathy" (p. 96). Teachers who expressed sincere empathy and who also characterized their relationships with families described their relationships as positive. Empathy was the key factor between teachers who made critical comments and those who were sincerely empathic. Certainly, there are other factors at play in these family member/parent–teacher partnerships in addition to the critical statements teachers made regarding families. Time in the daily schedule, teachers feeling overworked, and parents working outside of the home are just a few possibilities that may negatively affect a parent–teacher partnership. Empathy seems to be one piece of the partnership puzzle.

Empathy: Important for Practices Inclusive of Diversity

Teachers who made empathic statements held a strengths view of children, families, and diverse cultural practices and did not express judgment toward or about them. Teachers valued diversity, in its many forms—ability, cultural, and socioeconomic—within their classrooms and perceived themselves as trying to support it. This echoes research on teacher empathy and diversity (McAllister and Irvine 2002), which has indicated that empathy is a necessary, albeit not sufficient, trait needed in working with students from culturally diverse backgrounds. Empathy helped teachers in this study to foster inclusive practices supportive of diversity and allowed teachers to better

understand behavior, cultural practices of children and families from diverse backgrounds, and experiences of children of varying abilities and socioeconomic statuses.

Although the teachers in this study identified predominantly as Caucasian, children and families in their classrooms are increasingly diverse. Calloway-Thomas (2010) considers empathy "the crucible of intercultural relations" (p. 7). As the field of early childhood moves forward, teachers will need to have the ability to not only share and understand the feelings and experiences of children, their families, and their cultural practices, they also will need to be able to communicate their understanding to them. They also will need to be able to respond in a way to help meet the needs of children, families, and their cultural practices, some of which may be quite different from theirs. As we explored in the findings, teachers who were sincerely empathic described a greater ability to do this than did teachers whose criticism distorted their empathy.

Strengths View and Relational Help-Giving Practices

Teachers who made empathic statements took a strengths-based view (as opposed to a deficit view) of children, families, and their cultural practices. This was crucial to building relationships with children and families. Not only were teachers who were sincerely empathic able to empathize with distress and help mitigate stressful situations children and families were experiencing, these teachers also were able to engage in positive empathy and share in the joyful experiences. The use of empathy can help teachers foster a strengths view of children, families, and cultures instead of perpetuating a deficit view and focusing on what is perceived to be lacking within the child, family, and/or culture.

Empathy allowed teachers to build a foundation of emotional stability and safety that enabled relationships with children and partnerships with parents to flourish. Judgment, along with a lack of empathy, was a barrier to partnerships for teachers whose criticism distorted their empathy. Research by Brotherson et al. (2010) regarding partnership patterns of professionals and families in early intervention home visiting indicated that professionals often felt they were not well trained to support families' emotional or other complex needs. One possible way that teacher-educators can help support teachers is to provide in-service and preservice support regarding empathy. Keeping Katz's (1972) developmental stages of teaching and her model of training and support needs in mind would be useful as a guide in this work.

Helping teachers understand the feelings and experiences of children and families who may be different from them may help teachers feel more prepared to work with children and families of increasingly diverse backgrounds,

with increasingly diverse and complex needs. Additionally, including the element of response, or ways that teachers could help meet the needs of children and their families, is critically important for the success of the child within the classroom. Teachers are not trained as social workers and we are not advocating that they necessarily should be. However, having a working knowledge of other community service agencies to which teachers could go for support and/or to refer families may help children and families to become better connected within the community and may also reinforce the connections between schools and the local community.

Empathy is not a magic wand, but it is an incredibly important piece necessary in interactions between teachers and children, teachers and parents/family members, and among children. Empathy is crucial and must be fostered in preservice and in-service professional development for teachers. There are potential implications for professional satisfaction for teachers and for training on empathy, which we describe in the following sections.

Empathy and Professional Satisfaction

One factor that leads to professional burnout is empathy fatigue. The numbers of public school teachers who have left the teaching profession has increased over the past few decades (NCES, 2011). In the 1988–1989 school year, 6 % of public school teachers (or 132,000 teachers) left the profession, compared to 8 % (or 270,000) public school teachers who left the profession in 2008–2009 (NCES, 2011). In the 2008–2009 school year, 12 % of the teachers who left the profession were new teachers who had taught for 3 years or less; 11 % of the teachers who left the profession had taught for 20 or more years. The NCES report does not indicate why teachers chose to leave the profession; however, one possibility is that teachers may have experienced some degree of empathy fatigue or burnout.

Compared with other helping professionals, teachers not only experience empathy fatigue or burnout, but they also tend to do so more easily (De Heus and Diekstra 1999). There are many possible reasons teachers may burnout more easily compared with other helping professionals, but part of it could be attributed to the lack of preparation teachers receive in certain areas. Teacher preparation does not often focus on preparing teachers for the possibility of burnout and does not focus on the promotion of self-care or coping skills.

Helping teachers to cultivate empathy beginning in the preservice years could be one way to help teachers increase job satisfaction and potentially remain in the teaching profession longer. Larson and Yao (2005), for example, argued that empathy has become a "critical component"

(p. 1104) in the patient–physician relationship. They also asserted that physicians who engage in the process of empathy with their patients experience more professional satisfaction. Perhaps teachers engaging in empathy with children, families, and the families' cultural practices would yield a similar result in terms of professional satisfaction. With a threat of empathy fatigue along with other stressors leading to professional burnout, it is important for teachers to maintain boundaries for their own well-being while still preserving empathic responses and the ability to build partnerships with parents and family members and to prepare preservice teachers to learn skills for creating professional boundaries and self-care.

Empathy Training

Although most of the teachers we interviewed during follow-up interviews thought that empathy was a part of their nature, a few wondered if empathy could be taught. According to Decety and Jackson (2004), empathy is hardwired in our brains and, through interactions with others, it develops. Researchers believe that empathy can be learned and that it is possible to train or enhance empathy (Feshbach and Feshbach 2009). Decety and Jackson described empathy as "a flexible human capacity as well as a method of gaining knowledge of understanding another, and it is susceptible to social-cognitive intervention" (p. 94). They indicated that empathy training or enhancement could be beneficial for training young children who are at risk. Gerdes and Segal (2011) echoed Decety and Jackson and stated: "Empathy can be taught, increased, refined, and mediated to make helping professionals more skillful and resilient…making them less vulnerable to becoming overwhelmed, burnt out, or dysfunctionally enmeshed with clients" (p. 143).

As the composition of classrooms becomes increasingly diverse, we assert that this type of training will become increasingly more important. Empathy, as one piece of a larger partnership puzzle, can enable the understanding of different perspectives, assist in resolving differences in a respectful way, and is an important example to set and foster for young children in ECE. We need a renewed focus on empathy in ECE teacher preparation programs. A focus on empathy in the context of ECE may increase teachers' own empathic awareness, and learning how to maintain empathy without reaching empathy fatigue or burnout may benefit not only teachers but also the children and families with whom they work.

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