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The Power of Empathy:  
A Critical Narrative Inquiry of Cultural Competencies in New Teachers

by

Marcus K. Hughes, Sr.

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,  
Loyola Marymount University,  
in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

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I want to thank my mother who taught me how to love and to dream without limitations,

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES .....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES .....</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE: Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
The Problem .....	3
Research Questions .....	9
Purpose and Significance .....	9
Theoretical Framework .....	11
Humanization .....	11
Democracy .....	11
Liberation .....	12
Equity .....	12
Power .....	13
Conscientization .....	13
Dialogue .....	14
A Critical Reading of Empathy .....	14
Methodology .....	16
Limitations .....	18
Definition of Terms .....	18
Organization of Study .....	
<b>CHAPTER TWO: Schooling, Empathy, and Cultural Competency:.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>A Review of the Literature .....</b>	
Schooling and Low-Income Students of Color .....	21
Student-School Relationships .....	23
Teacher-Student Relationships .....	24
Students of Color in California .....	25
Latino Students .....	26
African American Students .....	26
Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Students .....	27
National Teacher Workforce .....	28
California's Teacher Workforce .....	30
New Teachers: The Millennial Teaching Force .....	31
Management and Instruction .....	32
Self-Image .....	33
Cultural Competency .....	34
Empathy .....	37
Attributes of Ethno-Cultural Empathy .....	41

Empathy Development.....	43
Conclusion .....	45
<b>CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>48</b>
Research Questions.....	48
Qualitative Methods.....	49
Focus Groups .....	51
The Narrative Process .....	52
Research Design.....	52
Participants.....	53
Research Collection Process .....	54
Introductory Focus Group.....	54
Personal Narratives .....	54
Culminating Focus Group.....	56
Analysis of Data.....	56
Limitations.....	57
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: Teacher Narratives and Major Themes .....</b>	<b>58</b>
Teachers' Stories about Empathy .....	58
Helen Snow .....	58
Kevin Adams .....	63
Wendy Lewis .....	72
Jerry Pass .....	79
Natalie Gonzalez.....	85
Major Themes .....	90
Empathy in the Teacher-Student Relationships.....	90
Empathy Versus Sympathy.....	93
Empathy and Content.....	94
Empathy and Cultural Competency .....	97
Empathy and Trauma.....	101
Empathy Limits.....	103
Summary .....	104
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: Analysis and Recommendations.....</b>	<b>105</b>
Ethno-Cultural Empathy and Critical Pedagogy.....	106
Acceptance of Cultural Differences.....	107
Empathetic Awareness.....	109
Perspective Taking.....	111
Empathetic Action .....	113
Further Suggestions for Study .....	116
Empathy Formation Recommendations.....	117
Critical Empathy Development.....	118
Self-Awareness .....	119
Managing Administrative Responsibilities.....	121

Self-Care Strategies .....	122
Epilogue .....	124
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
A: Interest Survey Email.....	127
B: Interest Survey .....	128
C: Focus Group Questions .....	129
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>132</b>



## LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1 California Ethnic Distribution of Public School Students: 2014–2015 .....	25
(Education Trust-West, 2010a)	
Table 2.2 California Ethnic Distribution of Public School Teachers, 2014–2015 .....	30
Table 2.3 Key Attributes of Empathy Based on Discipline.....	41
Table 3.1 Los Angeles K-12 Student Population by Race and Ethnicity .....	53

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1. Actual and projected public elementary and secondary school enrollment .....	4
Figure 1.2. United States K–12 teachers by race and ethnicity 1986–2011 .....	5
Figure 5.1. Overlap between ethno-cultural empathy and critical pedagogy .....	107
Figure 5.2. Proposed theoretical framework for Critical Empathy.....	115

The Power of Empathy:  
A Critical Narrative Inquiry of Cultural Competencies in New Teachers

by

Marcus K. Hughes, Sr

Given the large homogeneous workforce of predominately White, middle-class female K–12 educators combined with the rising population of diverse students in the United States and the disproportionate achievement gap of students of color compared to their White peers, I sought to discover how new millennial educators defined and used empathy to build their own cultural competencies as well as discover how these teachers used empathy to strengthen the teacher-student relationships across cultural differences. Using the conceptual frameworks of Paulo Freire’s (1970) pedagogy and Wang et al.’s (2003) definition of ethno-cultural empathy, I conducted a critical narrative inquiry of five first-year teachers who did not share the racial or ethnic background of the majority of their students of color. From the participants’ stories, six major themes surfaced: (a) the role of empathy in the teacher-student relationships, (b) the struggle between empathy and sympathy, (c) their contrasting views on empathy and content, (d) the relationship between empathy and cultural competency, (e) the importance of empathy

related to trauma, and (f) the personal limitations of empathy. I present a proposal for a new theoretical framework resulting from the symbiotic relationship of ethno-cultural empathy and critical pedagogy, called *Critical Empathy*, as well as recommendations for teacher formation institutions to prioritize an empathy formation that focuses on critical empathy development, self-awareness, administrative management, and self-care strategies.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Growing up as a young African American male in South Central Los Angeles in the early 1990s was anything but easy. Few pathways to opportunity existed for children like me. The local schools were under resourced. Gangs were a constant nuisance. Poverty was a lived reality. This led me to have mixed emotions about my own community growing up. On one hand, it fueled a sense of cultural identity within me. On the other, I was constantly reminded of poverty's limitations to equip me with what I needed to pursue my dreams. Regardless of the challenging circumstances, it was my mother who stressed education as a means to social mobility. To and through college was my goal from an early age. It was in the public schools of Los Angeles that I pursued this goal and also discovered my love for learning.

When I was 12, something happened that changed my life: my mother sent me to a magnet school in another community instead of the local middle school in our neighborhood. It was at this point where the opportunity gap between my neighborhood friends and I took form.

So, what was wrong with my neighborhood school? It's actually the same problems plaguing many communities today: an apathetic and unruly school culture created by systematic neglect perpetuated by limited resources, ineffective leadership, and disconnected teachers.

This move further exacerbated my cultural identity crisis as I began dreaming of "getting out" of my neighborhood. Education became my gateway to fulfilling that goal. Ironically, the gateway of education that once allowed me to leave my community is also what eventually fueled my return. It was through education that I learned that we should no longer strive to escape our neighborhoods, but rather to understand that we need leaders to reinvest into our

communities by building from the assets that are already present. This liberating idea of being a leader fueled me. Hence, I wanted to be like the teachers who had supported me through my journey. I still can recall my favorite teachers. Mrs. Redway, an African American woman, who helped me discover my passion for math and a love for the arts. Ms. Ricks, an older White woman, who was an amazing teacher with a witty sense of humor who created an environment of love and high expectations. As a student, I felt like both of these teachers knew me and saw my potential. Conversely, I did not want to be like those teachers who were disconnected from us as students. I have vivid memories of teachers who consistently said and did things that were culturally unresponsive or misguided. I remember being teased by teachers for my street vernacular. As a gift given to me from one of my White middle school teachers, I received a compact disc of music full of sexual undertones and inappropriate language. I can only assume it was her attempt to culturally connect with her urban students and their music. I can also recall being in classes where the teachers' expectations were so low that rote memorization of facts was all that was required to earn an easy A.

Upon graduating from Morehouse College, I joined Teach for America, where I worked as a 5th-grade teacher in downtown Atlanta. I remained in the classroom for six years. As a teacher, I learned quickly that culture is dynamic and evolving. Even though I shared the background of my students, this did not make relationship building automatic. Growing up as an African American child in Los Angeles is a culturally different experience than growing up in the inner city of Atlanta. I had to invest time and energy into understanding the wants and needs of my students and their families. I had to recognize their particular histories and the impact of regional politics on their lives and their community.

During my tenure as a teacher, I was simultaneously building a nonprofit organization that empowered and mentored urban youth. As the executive director, I worked with a team, mentoring hundreds of kids, helping many of them gain access to college and career trades. I eventually left the classroom to serve full-time in a ministerial role for several years at the local church affiliated with our mentorship organization before returning to a career in formal education.

All of these experiences helped me become successful in my current educational leadership role. As a teacher development coach for first and second year PK–12 educators in Los Angeles, I have seen firsthand how issues of race and class can impact the teacher-student relationship dynamics. Since many of these teachers do not share the same backgrounds as their students, I often share with them what I have learned; which is that you cannot teach what you do not know and you cannot teach who you do not know. What I have seen in Los Angeles is in many ways a microcosm of what is going on in schools across our country: an absence of empathy for students with whom teachers share little history or experience.

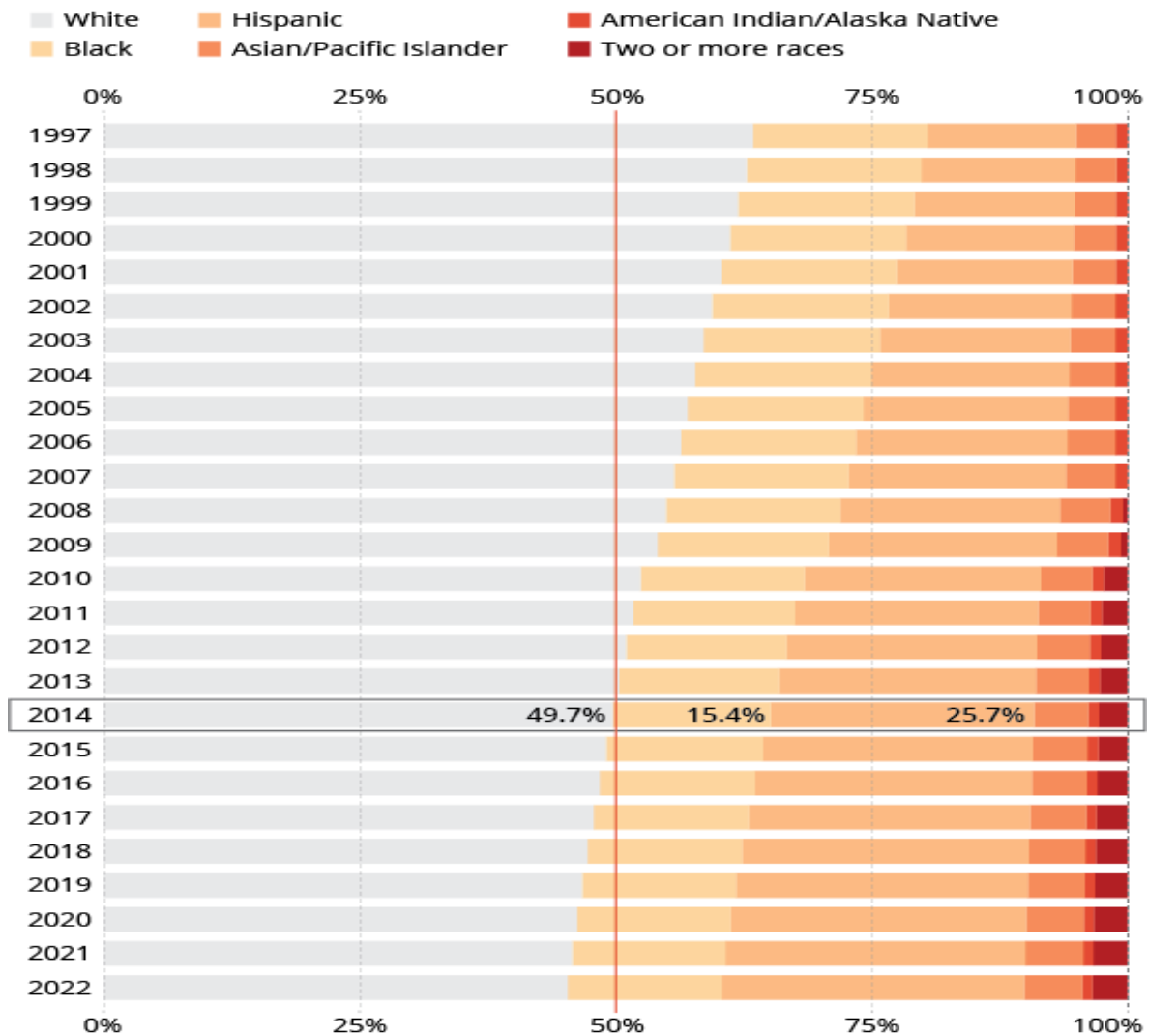
### **The Problem**

There are two groups of students to consider when discussing the impact of race, culture, socio-economic class, and achievement: students currently living in the United States who are not achieving and those whose arrival is anticipated. With an estimated projection of over 50% of the student population being students of color in American public schools by 2020, and a distinctly contrasting teacher labor force that is predominately comprised of White, middle-class females, the research suggests that many of these teachers are simply ill prepared to deal with the growing diverse student populations (Coston, 2010; Hinojosa & Moras, 2009). Klein (2014)

depicted the current racial landscape of both students and teachers in the United States (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2).

## This Is The First Year Most Public School Students Are Minorities

Actual and projected public elementary and secondary school enrollment, by race/ethnicity, 1997 to 2022



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

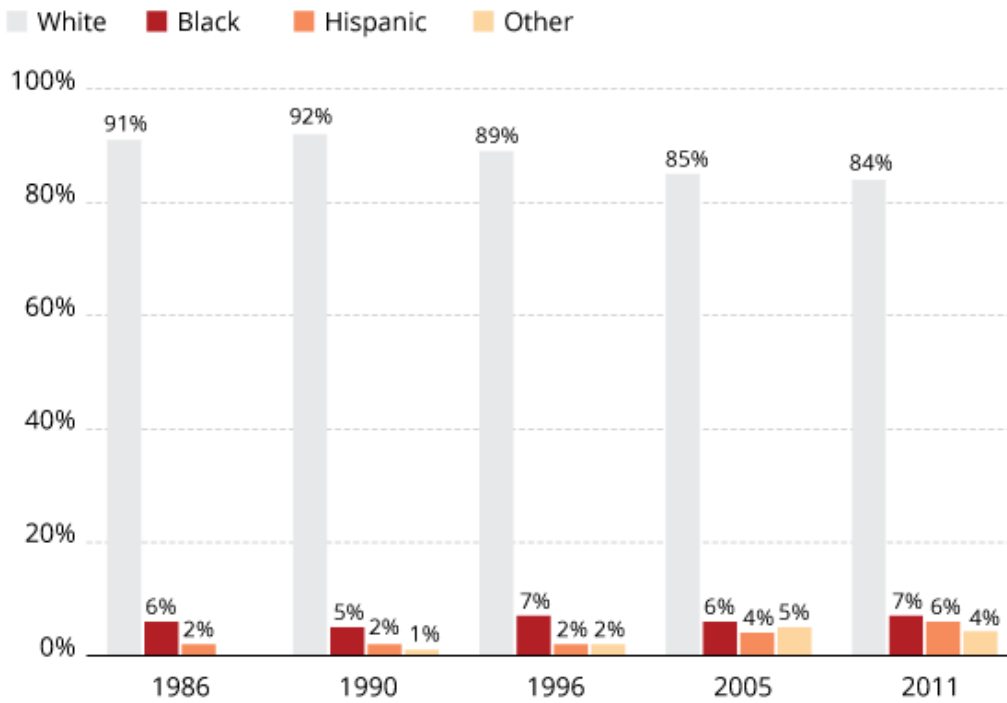
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Figure 1.1. Actual and projected public elementary and secondary school enrollment.



# Teacher Demographics Are Shifting More Slowly Than Student Demographics

K-12 teachers by race/ethnicity, 1986-2011\*



\*Totals may not add to 100 due to rounding

Source: National Center for Education Information

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Figure 1.2. United States K-12 teachers by race and ethnicity 1986-2011.

At present, a largely homogeneous teaching force serves students with a variety of ethnic, linguistic, cultural, racial, and socioeconomic differences. To compound the problem, many White teachers come from White neighborhoods and attend predominately White colleges for their teacher education. Most teacher education programs do not adequately address the racial challenges that surface between students of color and White teachers (Adkison-Bradley, Johnson, Rawls, & Plunkett, 2006). Moreover, there is little understanding of the bicultural

process that students of color experience—hence a lack of empathy exists around this phenomenon (Darder 2012). Darder (2012) argued:

Given the impact of racism in the classroom, students of color who struggle with the process of integration into the mainstream can also experience a lack of acceptance and empathy from their teachers. From this standpoint, we can come to understand that when many students drop out of school, it is actually a completely logical and necessary decision, given the negative impact of the schooling context upon the emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual aspects of their lives. (p. 77)

Hence, the absence of a diverse workforce, the lack of adequate preparation, and the realities of a growing diverse student population have produced some complex challenges that require our attention.

In 2009, the National Opportunity to Learn Campaign run by the Schott Foundation for Public Education (SFPE) examined this issue using a metric it labeled “Opportunity to Learn.” The “Opportunity to Learn” metric comprises four components: high quality early childhood education; highly qualified teachers and instructors in grades K–12; college preparatory curricula that prepares all youth for college, work, and community; and equitable instructional resources (SFPE, 2009). In May 2009, the foundation reported that students from historically subordinate cultural groups (i.e., Black, Native American, Latino, and students in poverty) nationwide have only a 51% Opportunity to Learn compared to White students (Rychly & Graves, 2012; SFPE, 2009).

Meeting the demands of growing number of diverse students in this country should be the goal for new teachers. However, traditional and nontraditional teacher preparation programs are

lacking targeted development of cultural competency. Research suggests that the cultural competencies of teachers directly impact student achievement. Boykin and Bailey (2000) showed that African American students' chances of school achievement increase when they—like their non-African American schoolmates—experience education with teachers who understand their sociocultural knowledge and take into account cultural factors when designing, implementing, and evaluating instruction. According to this research, such teachers maintain high standards and expectations for students' social, behavioral, and academic competence, and they tend to create more caring and supportive learning environments that promote students' cultural identities and encourage high academic performance (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). Moreover, notwithstanding the implications for poor achievement outcomes when teachers fail to connect students' culture to schooling, the risk for teacher referral for special education services increases (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999).

However, many teachers feel ill equipped to do just that, as many White teachers feel inadequately prepared to effectively teach students of color (Bollin & Finkel, 1995; Henze, Lucas, & Scott, 1998; King, 2000; Lawrence, 1997; McIntyre, 1997). Recent data suggest the gap persists in spite of improved attention to the multicultural education of teachers and in spite of more culturally inclusive and responsive curricular materials and instructional recommendations (Cunha, 2011). In her study, Cunha illustrated how America's high-stakes testing climate creates a pedagogy that is in contradiction to multicultural education. Cunha's research highlights the teacher-centric and mono-cultural practices that are customary at these schools.

The development of cultural competencies is a process. Taylor (2013) has explained that the development of an educator's cultural competency is a gradual and complex process because it requires an individual to examine his or her own ethnic identity, as well as to become more aware of the cultural background, values, and behaviors of others. An important aspect of developing cultural competence is the ability to empathize with others' experiences (Darder, 2012; Duan & Hill, 1996; Head, 2012). Moreover, empathy appears to be an important catalyst that can assist teachers with building their cultural competencies as well as lead them toward building stronger teacher-student relationships.

The literature clearly shows that empathy is a difficult concept to measure and therefore is not easily defined (Gerdes, Jackson, Mullins, & Segal, 2011; Phillips, 2003). Additionally, empathy is embedded in a variety of descriptions of self-processes. For example, Ridette-Moore observed that empathy "is never static and stable but always relational and dynamic" (p. 3). Phillips (2003) stated that "one of the best discoveries (and conversely the most maddening aspect) of my search for a definition to empathy is that there is no universal meaning of empathy that works for every situation" (p. 46). Further, Gerdes et al. have stated that empathy has "not always been well-articulated as a communicable and teachable concept" (p. 109).

To compensate for the difficulty associated with defining empathy, one definition of empathy was employed as part of the guiding framework for this study. Duan and Hill (1996) identified research regarding empathy as a situation-specific, cognitive-affective state. Much of the research on empathy, moreover, has focused on the construct as being one that can be altered in individuals (Batson, Turk, Shaw, & Klein, 1995). Empathy has also been viewed as an ability that can be manipulated so as to lead to increased valuing of other people's welfare as well as a

source of attitude change toward people from groups that experience oppression (Batson et al., 1995; Batson et al., 1997; Wang et al., 2003). Empathy, therefore, is the act of perceiving, understanding, experiencing, and responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person (Gerdes et al., 2011).

### **Research Questions**

In an effort to understand the power of empathy in enhancing the cultural competence of new teachers, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do new teachers define empathy and what do they believe can influence its development in teachers?
2. In what ways do new teachers consider empathy important to building their cultural competencies in the classroom?
3. In what specific ways do new teachers use empathy in their interactions with students of color to build strong teacher-student relationships?

### **Purpose and Significance**

This study is based on the notion that students' success is heavily dependent on the emotional qualities and cultural competencies of their teachers, expressed through a sense of empathy with their students. It is founded on a premise built on the following assumptions: (a) Good teachers understand and empathize with their students and, thus, build strong relationships with their pupils. (b) Empathy is a trait that can be developed and a trait that good teachers cultivate. (c) The cultural competencies and empathetic awareness of new teachers is influenced by their lived experiences and can be developed over the course of their professional development.

This study is based on the notion that students' success is heavily dependent on the emotional qualities and cultural competencies of their teachers as expressed through a sense of empathy with their students. This premise was built on the following assumptions: (a) Good teachers understand and empathize with their students and, thus, build strong relationships with their pupils. (b) Empathy is a trait that can be developed and a trait that good teachers cultivate. (c) The cultural competencies and empathetic awareness of new teachers is influenced by their lived experiences and can be developed over the course of their professional development.

This project has a three-part purpose. The first is to understand how teachers define empathy and its significance to building strong relationships with students of color. The second is to understand how teachers utilize empathy to build their own cultural competency. The third is to identify ways in which teachers utilize empathy in their relationship with students of color.

This research seeks to contribute to our knowledge of the utility of empathy within the confines of the teacher-student relationship as well as to lay the foundation for further research on topics of empathy and teacher preparation. Further research topics that may surface from this project could include how the topic of empathy was used/discussed/integrated in teacher preparation programs? Are there actually differences in empathy? Should we consider empathy a more important competency in teacher preparation? This research will help us to better understand the importance empathy plays in bridging the relational gaps between teachers and students of different backgrounds.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study employs Paulo Freire's (1970) critical education philosophy to both define a successful educational experience for students, as well as, underscore the cultural competency and empathetic expectations for educators. Based on his view, education must hold an emancipatory purpose and acknowledge schooling as a political process. More specifically, Freire's pedagogical approach is rooted in the characteristics of humanization, democracy, liberation, equity, power, conscientization, and dialogue.

### **Humanization**

Freire believed a liberatory education could never be conceived without a profound commitment to our humanity (Darder, 1998), which is the path through which men and women can become conscious about their presence in the world. Freire believed that if we were to solve the educational difficulties of students from oppressed communities, then educators had to look beyond the personal. "We had to look for answers within the historical realm of economic, social, and political forms, so that we might better understand those forces that give rise to our humanity, as it currently exists" (Darder, 2002, p. 35). A humanizing education also serves as the path through which both teachers and students can become conscious about their presence as cultural beings and subjects of history in the world. The ways they act and think as cultural subjects in the classroom and their lives must also help them to take into consideration the needs and aspirations of others (Freire, 1970).

### **Democracy**

A democratic education is one in which students' voices, interests, and ideas are considered an integral part of the learning process. Students engaging in a critical education inspired by Freire's ideas will find themselves operating within a learning environment that

supports a culturally democratic context. Such a context works to provide a more socially equitable educational opportunity for all students, including working class students of color who generally enjoy few opportunities (Darder, 1998). A culturally democratic classroom is one in which the cultures of all its students are integrated into the classroom culture, instead of students being ask to assimilate to a prescribed dominant culture, while expected to leave their bicultural sensibilities and cultural knowledge at the door (Darder, 2012).

### **Liberation**

The concept of liberation, as Darder (2011) has explained, highlights an educational process that embraces an emancipatory purpose and acknowledges schooling as a political process. A key to this perspective is the recognition of the contextual relationship that exists between the cultural politics and economic forces in society and the structure of schools. Therefore, as Freire posited, a liberatory education can never be conceived without a profound commitment to our humanity and faith in the capacity of the students and their communities to shape their own destinies (Darder, 1998).

### **Equity**

The notion of equity demands that all students, not just those from affluent and dominant cultures, have access to a quality education. Important to this topic is the manner in which the dominant school culture functions to support the interests and values of the dominant society while marginalizing and invalidating the knowledge and experiences significant to oppressed communities. Darder (2012) has argued that an overarching philosophical assumption that undergirds the ideology of public schooling today is the unbridled but veiled acceptance of Darwinian conclusions related to the belief in the “survival of the fittest.” This hegemonic view



is veiled in the false benevolence at work in justifications of standardized testing, tracking, and the competitive and instrumentalizing curricular practices found within classrooms today. In addition, this paradigm functions—wittingly or unwittingly—to perpetuate deficit notions of students of color as inherently less fit than their White counterparts (Darder, 2012).

### **Power**

Power is a central concern of Freire and a critical pedagogical perspective in that this view embraces knowledge as both historical and dialectical in nature, perpetuated through a dominant cultural regime of power and politics. As such, a critical educational perspective is informed by an unwavering commitment to the empowerment of the powerless and the transformation of existing social inequities and injustices (McLaren, 1988).

### **Conscientization**

Freire's philosophy and that of other critical education theorists (Darder, 1998, 2012; Giroux, Freire, & McLaren, 1988; hooks, 1994) incorporate the view that teachers need to understand how the dominant worldview and its social practices are produced throughout society in order to shatter the mystification of the existing power relationships and commonsensical social arrangements that sustain them (Gramsci, 1971). Thus, conscientization incorporates an understanding of critical discourse as a means of building social consciousness, which undoubtedly shapes the overall structure and relationships of classroom life. For Freire, as Darder (2012) has written, "conscientization refers to the process by which students—not as recipients of knowledge, but as knowing subjects—achieve a deepening awareness of the sociopolitical and economic realities that shape their lives and their capacity to re-create them" (p. 96).

## **Dialogue**

Freire (1970) viewed dialogue in opposition to the “banking” concept of education, wherein the teacher produces knowledge that is deposited into students to “receive, file and store” (p. 72). Instead, he described the educational process as an encounter in which the reflection and action of the dialoguers address their world in transformational and humanizing ways. Therefore, dialogue is the critical process of communication, teaching, and learning that is committed to the empowerment of students through challenging the dominant educational discourse.

The act of dialogue affirms both the students’ voices and their lived experiences and underscores their importance in the learning process. Darder (2012) asserted that an integral component of student voice is the development of a critical process by which students learn to share their lived experiences in order to integrate themselves as complete beings. She further stated that “by recognizing the truths embedded in their personal reflections and the substances of their everyday lives...[students] awaken their bicultural voice” (p. 63).

### **A Critical Reading of Empathy**

Based on Freire’s (1970) perspective, the educational experience that critical educators seek for all students must include:

1. *Empowerment*: Creating the conditions that reposition students as subjects in the creation of knowledge.

2. *Authentic Caring*: Treating students as integral human beings.

3. *Social Justice Content*: Teaching content that directly counters racism and racist stereotypes as well as other structures of inequality through epistemological contextualization of the students' social, economic, and cultural realities.

A critical education then encompasses an unwavering commitment to the empowerment of the powerless and the transformation of existing social inequities and injustices (McLaren, 1988). Hence, empathy must be discussed and understood critically; that is, beyond simply a psychological construct. Just as Freire's critical theoretical lens recognizes the inherent relationship between culture and power (Darder, 2012, 2015), a critical notion of empathy provides a more complex reading of this phenomenon. This notion highlights the manner in which cultural differences may affect the ways teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds define, express, and enact empathy (Rychly & Graves, 2012). That said, the critical perspective sought here is meant to lead to a culturally democratic classroom that can provide all students with a more socially equitable educational opportunity, regardless of race and socio-economic status.

Moreover, Rychly and Graves (2012) have found a correlation between empathy and cultural competency. In addition to caring about students, empathetic teachers must be reflective about their beliefs about people from other cultures, reflective of their own cultural frames of reference, and intentionally develop their own knowledge about other cultures. Based on the work mostly by Geneva Gay (2002) and Wang et al. (2003), I will also employ the definition of ethno-cultural empathy as the primary lens to investigate the use of empathy by teachers in their interactions with students. Ethno-cultural empathy speaks to one's ability to empathize with the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of students from different cultural backgrounds. Further, this

perspective is consistent with both Freire's humanizing approach and Darder's (2015) insistence that:

In the process of teaching and learning, it is impossible to express love and respect for students without our willingness to engage them in ways that allow us to know them authentically. This is a form of knowing that demands we transcend our self-absorption and authoritarian fixations, in ways that open us horizontally to know and be known. In many respects, Freire's own capacity for love was an exercise in precisely this humanizing relational dynamic—one that seeks to identify or empathize with the core of another, beyond simply superficial responses or stereotypical distortions (p. 52).

### **Methodology**

Freire's philosophy of identifying and empathizing with the core of another is an impactful concept that influenced the methodological approach for this research. The process of integrating critical education philosophy within the research design is an intentional focus to ensure that this study on empathy engaged the participants in a humanizing and participatory experience that incorporated their voices, identities, and lived experiences. Therefore, the principal act of dialogue was instrumental in the gathering and interpretation of the data.

This study on empathy and its role in enhancing cultural competency employed a qualitative study utilizing the multimethod approach of focus groups and personal narratives. The introductory focus group allowed for dialogue among the participants. The personal narratives provided participants the opportunity to bring their own identities and experiences into the critical discourse on the topic of empathy. Finally, the culminating focus group provided participants the opportunity to collectively make meaning of the data through further discourse.

These methods were particularly well-suited to hearing, gathering, and participating in stories of empathy and cultural competency. They allowed for diverse perspectives on participants' experiences and for a variety of relationships with the research participants.

For this study, I worked with five first-year K–12 public school teachers who were completing or had completed their first year of service. The five teachers were comprised of three White and two teachers of color who served predominantly students of color throughout Los Angeles County. This study drew on a qualitative methodology using data generated from focus groups and one-on-one narrative inquiry sessions. The pool of participants was recruited via an interest email distributed to first-year teachers associated with an alternative certification program where I was formerly employed as an instructional coach. Out of this pool of participants, five teachers of diverse gender and backgrounds were selected through a convenient sampling process to ensure there was diversity among the five participants. I chose to select participants through convenience sampling not with respect to any subjective or objective measure of empathy but rather because they fit my criteria and were committed to participating in the study. Teachers affiliated with this particular alternative credentialing program were chosen for several reasons. The first reason was that this organization partnered with schools primarily serving students of color. Second, this organization directly supported teachers in their first and second years in the profession. Third, each year they typically recruited a diverse cohort of teachers. Fourth, a majority of the organization's teachers were millennials. The final reason was access. As an instructional coach, I was directly and indirectly involved in the arc of professional development of these teachers and thus had permission to continue work in this area.

## **Limitations**

Given the specific design of this research project, the sample size of only five teachers is not necessarily generalizable to a population of teachers. Also, the sample of first-year teachers also consisted of members from the same alternative certification program, which provided some training on diversity, equity, and inclusiveness as well as on culturally responsive teaching. However, it was my assumption that none of this preparation included any in-depth development of empathy and/or cultural competencies. Also, since teacher certification requirements vary from state to state, the participants' experiences and professional development opportunities received may or may not have spoken to the experiences of all new teachers.

## **Definitions of Terms**

*Cultural Competency:* The acquisition of culture-specific and culture general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures (De Beuckelaer, Lievens, & Bücker, 2012; Gay, 2002; McAllister & Irvine, 2000).

*Empathy/Ethno-Cultural Empathy:* One's ability to empathize with the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of students from different cultural backgrounds (Wang et al., 2003).

*Teacher-Student Relationship:* The academic and social relationship between educators and their pupils. *Traditional Teacher Preparation Program:* A university-based preparation program that teacher candidates must complete in order to receive their initial state teaching credential. In *Educating School Teachers*, Arthur Levine (2006), former president of Teachers College, Columbia University stated, "the content of the curriculum [in teacher preparation] is too often a grab bag of courses, ranging across the various subfields of teacher education from

methods to the philosophy and history of education, rather than the focused preparation needed for real classrooms” (p. 107).

### **Organization of Study**

This dissertation will be divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 provided an introduction to this study and a brief overview of my work. Chapter 2 offers an in-depth literature review on the issues of cultural competency and teacher empathy. Chapter 3 provides a description of the methodology and research design. Chapter 4 will systematically present the data according to the participants’ stories as well as important themes that resonate from the research. Chapter 5 provides an analysis and discussion of the findings along with implications and recommendations for the field.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **SCHOOLING, EMPATHY, AND CULTURAL COMPETENCY: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Though education has been framed as the civil rights issue of this generation, concentrated academic failure continues to stifle mobility in the poorest communities where historically marginalized groups—African Americans/Blacks, Latinas/os, Native Americans, and immigrants—generally reside (Noguera, 2003). Schools in low-income communities still tend to be racially, economically, and linguistically segregated (Orfield & Yun, 1999). These same schools often fail to provide children with equitable opportunities to learn—as evidenced by unqualified teachers and the lack of other vital resources (Anyon, 2005; Fry, 2003). American public schools are experiencing an increase in racially and culturally diverse students, mostly students of color, who are expected to grow to 40–50% of the total student population by 2020 (Frankenberg & Hawley, 2012). According to demographic forecasts, Blacks and Latinos combined will make up a majority of the United States population by the middle of the 21st century (Carter & Welner, 2013).

Research suggests that educators' cultural competencies directly impact student achievement. For example, Boykin and Bailey (2000) have argued that African American students' chances of school success increase when they are taught by teachers who understand their sociocultural perspectives and can effectively engage students' cultural worldviews in the process of classroom instruction and student assessment. These bicultural teachers, who understand the tensions and practices of navigating a dominant/subordinate cultural divide (Darder, 2012), also are able to maintain high standards and expectations for students, which



promote strong cultural identities and high academic performance (Neal et al., 2003). More importantly, when teachers can enact greater cultural competency in the learning process with their students of color, the risk of the students being improperly referred for special education services decreases (Oswald et al., 1999).

As discussed in Chapter 1, many educators are simply not prepared to work with students of color. Taylor (2013) argued that the development and evolution of cultural competency is a gradual and complex process because it requires teachers to carefully examine their own cultural identity and to become better aware of the cultural differences at work in a diverse context. An important aspect of developing cultural competence is the ability to empathize with the histories and experiences of others by exercising a cross-cultural pedagogical approach. This is important because a lack of cultural competency in teachers can potentially lead to a lack of empathy for their students (Darder, 2012). This creates an unfortunate disconnect in the teacher-student relationship, which can ultimately detract from the educational experience of students of color.

With all this in mind, this literature review begins by grounding the research in a critical education lens. Next, this review looks at the public-school experience of low-income students of color and examines America's public education workforce, focusing primarily on new teachers. Finally, I present a conceptual discussion of both cultural competency and empathy, highlighting their intersectionality as described by the term ethno-cultural empathy and its potential impact on new teachers and their classrooms.

### **Schooling and Low-Income Students of Color**

Educational attainment is a powerful vehicle that unlocks human potential and serves as a lever to social mobility for many Americans. As Wenger (1998) wrote, "because learning

transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity. It is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming” (p. 215). Therefore, classroom practices are more than vehicles for learning but also social activities that are fundamental to what students learn about themselves and their world. Hatt-Echevarria (2005) argued that schooling shapes identities in powerful ways by creating a sense of smartness (or lack thereof) that students carry with them throughout their lives.

In low-income communities of color, smartness in schools is often limited to compliance with rote assignments. This passive and obedient identity is limited and unappealing, running “counter to [students’] developing identification as responsible, thinking agents” (Boaler & Greeno, 2000, p. 171). Even when students do consent to the constraints of the ideal learner, they are not developing the skills, competencies, or the social capital necessary to gain entry to or succeed in higher education (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). This is a no-win situation for students as both compliance and noncompliance achieves the same result—a lack of preparedness for higher education due to the emphasis on rote, low-level skills, and a lack of access to adults who can guide students of color toward their desired goals and aspirations (Rubin, 2007).

Based on a critical educational perspective, classroom practices should engage students with ideas and activities that call on their previous learning and experiences and encourage them to develop a critical understanding of issues. Critical discourse should validate students as learners, encouraging participation and reiterating the belief that student ideas are worthwhile and their learning is important and purposeful to classroom life. However, low-income students of color who are denied the opportunity to reach their potential due to low expectations and who are denied inclusion are generally blamed for their lack of educational success (Taliaferro &

DeCuir-Gunby, 2007). Instead of blaming students, critical educators seek to understand the variables that are reinforcing such system-wide failures. They examine more critically the teacher-student and school-student relationships with the hope of better understanding the asymmetrical dynamics of power at work in order to eliminate such failures (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2008). Furthermore, the inequalities experienced by students of color are understood to manifest through a variety of relationships, which are shaped by the hegemonic culture of schooling.

### **School-Student Relationships**

Rodriguez (2013) described the current climate of urban schools serving low-income students of color as one consumed by test-prep pedagogy—narrowed curriculum, low expectations, and neglected relationships. In a culture of test-prep pedagogy, students often report a depersonalized nature of schooling and lack meaningful connections with school adults, even when empirical research suggests that relationships are vital for low-income students of color (Conchas & Rodriguez, 2007; Valenzuela, 1999). This test-prep pedagogy has overshadowed the intellectual environment of schools and classrooms, particularly during the last three decades. For instance, students who fail to meet the standards must now take double sections of math and English, with these double courses replacing elective courses such as art, music, a second language, or gym on their schedules. Doubling up can have dire consequences for meeting most college entrance requirements. The academic impact not only creates barriers for students' college-going possibilities, but also manages to overshadow the liberatory purpose of education, particularly for marginalized students who rely on public schooling as a vehicle for upward mobility (Kozol, 2005; Rodriguez, 2013).

As such, it is important to note that test-prep pedagogy is as much about the social, relational, and cultural dynamics of schooling as it is about classroom instruction (Rodriguez, 2013). Along with zero-tolerance policies, high dropout and expulsion rates, and inadequate human and material resources needed to give all children a quality education, the prevalence of test-prep pedagogy essentially ensures that the most vulnerable children will continue to receive a substandard education and hampered future (Meier & Wood, 2004; Rodriguez, 2013).

### **Teacher-Student Relationships**

Noguera (2003) has asserted that students' ethnic or socioeconomic background governs how students are perceived and treated by adults within an educational environment. Alvidrez and Weinstein (1999) as well as Ferguson (2003) have concluded that teachers judged more positively those students with higher social economic status (SES), though IQ scores were less likely to align with teachers' predictions. They also found that race was a determinate factor in teacher' perceptions of student' ability, with students of color regarded as less capable despite demonstrating achievement comparable to their White peers. These biases often have implications for teacher–student interactions and affect curricular and instructional opportunities for students from marginalized communities.

Researchers widely recognize that teachers frequently approach classes populated by low-income African American youths with a strong emphasis on controlling student behaviors (Monroe, 2005). Historically, African American students have been targeted for disciplinary action in the greatest numbers (Gordon, Nandy, Pantazis, & Townsend, 2001). McCadden (1998) found that teachers confine reprimands and punitive consequences to African American children, even when youths of other races engage in the same unsanctioned behaviors.

## Students of Color in California

In California, Latino children constitute the majority of the state's student population, as reflected in many of our local districts, schools, and classrooms (See Table 2.1). During the 2014–2015 school year, Latinos comprised of 53% of the entire student population. Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) children constituted the second largest ethnic group other than White at approximately 10%, followed by African Americans at 6% (See Table 2.1). Yet, Latinos and African Americans are the lowest performing subgroups of students across the state.

Table 2.1

*California Ethnic Distribution of Public School Students: 2014–2015* (Education Trust-West, 2010a)

Ethnicity	Number of students	Percentage
African American not Hispanic	373,280	6.16%
American Indian or Alaska Native	36,755	0.62%
Asian	545,720	8.70%
Filipino	158,224	2.43%
Hispanic or Latino	3,344,431	53.25%
Pacific Islander	31,513	0.53%
White not Hispanic	1,531,088	25.00%
Two or More Races Not Hispanic	175,700	2.68%
None Reported	38,809	0.63%
Total	6,235,520	100.00%

**Latino students.** California's education system has not served Latino students well, particularly those from low-income families. For the most part, Latino students are disproportionately taught by out-of-field teachers, and a culture of low expectations and dismal performance often plague the schools they attend (Education Trust-West, 2010a). Conclusions made by Education Trust-West's 2010 California Research Report indicated that:

- 49% of Latino children attend preschool, compared with 65% of White children.
- 42% of Latino second-graders are proficient in English language arts.
- 40% of Latino eighth-graders are proficient in English language arts.
- 21% of Latino middle and high school students are proficient in Algebra I.
- 61% of Latino students graduate from high school in four years.
- 23% of these Latino graduates complete high school with the coursework needed for admission to the University of California or California State University—yet many of those students will not have the test scores and grades necessary to be truly eligible for admission.
- 14% of Latino public high school graduates immediately enroll in a four-year public university in California.

**African American students.** In a similar report by Education Trust-West (2010b), an opportunity gap in resources of high-quality preschools, great teachers, stable learning environments, and access to college and career-ready coursework exists for African American students in California. Findings from this report illustrate the underwhelming experiences of African American students, which include:

- 8% of African American children enroll in a high-quality preschool, compared with 30% of White children.
- 42% of African American second-graders are proficient in English language arts.
- 40% of African American eighth-graders are proficient in English language arts.
- 17% of African American middle school and high school students are proficient in Algebra I.
- 65% of African American students graduate from high school in four years.
- 23% of these African American graduates complete high school with the coursework needed for admission to the University of California or California State University—yet many of those students will not have the test scores and grades necessary to be truly eligible to enroll.
- 11% of African American public high school graduates enroll in a four-year public university in California.

**Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) students.** Contrary to the “model minority” characterization of Asian Americans, there are particular ethnic groups with disproportionately high rates of high school dropout and low high school graduation rates. Based on the 2010 California report on the state of Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Education, Chang et al. (2010) found:

- Hmong have the largest proportion (45%) in the state with less than a high school diploma among all racial/ethnic groups.
- About 40% of Cambodians and Laotians have less than a high school diploma, which is double the state rate.

- Pacific Islander students in grades nine through 12 have high dropout rates, with about one-fifth estimated to drop out over a four-year period.

Rubin (2007) explained that low-income students of color need an educational experience in which learning is creative, stimulating, relevant, and meaningful. Unfortunately, as the statistics illustrate, low-income students of color are not experiencing the type of liberatory and empowering education that leads to increased academic achievement. Educators, by nature of their position, are the primary designers of a student's educational experience. Therefore, educators must facilitate culturally democratic educational experiences, which support the notion that there are many forms of intelligences and that the lived histories and experiences of students equip them uniquely as learners. However, when the national teacher workforce is overwhelmingly unprepared to engage with the learning and social needs of students of color, this phenomenon creates a challenging environment for both new teachers and the students they are supposed to be teaching.

### **National Teacher Workforce**

The achievement gap between White middle-class students and their low-income peers of color continues to widen (Harris & Herrington, 2006). This disparity leads many educational critics to believe that teachers are not well prepared to meet the challenges of today's diverse student population. In addition, rising attrition rates among teachers working in the highest-need schools—those serving large numbers of low-income culturally diverse students—flame the criticism aimed at teacher preparation (Latham & Vogt, 2007; Wilkins & Clift, 2007).

The national profile of teachers remains remarkably consistent. The majority of our public education teachers are White, monolingual, and middle-class women from rural and



suburban areas with limited experience with students from other cultures (Hollins & Guzman, 2005). This largely homogeneous teaching force is serving a base of students with a variety of ethnic, linguistic, cultural, racial, and socioeconomic differences. Research suggests that many teachers are not prepared to deal with the growing number of diverse students (Hinojosa & Moras, 2009). Studies examining White teachers (both preservice and active teachers) and their attitudes toward students of color reveal that many White teachers feel unsure of their ability to teach students of color, tend to hold stereotypical beliefs about urban students and/or students of color, and tend to use cultural deficiency models for explaining their academic performance (Darder, 2012; Henze et al., 1998; King 2000; Weiner 1990).

Other variables impact the process of schooling. For example, teaching is still an overwhelmingly female occupation. Despite much attention and some effort to recruit males into K–12 teaching, the public-school teaching force in the United States continues to be increasingly female. Eighty-four percent of public school teachers are female—up from 82% in 2005, 74% in 1996, 71% in 1990 and 69% in 1986 (Feistritzer, 2011). On the race/ethnic front, some shift has occurred toward more people of color entering the ranks of teaching. The proportion of K-12 teachers who are White has dropped from 91% in 1986 to 84% in 2011. Latinos are the fastest growing non-White group entering teaching (Feistritzer, 2011). Similarly, Latinos have higher percentages of males entering teaching—22% of Latino teachers (Feistritzer, 2011).

Another variable is that of age. Feistritzer (2011) highlighted that more than one in five (22%) teachers in 2011 were under the age of 30, compared with only 11% in 2005 and in 1996. The proportion of teachers 50 and older has dropped from 42% in 2005 to 31% in 2011. Clearly, older teachers are retiring and being replaced once again by teachers in their 20s and 30s.

## California's Teacher Workforce

Consistent with national trends, California's workforce is, indeed, predominantly White and female. Latinos are the second largest ethnic group, followed by African Americans (See Table 2.2).

Table 2.2

*California Ethnic Distribution of Public School Teachers, 2014–2015*

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Number of Male Teachers</b>	<b>Number of Female Teachers</b>	<b>Total</b>
American Indian or Alaska Native	475	1,052	1,527
Asian	3,662	12,331	15,993
Pacific Islander	264	675	939
Filipino	1,134	3,173	4,307
Hispanic or Latino	15,033	39,956	54,989
African American	3,448	7,929	11,377
White (not Hispanic)	51,401	140,285	191,686
Two or More Races Not Hispanic	648	1,637	2,285
No Response	3,149	8,773	11,922
<b>Total*</b>	<b>79,214</b>	<b>215,811</b>	<b>295,025</b>

## **New Teachers: The Millennial Teaching Force**

Millennials, born between 1982 and 2002, constitute the majority of prospective teachers currently enrolled in university-based teacher education programs in the United States and entering the teaching profession (Howe & Strauss, 2000). The characteristics of the preservice teaching force are changing as teacher candidates of the millennial generation enter teacher education programs (Cooper & He, 2012). The broad characterization of Millennials suggests that this generation of teachers is technology savvy, always online, and very connected. These views highlight technology use and “community connectedness” as defining markers of what it means to be Millennial.

Generally, Millennials have been characterized as possessing openness to diversity, attributed to the fact that they, as a generation, did not experience racial tensions the way previous generations did; therefore, they typically do not characterize race as a dividing line among individuals (Rodriguez & Hallman, 2013). Instead, Millennials have been thought to view social class as more significant than race in understanding achievement gaps (Pew Research Center, 2010). Such a perspective complicates Millennial teacher views of multicultural education as well as their understanding of culturally responsive teaching. These prospective teachers often support only minimal levels of multicultural education and often hold naive attitudes about equality.

Seemingly positive attitudes may, in fact, mask a lack of real understanding of multicultural issues, White privilege, and structural inequities (Castro, 2010; Gay, 2010). Even worse, some researchers have argued that Millennial teachers have become more sophisticated in their use of racial etiquette, especially when performing the role of participant in a research study

(Rodriguez & Hallman, 2013). While some studies show that preservice teachers of color hold more complex and advanced views of multicultural education, others reveal that they are equally susceptible to the same resistance or ignorance as White preservice teachers (Rodriguez & Hallman, 2013). Therefore, the majority of new educators will begin teaching in increasingly diverse schools; and even with the best of intentions, many may inadvertently contribute to persistent disparities in achievement, literacy and dropout rates, and opportunity gaps between students of color and their White middle-class peers.

Many challenges cause new teachers to exit the profession. Over 50% of all new teachers in urban schools leave the profession within five years (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). Beginning teachers are more likely to leave the profession than seasoned counterparts; 14% of new teachers leave after their first year, 33% leave within three years, and almost 50% leave in five years (Alliance for Quality Education, 2004). Research on teacher attrition also shows that many educators who are part of this “revolving door” (Ingersoll, 2001) are “service oriented” and “idealistic” teachers (Miech & Elder, 1996). Alliance for Excellent Education (2004) also found that high-poverty schools experience a teacher turnover rate of about 20% per calendar year—roughly 50% higher than the rate in more affluent schools.

According to the research, some of the most common concerns that new teachers must navigate included: (a) management and instruction, (b) self-image, and (c) school context (Cooper & He, 2012; Flores 2007; Graziano, 2005; Klein, 2004; Picower, 2011).

### **Management and Instruction**

In a study conducted by Cooper and He (2012), participants confirmed the present contradiction they saw in their efforts to teach as an authority figure versus being a facilitator and

to focus on content instruction versus developing relationships with students. This dilemma is quite significant, especially for teacher candidates who are working to position themselves in becoming skilled in the delivery of content and pedagogic interactions that go beyond content knowledge (Klein, 2004). It is especially challenging for secondary teacher candidates because of the requirement of content expertise at the secondary level and the relatively small age difference between themselves and the students with whom they engage.

### **Self-Image**

Teacher candidates' major concerns included their struggles with their self-image as teachers and attending to their own professional development in becoming teachers (Kennedy, 2006). New teachers must address the tensions that arise between their ideals of teaching and the realities of the teaching profession as well as the ways they present themselves in front of the students. This tension also fuels a conflict between who they are as a beginning teacher and who they want to become (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010; Walkington, 2005).

### **School Context**

New teachers often identify negative working conditions, such as social climate, staff and faculty attitudes, beliefs, and morale as their reason for leaving the profession (Graziano, 2005). Quite often, beginning teachers feel they are at the bottom of the pecking order and have little professional knowledge (Picower, 2011). Flores (2007) has found that newcomers to the field tend to experience conflict with more experienced practitioners, as they challenge or attempt to change existing school practices. These teachers saw the culture and expectations of their schools as constraining their teaching and other interactions with students as well as their professional relationships with colleagues.

## **Cultural Competency**

In my professional development work with teachers, I often say, “You can’t teach what you don’t know and you can’t teach who you don’t know.” This statement applies to both content matter and student context. Too often teachers are inadequately prepared to teach an ethnically diverse student population. Unintentional biases surface in classroom practice in many ways, ranging from students not adequately being challenged or encouraged academically to misperceptions of behavior, leading to suspensions to misdiagnosed special education referrals (Lee, 2002). Limited understanding of students' cultures impedes culturally relevant teaching and student assessment, building empowering relationships with students, and collaborating with families and their communities (Ladson-Billings, 2004).

Gay (2002) explained that culture encompasses many things, some of which are more important for teachers to know than others because they have direct implications for teaching and learning. Her cultural characteristics list includes commonly thought of concepts such as cultural values, traditions, language, communication, learning styles, contributions, and relational patterns. Simple knowledge of food and holiday celebrations is not enough. Preferences in cooperative versus individual problem solving, expectations for behavior between children and adults, and gender roles are also integral aspects of cultural competency (Gay, 2002).

Therefore, cultural competency is defined as the acquisition of culture-specific and culture general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures (De Beuckelaer et al., 2012; Gay, 2002; McAllister & Irvine, 2000).

Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000) distinguished five qualities that are relevant to successful functioning across cultures: cultural empathy, open-mindedness, emotional stability, social initiative, and flexibility. Research suggests that cross-cultural competence, in particular, showing a high degree of cultural empathy and open-mindedness, is an important asset for educators when there is frequent interaction between teachers and students (De Beuckelaer et al., 2012). McAllister and Irvine (2000) asserted that beside knowledge of cultural practices, teachers must experience what it means and feels like to be a member of a nondominant cultural group. It is with this understanding that culturally competent educators are able to operate simultaneously and effectively with students from multiple cultures. Gay (2002) further identified four practices that define a culturally competent educator. These four practices included: (a) empathy and caring, (b) being reflective about their beliefs about people from other cultures, (c) being reflective about their own cultural frames of reference, and (d) knowledgeable about other cultures.

Cultural competency directly impacts the teaching and learning experience for both students and teachers. Teachers have to care sufficiently about ethnically diverse students and their achievement that they will accept nothing less than high-level success from them and will work diligently to accomplish it (Foster, 1997; Kleinfeld, 1974, 1975). This is a very different conception of caring than the often-cited notion of “gentle nurturing and altruistic concern,” which can lead to benign neglect under the guise of letting students of color make their own way and move at their own pace (Gay, 2002).

Gay (2002) has also identified five essential elements of cultural competency that impact the teaching and learning environment: (a) developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity,

(b) developing knowledge of ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum, (c) demonstrating caring and building learning communities, (d) communicating with ethnically diverse students, and (e) responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction. These elements assist teachers in the process of cultural scaffolding for students—that is, using their own cultures and experiences to expand their intellectual horizons and academic achievement. This begins by demonstrating culturally sensitive, caring, and culturally responsive learning communities (Gay, 2002). Part of this knowledge includes understanding the cultural characteristics and contributions of different ethnic groups and including this information in lesson planning and instruction (King, Hollins, & Hayman, 1997; Pai, 1990; Smith, 1998).

The knowledge that teachers need to have about cultural diversity goes beyond mere awareness of, respect for, and general recognition of the fact that ethnic groups have different values or express similar values in various ways. Culturally responsive caring places teachers in an ethical, emotional, and academic partnership with ethnically diverse students, which is a partnership that is anchored in respect, honor, integrity, resource sharing, and a deep belief in the possibility that students can transcend obstacles (Gay, 2000). The level of involvement a teacher has with students can influence not only their school engagement and academic performance, but also how students feel about their individual behavioral and academic abilities (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Students' awareness of teachers' perceptions determine motivation and attachment to school (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999). Noguera (2003) noted, "If students do not believe that their teachers care about them and are actively concerned about their academic performance, then the likelihood that they will succeed is greatly reduced" (p. 449).



While teachers must work to teach students in culturally responsive ways, teachers need to also understand that their cultural learning must avoid generalizations and stereotypes. Teachers must learn to engage with the reality that bicultural students are members of cultural groups with distinctive practices, as well as individuals navigating difficult cultural divides (Darder, 2012). As such, stereotyping them is akin to ignoring them (Gay, 2002; Nieto, 2004).

The quality or efficacy of student-teacher interactions supports the production of positive academic and social outcomes for students of color (Cornelius-White, 2007). Researchers found that students thrived in academic environments where they felt understood, cared for, and heard (Darder, 2012; Valenzuela, 1999). Students who feel more teacher support are more likely to achieve at higher levels, demonstrate stronger critical thinking skills, and express a higher concept of self-ability (Pollard, 1993). Conversely, students who feel less supported by their teachers are less likely to expend energy in their classes or to believe that they can be successful academically.

### **Empathy**

Empathy has been discussed in various subdisciplines of psychology and has been studied as a determinant of altruism, attribution, social judgment, and therapy (Batson et al., 1995; Dovidio, Allen, & Schroeder, 1990; Houston, 1990; Lichtenberg, Bornstein, & Silver, 1984; Omdahl, 1995; Strayer, 1987; Unger & Thumhuri, 1997). Such broad interest in empathy from various disciplines supports the claim that the ability to empathize with others is critical to all human relationships (Omdahl, 1995; Wang et al., 2003). The roots of empathy as a topic of study can be traced back 250 years when German philosophers defined it as an act of imaginatively stepping into another person's perspective. Intrigued by the psychological

phenomenon of imitation, they coined the word *emfühlung*, literally "in-feeling," which is Latinized as "empathy" (Gerdes et. al, 2011; Tettegah & Anderson, 2007).

Early theorists and writers saw empathy as a trait that was stable and could be measured but not taught. Among these are Cronbach (1955) and Hogan (1969), who devised personality instruments to test for empathy. These authors defined empathy as a personality attribute involving the capacity to respond emotionally, cognitively, and communicatively to other persons without the loss of objectivity (Wiseman, 1996).

Recent literature suggests that empathy is a multidimensional phenomenon with distinctions among its various attributes. Theories of empathy have led to an interpretation of empathy along multiple disciplines. The following discussion reviews four definitions of empathy and their alignment to my research. These include: (a) clinical empathy, (b) social science empathy, (c) neuroscience empathy, and (d) ethno-cultural empathy.

The clinical form of empathy has been heavily researched in the medical field due to its impact on the clinician-patient relationship and its importance on improving quality medical care. Wiseman's (1996) concept of empathy consists of four defining elements: (a) the ability to listen, (b) the ability to take on another's term of reference, (c) the ability to understand and not judge, and (d) the ability to communicate that understanding.

The social science definition of empathy is the most general description of empathy. Hoffman (2000) described empathy as involving an affective response with a focus on the other person more than one's self. Hakansson and Montgomery (2003) suggested that empathy may include taking on the perspective of another individual, such as mimicking another's actions.

While Hakansson and Montgomery (2003) described empathy as a process, Eisenberg and others have described empathy as an emotional state of arousal that originates from the understanding of uneasiness of someone else's experience (Eisenberg, Shea, Carlo, & Knight, 1991). Tettegah and Anderson (2007) asserted that regardless of the behavior expressed by others, empathy is something an individual feels as one encounters a situation (e.g., joy, pain) of another. The feelings that one may feel for another is often associated with the same or similar experiences or situations that have occurred in one's own life (Hoffman, 2000).

Recent breakthroughs in social cognitive neuroscience have given social scientists remarkable opportunities to observe and attempt to measure various aspects of human thought, feeling, and behavior through the use of brain imaging technology (Gerdes et. al, 2011). Combining social science research on empathy with the new findings in social cognitive neuroscience, researchers have developed a conceptualization of empathy based on the interaction of four neural networks: affective sharing, self-awareness, perspective taking, and emotion regulation (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Decety & Lamm, 2006; Decety & Moriguchi, 2007; Gerdes et al, 2011).

Ethno-cultural empathy, as defined earlier, refers to one's ability to empathize with the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Wang et al., 2003). The concept of ethno-cultural empathy is relatively new in the psychological literature; thus, the terminology used to define this construct has not been solidified. Terms such as cultural empathy (Ivey, Ivey, & Simek-Downing, 1987; Ridley & Lingle, 1996), empathetic multicultural awareness (Junn, Morton, & Yee, 1995), cultural role taking (Scott & Borodovsky, 1990), ethnic perspective taking (Quintana, Ybarra, Gonzalez-Doupe, & Baessa, 2000), and ethnotherapeutic

empathy (Parson, 1993) have been used interchangeably to speak to the concept of empathy in cross-cultural settings (Wang et al., 2003).

Ethno-cultural empathy is a promising way to promote mutual understanding between various racial and ethnic groups on both cognitive and affective levels. Wang et al. (2003) have posited that ethno cultural empathy consists of four distinct attributes: (a) acceptance of cultural differences, (b) empathetic awareness, (c) empathetic perspective taking, and (d) empathetic action.

Table 2.3 shows the overarching characteristics that describe empathy across the various perspectives identified above. However, there are also unique differences, between their perspectives. For the purposes of this research on teachers' ability to define and use empathy to build cultural competency with their students, Wang et al.'s (2003) concept of ethno-cultural empathy will be used as the primary investigative definition.

Table 2.3

*Key Attributes of Empathy Based on Discipline*

<b>Discipline</b>	Clinical	Neuroscience	Social Science	Ethno-Cultural
<b>Source</b>	Wiseman, 1996	Gerdes et al., 2011	Tettegah & Anderson, 2007	Wang et al., 2003
<b>Attribute 1</b>	See the world as others see it	Affective Sharing	Fantasy	Acceptance of Cultural Differences
<b>Attribute 2</b>	Non-judgmental	Self-Awareness	Personal distress	Empathetic Awareness
<b>Attribute 3</b>	Understanding another's feelings	Perspective Taking	Perspective Taking	Perspective Taking
<b>Attribute 4</b>	Communicate the understanding	Emotion Regulation	Empathetic Concern	Feelings and Expression

**Attributes of Ethno-Cultural Empathy**

The empathetic response to the *acceptance of cultural differences* is based on the premise of intellectual empathy. Intellectual empathy is the ability to understand a racially or ethnically different person's thinking and/or feeling. It is also the ability to perceive the world as the other person does; that is, the ability to take the racial or ethnic perspective of another. For teachers, intellectual empathy involves the manner in which they pay special attention to the way children define, describe, and interpret phenomena and problem-solving situations in their daily

experiences and can begin to understand these experiences from the unique perspectives of children (Tettegah & Anderson, 2007).

Empathetic listening is a primary attribute of *empathetic awareness*. Woolfolk (1998) has expressed belief that it is important for teachers to use empathic listening. Evidence of empathic listening is the ability to hear the intent and emotions behind what another person says and reflect them back by paraphrasing.

*Perspective taking* is an attempt to temporarily adopt or acquire another person's psychological point of view. The ethno-cultural empathetic response to perspective taking is the ability to pay attention to the feeling of a person or persons from another ethno-cultural group to the degree that one is able to feel the other's emotional condition from the point of view of that person's racial or ethnic culture (Wang et al., 2003). It encompasses a process of learning to imagine life from the "other" person's perspective. That is, to see that individual's circumstance through the social, cultural, political, and historical frames that shapes his or her lived reality (Warren & Lessner, 2014).

Mirroring is also evidence of an empathetic neurological response that demonstrates perspective taking. When we hear people speak or watch their posture, gestures, and facial expressions, the neural networks in our brains are stimulated by a "shared representation." The result is an inner reflection or simulation of the experiences of those whom we are observing (Gerdes et al., 2011). Lastly, empathetic feelings and expression result in *empathetic action*. Empathetic action involves conscious decision-making and requires that we move beyond affective responses (perspective taking, self-awareness, emotion regulation) and cognitive processing toward informed action and choices (Gerdes et al., 2011; Segal, 2007).

Therefore, it is through these four attributes of ethno-cultural empathy that I attempted to better understand the new teacher data collected for this study. I believe this definition of empathy aligns best with the tenants of critical educational theory as well as addresses both the concepts of cultural competency and empathic relationship building discussed earlier. The underlying assumption is that through the development of ethno-cultural empathy, new teachers who do not share the backgrounds of their students—particularly White teachers—can build the fundamental skills and mindsets needed to implement culturally democratic classrooms.

### **Empathy Development**

In addition to the various definitions and perspectives on empathy across disciplines, empathy is believed to be a learned skill or one that can develop over time. Several factors related to the development of teacher empathy surfaced in this literature review, including entering the teaching profession with limited empathy, issues of identity related to gender and race, and the critical need for self-awareness as a precursor to developing empathy.

First, research suggests that teachers enter the profession with limited empathic concern. Based on the research by Tettegah (2007), most preservice teachers have little recognition, empathetic concern, problem-solving ability, and management skills related to victim empathy. Victim empathy is targeted empathy for students facing some type of trauma.

Additional factors such as gender and race impact empathy. Wang et al. (2003) found that women were significantly more ethno-culturally empathetic than men in terms of empathic feeling and expression, empathic awareness, and the acceptance of cultural differences, though not in terms of empathic perspective taking. These findings are consistent with several previous studies of general empathy that found that women have higher levels of affective empathy than

men, but that no gender differences exist with regard to the perspective-taking component of empathy (Davis, 1994).

In addition, non-White individuals have been found to have significantly higher levels of general and specific ethno-cultural empathy than their White counterparts (Wang et al., 2003). Congruent with other findings, the researchers found that female and non-White participants were more likely to express empathetic emotions around the issue of justice or fairness, were more receptive of cultural differences, and were more aware of the experiences of people from different racial or ethnic backgrounds than were their male and White counterparts. Also, compared with the White preservice teachers, non-White pre-service teachers in their study reported more understanding of the experience of other ethno-cultural groups by taking their perspective or sharing in their emotional experiences (Wang et al., 2003). Given that the teaching force is predominantly White underscores the importance that empathetic development plays in the classroom and that it represents a vital first step to enacting greater cultural competency in teaching students of color.

What is also promising is that empathy can be developed. Wang et al. (2003) conceptualized ethno-cultural empathy as a trait that can be developed over time. Empathy, along with self-management, emotional regulation, interpersonal management, and adaptability, are considered components of emotional intelligence (Alnabhan, 2008; BarOn, 2002). An emotionally intelligent teacher must be able to resist or delay the drive or temptation to act impulsively when dealing with others. A teacher with low frustration tolerance, impulsiveness, anger control problems, abusiveness, loss of self-control, or explosive and unpredictable behavior will struggle to be successful. Based on the research conducted by Alnabhan (2008) on



the Emotional Intelligence of high school teachers, the more experienced teachers respond to the pressing or sudden situations more appropriately than colleagues with less experience. This research demonstrates that empathy can be developed over time and, typically, the longer you teach, the more empathetic you may become.

However, time alone does not predict an increase in empathy. Self-awareness is another factor in the development of empathy. Empathetic development for teachers begins when they come to terms with their preconceived and fixed notions of the abilities of students from diverse backgrounds and if they are able to see past the stereotypical underachievement of diverse students (Grant & Asimeng-Boahene, 2006). Second, according to Nieto (2004), one consequence of being part of an inherently racist society is the internalization of untruths about different cultural groups, which can surface in the ways that these students are discussed.

Furthermore, empathetic development happens in stages. Each level of ethnic perspective taking is reached as an individual proceeds through developmental life stages (Quintana, 1994; Quintana et al., 1999). Quintana, Castaneda-English, and Ybarra (1999) summarized the various developmental stages of ethnic perspective-taking ability as including “awareness of ethnic discrimination and prejudice,” “awareness of perspectives, attitudes, experiences shared by ethnic group,” and “enhanced ability to take the perspective of other ethnic groups” (p. 163).

### **Conclusion**

Research suggests that teacher empathy holds the threefold purpose of cultivating trusting relationships with students, establishing safe and supportive classroom environments, and building cultural competency. Researchers found that students thrived in academic environments where they feel understood, cared for, and heard (Dance, 2002; Darder, 2012; Valenzuela, 1999;

Warren & Lessner, 2014). Warren and Lessner found that the more empathy teachers expressed in their verbal and physical exchanges with students, the greater the likelihood his or her interactions with students were to produce the intended academic and behavioral outcomes. Classroom teachers who allowed students to act, think, speak, and perform their various social identities without judgment created an atmosphere for high-quality student-teacher interactions (Warren & Lessner, 2014).

Bochner and Yerby (1977) concluded that empathy plays an important role in creating a psychologically as well as physically safe climate for learning in the classroom, most particularly when responding to student's school conflict and acts of aggression. Tettegah (2007) also identified that empathy is critical in teaching and learning relations for recognition and identification of students who are victims of classroom and school antisocial behaviors.

Empathy, as described in the work of McAllister and Irvine (2002), is a refined element of caring. Specifically, empathy refers to the teacher's ability to understand the classroom from the students' perspectives. Thus, "caring" teachers will be more successful if they approach their goals of holding all students to the same rigorous standards by seeking first to understand where students are (Rychly & Graves, 2012). Gay (2002) has described caring teachers as those who "care so much" about their culturally diverse students that they insist on holding them to the same standards as other students.

Most important to this study, Rychly and Graves (2012) found a strong correlation between empathy and cultural competency. As empathy increased, so too did cultural competency. In addition to caring, empathetic teachers must be reflective about their beliefs

about people from other cultures, they must be reflective of their own cultural frames of reference, and they must intentionally develop their own knowledge about other cultures.

In this literature review, I began with an explanation of theoretical framework of critical education theory that grounded this work, and then described the schooling experience that is far too common for low-income students of color. I followed with an examination of the teaching landscape focusing on new teachers entering the workforce, and concluded with a review of the primary concepts of cultural competency and empathy.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study examined the views of new teachers with respect to how they defined and used empathy, particularly with respect to enacting culturally responsive classroom interactions with students of color. Toward this end, the study employed a qualitative methodology to collect rich data in an effort to better ascertain the perspectives of five new teachers about the power of empathy in enhancing cultural competency. My aim was to interpret across personal accounts in order to investigate and represent the storylines and broader societal narratives that informed them.

This research project sought to explore the concepts of critical education theory as the basis of an approach called critical narrative inquiry to enable a broader research context of social and political generative themes that influence the educational experience for students of color. In alignment with critical education theory, dialogue served as an important vehicle for gathering data. Discourse among peers, as well as individual conversations with the researcher, were intentionally used to encourage authenticity of data and perspective. Therefore, a multimethod study that combined focus groups with personal narratives was used, with the goal of each method contributing something unique to the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon under study (Morgan, 1997). By capturing the experiences of participants in their own voices, I was able to uncover the complexity of their experiences.

#### **Research Questions**

In an effort to understand the power of empathy in enhancing the cultural competence of new teachers, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do new teachers define empathy and what do they believe can influence its development in teachers?
2. In what ways do new teachers consider empathy important to building their cultural competencies in the classroom?
3. In what specific ways do new teachers use empathy in their interactions with students of color to build strong teacher-student relationships?

In concert with the literature presented earlier, the research questions that fueled this study were directly informed by three key assumptions. These included:

1. Participants' definitions of empathy focused on victim empathy and issues of social class and were to be limited in areas of race and ethnicity (Pew Research Center, 2010).
2. Teachers of color, though they don't share the same background of their students, would have a greater sense of ethno-cultural empathy than White teachers, primarily based on shared lived experiences. White teachers would be less likely to utilize empathy as a way to build cultural competency (Hinojosa & Moras, 2009).
3. Though Millennials are more comfortable in diverse settings, their use of empathy as a way of building relationships, cultural competency, and providing a multicultural education in order to counter some of the racial and social economic challenges impacting their students would be limited (Rodriguez & Hallman, 2013).

### **Qualitative Methods**

As indicated by Newman, Benz, Weis, and McNeil (1998), qualitative research designs present and accentuate elaborate descriptions of the phenomena and their meanings for the people or the culture under examination. In contrast to quantitative measure, qualitative research

seeks to dive deeply into an understanding of the social dimensions of phenomenon that inform its manifestation. Toward that end, I employed critical narratives as the method for conducting this study of teacher empathy.

### **Critical Narratives**

I relied on a narrative inquiry model (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to collect data in a way that sought to gather the rich stories from participants' voices, allowing them to be heard and to realize through a sense of human agency that we are, as Ivor Goodson and Sherto Gill (2014) proclaimed, "actors in...the production of culture, construction of meaning, cultivation of ways of being and identification of paths of future social actions" (p. 15). Therefore, the use of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, which is referred to as a critical narrative inquiry, undergirds the importance of meaning making that is derived through dialogue. "The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are story-telling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Through critical narrative inquiry, we are allowed to gain insights into the world of those with whom we engage in dialogue as we negotiate the stories. As Grumet (1991) explained, in narrative research, we see the undertaking as a shared experience between the teller and the listener. Each person contributes; each is altered by the exchange. Therefore, the individual experiences of each participant was considered separately, and then explored collectively through focus groups and one-on-one narratives (Grumet, 1991). More specifically, the research design included the collection of data through two focus groups as well as a personal narrative with each participant.

## **Focus Groups**

The purpose of the introductory focus group was to collect data through group interaction on the topic of study (Morgan, 1996). I conducted a focus group comprised of all five teachers in an attempt to discover how new teachers defined empathy and its role in relationship building. Primarily, the introductory focus group was for participants to express their opinions, learn from each other's suggestions, or reconsider their interpretation as they discussed empathy as a group.

Focus groups are ideal for understanding participant's perceptions because of "the fluid and dialogic aspects of opinion formation" (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994, pp. 788–789). The open-ended nature of focus group interactions helped to "provide insights into why people believe what they do, how they perceive verbal and nonverbal messages, and what they consider important and why" (Carlin & McKinney, 1994). Group discussions provide direct evidence about similarities and differences in the participants' opinions and experiences, as opposed to reaching such conclusions from post hoc analysis of separate statements from each participant (Morgan, 1997). However, Lunt and Livingstone (1996) suggested that focus group research be paired with other methods if it is to provide thorough interpretation. To that end, this study also employed personal narratives to provide an objective measurement.

At the conclusion of the narratives I conducted a final focus group to discuss with participants my findings and to gather their impressions about the findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Conducting the final focus group following the individual narratives provided me the opportunity to explore issues that came up only during the analysis of the narratives (Morgan, 1997). This also served as a member check for participants to clarify or add detail to their comments and help to support the accuracy of my work.

## **The Narrative Process**

The narrative inquiry process was central to the narrative research. With narrative research, participants are allowed to tell their own stories, and the meanings are negotiated between the teller and the listener (Casey, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative research as explained by Casey provides free spaces where the experiences of the epistemic privilege of those marginalized would be valued and included.

Casey (1995) posited that in order to understand narratives, the listener must take the struggles of the teller into account. Knowing is facilitated through reflection, and this reflection is constituted when we look back on experiences with a different focus. Hence the researcher is a part of the story. As Casey stated, “Whether implicit or elaborated, every study of narrative is based on a particular understanding of the speaker’s self” (1995, p. 213). Therefore, the critical narratives that evolved from this process were three-dimensional autobiographies in which I, as the researcher, sought to help uncover. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explained this concept as a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space where thinking moves from interaction (personal and social) through continuity (past, present, and future) to situation (place or sequences of places).

## **Research Design**

My research focused on K–12 teachers working in public schools that served predominantly students of color throughout Los Angeles County. In California, Latino children constitute the majority of the state’s student population, as reflected in many of our local districts, schools, and classrooms. During the 2014–2015 school year, Latinos comprised 53% of the entire student population. Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) constituted the second



largest ethnic group other than White (10%), followed by African Americans (6%). Yet, Latinos and African Americans were statistically the lowest performing subgroup of students.

In the Los Angeles area, the demographic breakdown is very similar to that of California, with Latino students being the largest ethnic group. White students make up the second largest group, followed by African American and Asian American students. Table 3.1 shows the ethnic breakdown for all students based on data from the California.

Table 3.1

*Los Angeles K-12 Student Population by Race and Ethnicity\**

<b>Los Angeles County</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>African American/Black</b>	8.1
<b>American Indian/Alaska Native</b>	0.3
<b>Asian/Asian American</b>	7.6
<b>Filipino</b>	2.2
<b>Hispanic/Latino</b>	65.0
<b>Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander</b>	0.4
<b>White</b>	14.3
<b>Multiracial</b>	1.6

\*Data Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics (May 2015).

## Participants

The participants in this study were five K–12 teachers, three of whom were White and two of whom were teachers of color. The criteria for participation included being a Millennial finishing his or her first year of teaching. These new teachers came from both traditional district schools as well as charter schools located in communities of color that, historically, have been considered some of the lower-performing schools in the district. These new teachers ranged in ethnicity; however, one criterion was that none of these participants shared the same racial or ethnic background as the majority of students in their classrooms. The participants were all

members of the same alternative teacher certification program, which also partnered with a prestigious private university in the Los Angeles area. As a former staff member of this alternative teacher program, I worked directly and indirectly with each of the participants in this study as an instructional coach.

The study used a convenient sample of new teachers whom I contacted via email to announce the upcoming study. Convenience sampling is generally used when participants will be selected because of their convenient accessibility and proximity to the researcher. The prospective participants were informed on the topic of the study and the voluntary nature of the project, and were invited to complete a brief survey regarding their interest (Appendix A and Appendix B). The survey asked for personal demographic information; teachers self-identified their race and general demographic information about their students. Upon the results of this survey, participants matching the threefold criteria of a first-year Millennial teacher, teaching in a school that served low-income students of color, and who did not share the background of a majority of his/her students were selected to comprise the population group from which I found my sample group.

Participants were not selected with respect to any subjective or objective measure of empathy, but rather because they fit criteria and were committed to participating in the study. Each of these interested teachers was assigned a number. Similar to a lottery system, a number was drawn to signify which teacher would be invited to participate in the study. I continued randomly drawing numbers, which resulted in a sample group of two teachers of color and three White teachers. All participants' names as well as the name of the schools were changed for the sake of anonymity. Participants self-selected a pseudonym.

## **Research Collection Process**

### **Introductory Focus Group**

All participants were invited to participate in a one-hour focus group (Appendix C). The location was a university conference room, and the session was audio recorded and then transcribed. The primary objective of this focus group was to learn how new teachers defined empathy and how they saw its significance in building strong relationships with their students of color. By examining empathy using open-ended questions, I hoped to reduce the social desirability and self-promoting responses that are often associated with standard survey methodology (Walsh & Betz, 2001). Therefore, teachers were asked five open-ended questions in order to discover their collective understanding of empathy and its utility in the classroom. A sample question was, “What typical opportunities do teachers have to demonstrate empathy towards students?”

### **Personal Narratives**

After the focus group, each participant took part in a personal narrative inquiry. Each inquiry session was held in the teacher’s classroom after school. Before beginning the narratives, I showed them a list of open-ended questions that I intended to ask. My intent was to set their minds at ease so that their stories would flow with the hope that participants would feel more open to express themselves in their own words. The narrative inquiries lasted between one and two hours. During these narratives, I sought to discover how empathy had personally influenced the participants’ development of cultural competencies. It was my desire to identify specific examples of how teachers understood and utilized empathy to build their own cultural competencies of their students. These sessions were audio recorded and then transcribed.

Examples of these questions to prompt participants telling of their stories related to narrative included, “In what ways have you, as a teacher, shared in a cultural experience and physically respond to those whom you were interacting with?” “Tell me about a specific situation where you felt like you responded empathetically? Why did you respond the way you did? What did you say?” Other questions arose throughout the narrative process for clarification. Overall, the aim was to provide participants the opportunity to tell their stories with the least interruption or directing possible, yet to remain focused on the aim of the narrative session. Additional prompt questions can be found in Appendix D.

### **Culminating Focus Group**

At the conclusion of the study, I conducted a second focus group that included all five participants. Copies of the transcripts were presented to the participants for verification of facts. This reflective period also served as an opportunity to gain feedback and clarification as well as to discuss the findings of my research. This process allowed for the narrative to emerge in a free-flowing manner. This session was audio recorded and transcribed.

### **Analysis of Data**

Through the participants’ stories, I sought to find connections that allowed me to explore their attitudes, behaviors, and personal experiences as well as how they developed cultural competency through empathy in their first year of teaching. Data included transcripts from the introductory and culminating focus groups and the personal narratives. The major aim for both the narratives and focus groups was to gather descriptive data in participants’ own words to enable me to construct insights into the participants’ understanding of empathy as a construct for developing cultural competency and its role in relationship building.

All narratives and focus group recordings were transcribed and coded. Since the data was considered through a lens of critical educational and ethno-cultural empathy, I organized the qualitative data and coded according to the theoretical framework discussed earlier as well as the explicit definition of ethno-cultural empathy, creating axial codes that identified data associated with the dimensions of critical education theory. Recordings were replayed, transcribed, and inspected for accuracy in order to better understand the dialogue (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Accuracy was ensured through techniques of member-checking and tracking of negative evidence. These techniques were utilized within the different contexts of the study and provided additional insights into interpretations resulting from data analysis. Triangulation techniques were used with the different sources of data in order to establish themes, adding to the validity of the study (Creswell, 2009).

### **Limitations**

A limitation of this study was the small sample size of only five participants. Thus, it is not generalizable to any larger sample or population. However, Creswell (2009) has reminded us that the value of qualitative research does not lie in generalizability but, rather, in the particularity and themes within the context of a specific study. Also, the sample of first-year teachers were also members from the same alternative certification program, which provided some training on diversity, equity, and inclusiveness as well as culturally responsive teaching, though it is my assumption that this preparation did not include any in-depth development of empathy and cultural competencies. Also, since teacher certification requirements vary from state to state, the participants' experiences and the professional development they received may or may not be the same as the experiences of all new teachers.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **TEACHER NARRATIVES AND MAJOR THEMES**

The primary purpose of this chapter is to share the stories of teacher participants and explain the major themes that surfaced during the research of which the new teachers found most challenging in the actual integration of empathy in the classroom. This qualitative study was designed to explore the impact of empathy in the teacher-student relationship as well as to support the cultural competency development of new teachers who did not share the background of the majority of their students. The data are divided into two parts. The first section focuses on each of the stories of participants, highlighting their triumphs and struggles with empathy. The second section of the chapter highlights the six major themes that emerged from the narratives and the focus group dialogues. The six themes included: empathy within the teacher-student relationship, empathy versus sympathy, empathy and content, empathy and cultural competency, empathy and trauma, and empathy limitations.

#### **Teachers' Stories about Empathy**

The following section presents the stories of five teachers speaking about the issues of empathy in the classroom. As much as possible, I sought to honor their voices and include direct quotes that highlight salient points made by each participant.

#### **Helen Snow**

This is really bad to say as a teacher, but sometimes when the kids piss me off, I think to myself, "Why am I working here? I don't want to deal with this anymore. Goodbye."

Those are days when I can't take it anymore behaviorally. I'm just like, "No more love.

Forget you all. You pissed me off. That's not how we do things in class. We have consequences. You lost your privileges. Goodbye.

Helen Snow was a second-generation Korean American Special Education teacher from Los Angeles. I sat down with Helen one day after school, in late spring, toward the conclusion of her first year of teaching. We met in her kindergarten/first-grade combo classroom at her public school in the heart of South Los Angeles, where she taught a class comprised of 12 African American and Latino students. Upon entering her room, I was instantly drawn to her small classroom library and noticed several books with people of color gracing the front covers, which I came to learn were some of her students' favorite books. I quickly learned that Helen believed culture was important and that education should be inclusive of culture and identity. Though Helen was somewhat familiar with the area surrounding her school since her parents used to own a store about five miles away when she was a child, she would admit she still had a lot to learn about the community. In Helen's statement about how her background prepared her for this new career, she said,

I had a lot of volunteer experience with kids, mostly Korean kids from church. So I was more used to the kind of culture I grew up with, like Korean food, Korean animations for the kids, and like Korean songs and nursery rhymes. Coming into this setting, it was a bit harder to relate to them because I don't know that many Spanish songs, nor was I accustomed to a lot of the holidays they celebrated, like Cinco de Mayo or Kwanza. I definitely wanted to make a connection with them culturally so it was something I had to make a bigger effort on.

Though she hoped to bridge the cultural competency gap between herself and her students in her first year, Helen reflected that this was still not a reality for all her students.

I think I can definitely take more time getting to know the community and the background of where my students come from. Every kid is different and given their ethnicity and their disability it takes so much time to get to know them. It will be nice to have some of the same kids the next year.

In our conversation, Helen shared both stories of empathetic triumph as well as heartfelt struggles with how to consistently empathize with all students. Ultimately, Helen found her greatest challenge to be a pedagogical one, the struggle of being empathetic while also working hard to close the achievement gap. She feared that being too empathetic could lead to lowered expectations for students.

I would choose to think I was on the stricter side when it came to production and upkeep of the classroom but at the same time because I knew these students had developmental delays and disabilities, I tried to be understanding. It's kind of a love-hate relationship. I wanted to be as loving and patient as possible, and at the same time I didn't want that to be a reason for them to be setup for failure. So I tried to push my kids as much as I could especially when it came to academics. I tried to be empathetic in the sense that I knew some kids wouldn't be able to process the info the same as others, so I definitely tried to give them a lot of chances.

Helen credited her lack of experience as the underlying factor, but was optimistic that with time she would develop into a teacher that could be both empathetic and maintain high



expectations. She articulated her struggles with managing the time needed to build the quality teacher-student relationships that she hoped for entering into her first year of teaching:

All the additional responsibilities outside of instructing students can impact a teacher's empathy level. It's frustrating trying to prioritize instruction and district-mandated paperwork over spending time with the kids. I can't spend time doing what I want to do because there is so much I'm required to do. So awareness in the classroom is also a factor. I think that's one of the more structured things I struggled with. Having to do all of this work when I actually need to build relationships with the kids. Instead I have to turn in attendance now or else they'll constantly call me.

She continued,

My lack of experience in teaching definitely plays into it. I focused so much of my time really trying to master instruction and being able to differentiate. I'm still trying to understand whether it's the disability delaying some students from doing well at school, or if it's a part of their personalities, or even if it's things happening at home. Maybe mom didn't come home or they had a fight. Being more conscious of my students' personal lives and how that impact their school lives is where I still need to develop.

In addition to Helen's pedagogical challenge, multiple factors impacted her ability to be a culturally competent, empathetic, early childhood/special education teacher. Age, disability, culture, and classroom management all made it extremely challenging to be empathetic. She highlighted one interaction she had with one of her students with cerebral palsy who was confined to a wheelchair:

I wouldn't consider myself an empathetic teacher. But a time when I was empathetic with a student was with my student in a wheelchair. When I saw him the first day I thought to myself, "Shoot, this is going to be hard." He was one of my biggest behavior challenges because he was constantly picking at me and teasing me as the teacher. He really knew how to push your buttons. I realized weeks into the school year that it was mainly because of attention. He really craved that attention and he tried to do it in negative ways. I just figured that this was how he got attention at home. Once I realized that I started giving him constant verbal praise. Once I did that he became a lot more accepting to listening and follow directions. Before that all I heard was "no."

Regarding issues related to differences among children that surfaced in her special education classroom, Helen explained:

I want my students to be aware that people come in different colors, skin types, heights, and abilities. Sometimes the kids would say really negative things about my student who was confined to his wheelchair like, "Oh, you can't walk." So we often had conversations like, would it be nice if someone said that to you and you couldn't walk? How would you feel? So being really conscious of the fact that not everyone is the same. Even though my kids are labeled Special Ed, sometimes they do look different and other students within the school would come off a little mean. So helping them be more aware that they have to defend themselves. I never tried to impose the label on the class as Special Ed, but I tried to think, How can I just make it more inclusive? I tried to put them more in grade level settings where we'd be with the General Ed kinder or first grade group, like going on

field trips together. I wanted to be inclusive rather than always be separate in our Special Ed classroom.

### **Kevin Adams**

I've had students to ask me, "Mister, why do you choose to come and work here? Why don't you go and work at a school that's easier?" I've had a student flat out ask me why I don't go work at a wealthier White school where it's going to be easier. Why do you come to the hood to work?"

Kevin was a first-year high school RSP teacher at a charter school located in South Los Angeles. Prior to teaching, Kevin worked in the entertainment industry as a videographer. Kevin and his parents were White, yet he also grew up with two adopted siblings of color, one Latino and one African American. He believed that his blended family gave him a unique perspective on race, class, and educational inequity and served as personal motivation for why he sought to work in urban education.

I sat down with Kevin after school in the fall, at the start of his second year of teaching to hear his stories regarding his challenges and successes with utilizing empathy as a means to build cultural competency. Kevin noted that he quickly realized in his first year that not sharing the background of his students was a hurdle:

I also think there is something cultural about it. The fact that I don't look like them. A group of teachers and I were talking about this yesterday. There is an assumption about all teachers at the school that we live such different lives than [students]. Students think none of their teachers live in this community and teachers are just going home to some

beautiful house and this perfect life, and then they just come to the school to collect a paycheck and just do this type of thing.

Kevin shared that one of the reasons the classroom could be difficult was students' lack of trust for teachers. Kevin attributed this to the lack of consistency with the teaching staff and believed students found it difficult to constantly be vulnerable and invest in teacher-student relationships only to have to do it again and again as a majority of the staff turned over year after year:

I feel like part of that is the difference in backgrounds and the difference in cultures, and at a school like this, it is also an unwillingness on the students to try to engage in that stuff because it's so frequent that teachers leave and don't stick around. That's the nature of the school, and I think breaking through that can be difficult for some students. There may be one or two students that I immediately built really strong relationships with early on. I'd say a majority of my students though took me months before I cracked through that outer protective shell and they started to let me get to know them and understand them. I also gave them written surveys at the beginning of the year as a way to get a sense of what they like to do and what their backgrounds are—that type of thing.

One way Kevin said he tried to build relationships with his students was by investing in getting to know his students' interests. Though he recognized it as important, he admittedly struggled with it at times during his first year. However, Kevin's example below highlights how the investment had positive ramifications on the teacher-student relationship with multiple students:

The other thing that I try to do is spend time with the students when possible to try to understand their other interests, their cultural backgrounds, and where they come from. In my first year, I probably didn't do as good a job as I would have liked and in a lot of ways the whole first year feels like a blur. I'm sure I did it more than I remember now. It is important to me now and was important to me then. I don't know if there is a by-the-book way of doing it besides just interacting with the students. I did spend time with a number of students talking about things that did concern them but wouldn't necessarily concern a person like me. Like when we were talking in one of my academic support classes about making arguments, we talked a lot about Donald Trump because a number of my students are undocumented. Specifically, one of my student's mother was potentially going to be deported last year. Actually, an administrator and I came together to write a letter to the judge to try to keep the mother here so that the family would be stable. Having those discussions I think validated my students' experience. They know [immigration is] not something that is affecting me personally, but by giving them the opportunity to discuss and voice their opinions on it and to know that I'm listening to that and validating that, I think helps with considering those backgrounds that may be different from mine. So I had opportunities to do it.

Kevin's experiences as a first-year teacher caused him to wonder how he could better adapt his teaching methods to meeting the needs of his students on both the academic and social-emotional levels. He theorized that teachers working in communities where students experienced high trauma would be more effective if teachers' pedagogies included trauma-informed practices. He said,

I think there's something and we're beginning to work on this at this school. I don't know what the connection is, but I think there's something between the trauma-informed practices and the ACE [Adverse Childhood Experiences] of our students and empathy. I don't know exactly what that looks like, but I do strongly feel there's something between our understanding as teachers of the physiological impact of environment on our students and our understanding of strategies to address that. I haven't learned enough about that topic to know what it is, but there has to be a connection between the trauma that a number of our students are experiencing and our ability as teachers to be empathetic. I'm not sure what that is, but having that awareness, which I didn't have last year, as well as the awareness of how much trauma can impact the physical health and the mental health of a number of our students is something that's worth looking at more, and reflecting on, especially for a new teacher. This can help especially if the student has high ACE scores. The first student I talked about would probably have extremely high ACE scores. So having an understanding of what to do with that information, and how to be empathetic for that student would've been very helpful.

There was one story in particular that Kevin shared that he believed most accurately highlighted the challenges that students from low-income communities of color face and the level of empathy required for teachers to successfully impact those students. Though Kevin consistently demonstrated empathy toward his students in general, this story illustrated how his limited cultural competencies may have negatively impacted the student:

Another time, and this was a little bit different, as it is with a student who I had a really close relationship with even early on in the year. He was probably one of the most mature

students I had ever interacted with. He really recognized that he had a lot of work to do and really wanted to graduate. He was really looking ahead to what's next and had these big dreams. Yet he had a kind of funky family situation. He was living with his aunt because his mom and dad were in Mexico. He was in my physics class that I supported. His biggest struggle was math and, with my support, we got him through the first semester of physics with a C, which for him might as well have been an A, because so much of physics requires math and he really struggled with that. So it was a victory. Physics was definitely hard for him. Lots of people don't get As and Bs in Physics, so for him to get a C was a big deal. So we put in all this work, but during the middle of second semester he just shut down.

Kevin continued by saying:

I think the workload and the pressure that he was even putting on himself along with some of the family stuff that was going on, that he wasn't living with his mom and dad, finally got to him. He wanted a job all throughout the first semester and in the second semester he would talk to me about it. He would ask me what he needed to do to get a job. I would straight up tell him we could look at getting you a job, but as your aunt said, your grades need to be solid. He also didn't have a car so getting to a job would be challenging for him and [his aunt] really didn't want him to pursue getting a job. So at some point and in the second semester, maybe a month and half left in the semester, he just stops coming to school. He just was not coming anymore. I tried calling home and I couldn't get a hold of anybody. So at one point he shows up for the day, but probably hasn't been to school for two weeks. We thought he had dropped out. So I asked him,

“What was going on? Why haven't you been coming to school?” And he says, “Well I got a job. I got a job with this guy and we're building fences. And so now that I have this job. I don't know if I'm coming back to finish school.” Now I wasn't very empathetic at that point. I think, again, I was very frustrated and part of that was me being a realist. I told him, “I don't think this job is going to last. I don't think this is a career. You're helping some guy build fences. What happens when he's done building fences?”

As Kevin progressed with his narrative, he offered insight about his own sense of difficulty in communicating or responding empathetically with his student:

I didn't communicate that well with him. I didn't yell at the kid, but I don't think there was a lot of empathy in my communication. I think he needed more of that to really process the message. Despite his maturity I don't think me telling him, “Hey, you need to be at school. This is a long-term mistake” went over well. I'm not one hundred percent sure, but I think had I been a little bit more empathetic in the way I communicated that day then maybe he wouldn't have basically bailed for the rest of the year. At that point he ended up failing all of his classes strictly from attendance just because he wasn't there. And I look back to that and I know that I was frustrated because I thought this kid is dropping out, he is not going to get his high school diploma, and this job is probably not going to last. I wasn't wrong with anything I was telling him. It was all truthful, but I think I presented it in a way that showed more of my frustration. To him, it probably came across as, “Look at all the work I've done for you and now you're throwing it away.” Which is not anything I said explicitly, but looking back at how those conversations went, I can see him potentially interpreting it that way. My response didn't



help the situation unless he was a super empathetic person himself and thought, “I really feel bad for him. Look at all the work he put into me.” I'm not expecting him to do all that. I wish I'd been a little bit more empathetic.

Although Kevin sounded happier about his experience with his student and the outcome, he did realize again that engaging the student with empathy might have been more helpful. He said,

Good news, though, is somewhere along the lines it clicked for him. He came back to summer school to make up his work and he's back at school this year to finish and graduate. So now I have that in my head. He knows that he has to do the work and the funny thing is when I saw him back he was like, “You were right. That job didn't last. I should not have dropped out.” I was happy to hear him say that now, but it did make me think I probably could have communicated that a little bit more clearly, with a bit more empathy.

Yet despite his rapport with this student, Kevin offered a heartfelt critique about the difficulties he experienced in being effective:

That was with a student that I had a really, really good relationship with. A close relationship with who comes and sees me every other day. But in that case I let my frustration get the better of me. I didn't take the time to really truly understand why he felt so strongly that he needed to get this job, and that he needed to hold the job even though the job took him out of school. I was a little too singularly focused on stuff that was down the line. Though it was not wrong, even to this day since we've been back, he's told me, “You were right.” It's good he's learned from it, and for me, too. I learn from it.

I should have sat down and said, “Let's talk about this. Why do you need this job? What is this job giving you?” before I jump into, “Hey man, I know you and wanted to work, but this is going to keep you from graduating and this job is probably not going to last long.” For a 29-year-old person, like myself, that all makes perfect sense. Any other adult would agree and be like, “Absolutely. That's not going to be a great move for him. He's got to get his diploma. He's throwing away his opportunity now, and he's worked so hard to get where he's at. So why now waste all this, which is just going to delay his graduation anymore, and it's not what he needed at the time.” He probably needed a better combination of it.

In his narrative, Kevin also linked the need for more cultural understanding if a teacher is to respond empathetically to students from communities that are different from their own. He admitted to having a blind spot in this area, saying,

That's probably the perfect example of me needing more cultural understanding. See I, too, worked when I was in high school. I had a job at McDonald's. It gives you some perspective. I know that the way my parents raised me that if I work at McDonald's and my grades suffered, I'd be done. Actually, I probably have to quit something else first, like some other afterschool activity or something like that if my grades suffered. Because it was always pounded into me that schools comes first. School comes first. And I think for this student in particular, honestly even now that I am reflecting on it, I don't know why he took that job. We have never addressed that part. Even in the conversations we've had this year because he seems to be back on and recognize where he went wrong. But I don't know what was going on. His little brother was also living with them. I don't know

exactly what was going on with the family because I couldn't get a hold of them. I don't know what the family financial situation was like. Maybe it was something where he felt like he needed to work to provide for the family, and maybe there was some kind of development in his social situation. Or maybe it was just he was 18 at the time and a junior. Maybe it was the notion that he wanted to work because that's what men do— “I am 18 and I'm a man now. I need to start acting like a man. A man has a job and things like that.” Kind of recognizing that with my parents it wouldn't have been like that. My parents would have been like, “You're a high school kid. That's great you're working a job, and I want you to get that job experience but your education comes first. No matter what.” So that could be an area where I had a blind spot that I just didn't consider at the time.

Kevin further noted,

As I am reflecting back now, I one hundred percent should've handled it more empathetically. So if something like that happens again my response would be different for him. It would change. The focus would not be about preaching to him. I'm not going to tell him a lot of stuff that he may not process. It's going to be more like, “Why do you need this? Express to me your feelings so that I can understand why you want to do that and why you feel that way.” I'd equip myself to understand that and then we can have a calm conversation about what's best moving forward. How can I be empathetic? And practical? And how can I communicate that to you?

## **Wendy Lewis**

I hope I never have to experience the things he has experienced. He would always joke with me and always point out how I was White. Anything I did he would say it's because I was White. It was so ridiculous. It would be things that have nothing to do with me being White. At the end of the day he would say, I love you, Miss Wendy. He could never say my last name right. I would tell him, "I have mad love for you."

Wendy was a first-year high school RSP teacher at a traditional public school located in South Central Los Angeles. As a White female undergraduate student, Wendy described herself as a colorblind person, unaware of the majority of the issues that she was learning about as a sociology major. However, she attributed the eye-opening exposure opportunities that she experienced while being a part of a multi-ethnic student group for creating a passion in her for justice and equity and leading her to want to work in low-income communities of Color. She credited her strong Christian faith and the role modeling of her mother, who was also an educator, for her empathetic nature. I sat down with Wendy after school in the fall, at the start of her second year of teaching, to hear her stories and reflect on her challenges and successes with utilizing empathy as a means to build cultural competency in her first year.

Wendy was adamant that empathy was required to be a great teacher, particularly when teaching at a school where children have no other options. She said,

I don't think you can be a great teacher without empathy. I don't think it works at my school. Maybe [not] at the school where the culture is academically rigorous. If you don't handle business then you're out. As a teacher [at those schools], you don't have to be empathetic because that is just how the school is. But in a school like mine, this is a last

resort for most kids. They don't have anywhere else to go unless they're going to juvenile hall or a continuation school.

Wendy also linked the issue of empathy to student motivation:

Students at our school don't always have a lot of motivation, so empathy becomes a tool that makes students feel important and loved so that they can hopefully draw into caring about their education. For me, I think there is no way I could teach without being empathetic. There's no way you can work with people so closely in my opinion and not be empathetic. Working with people is hard. There are teachers here who don't have empathy and no one likes them. Actually their classes suck and kids don't learn.

Everyone knows it. I co-taught with some of those teachers. The room is cold. It's not a good learning environment if you don't have that.

Wendy found that creating opportunities to listen to students was a simple way for teachers to strengthen the teacher-student relationship and show empathy:

Since I was a Special Education teacher I had two conference periods. A lot of times I would leave my door open and kids would come in. I would let them talk for five minutes and then send them back to class. I have a lot of students who I didn't even teach [who] would just see me in passing or I'd be outside my door just saying hi to students as they passed by. Then they'd begin to come by more often to talk to me.

However, Wendy also noted that listening to students meant that sometimes she had to handle sensitive topics that she was unprepared to engage. She said,

People come up to me and just start telling me things. Half the time I'm thinking, you probably shouldn't be telling me this. Sometimes they would tell me something that could

be borderline illegal. I tell them, Stop. I don't think I want to hear anymore. One day during my conference period I had my door open and I was doing work. One of my students walked in telling me that she was upset. Now this particular student, who is only 16 years old, already has a one-year-old child which already caused her to miss a year of school. Then she started crying as she began explaining that she was really upset because her aunt forced her to have an abortion in March. She starts telling me how she wanted to keep the baby and did not want to give it up. She shared that after she woke up from the procedure she screamed and cried and couldn't believe her aunt had forced her to go through that. She intended to keep it private but she ended up telling one friend who she trusted. However, word of what happened got around from that one person and kids were now beginning to tease her. Now she's sitting here right in front of my desk just crying. I began rubbing her back, giving her a tissue, and just letting her talk. She was telling me the story about how kids are so annoying and immature. Just being able to talk and having the opportunity to share was big for her.

Wendy believed that perspective taking was vital to being empathetic. She believed that an empathetic teacher first must understand why the students thought and felt the way they did, and then the teacher must validate those feelings in some way, before suggesting an alternative way of thinking:

When it comes down to it students just want teachers who really care. What's the old saying? They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. That's what it comes down to a lot of the times. Of course, I think especially where I teach, being a Special Ed teacher, being someone who doesn't have a disability, and having the

experience where school came natural to me, I really have to be empathetic for those students who truly struggle learning because I will never understand what they experience. I think that is a key part to being a teacher, especially a Special Education teacher. All students want to feel valued by adults and their teachers. I believe there has to be some aspect of empathy especially if you don't share their backgrounds. You have to find a way to come to their level and walk with them. I also try to invest a lot in them like some teachers do. I would tell students come talk to me whenever you want and I'll listen. I'll put whatever aside and listen.

Wendy was quite comfortable using urban colloquial language that she felt helps her relate well with her high school students. Her ability to communicate using language that students understand was evidence of her cultural competency development. She described this skill by saying,

Being culturally competent and knowing what students like and how they communicate is important. African-American students here are pretty loud and have a lot to say. I can tell them to shut their mouth and that is not offensive to them. Or I can put them on blast. I don't like to do that, but I learned that that works. My Latino students are typically more submissive and tend to be more respectful of authority. So I tend to approach situations differently. I'm not trying to stereotype but I've had situations with students where I've told them that I am going to call your parents. Some of my African-American students have said, "Well, go ahead and call." But with my Latino students they said, "No. No. Please don't call." I had to learn that and that is part of cultural competency.

However, Wendy noted that she struggled with being empathetic with students she felt didn't try, or who demonstrated challenging behaviors. She provided the following two examples:

[Example one:] I'm thinking of this one girl who I was so annoyed by. I had a student, a tiny little girl, and she did not do any of her work. She barely attempted. She'd put her head down and say, "Miss, I'm tired." She liked to read, which was great. That's cool, but not when I'm trying to ask you to do a diagnostic. She was always trying to sleep, or she was tired, or she was hungry, or she had a headache. Even as an empathic person, I struggled being empathetic with her.

[Example two:] I also struggle with this one boy who was in my homeroom and in my business class. I felt like he didn't try. I struggle with that. You have to give some type of effort. I will do everything for you to make sure you succeed if you at least try. But if you don't try, you are straight up annoying. I have a really hard time liking you. This kid was also a trouble maker. He was an instigator. I don't like that either when kids are just mean to other kids. That's not cool. He was someone who would make little unnecessary comments that would instigate fights. He would never be the one to fight but he would always instigate someone else fighting. So I struggle with kids who don't try and who are mean. But, honestly that was only one or two kids.

Wendy was concerned, though, about the long-term emotional toll of teaching. She shared her fear that the work might not be sustainable emotionally if she continued at the current rate. Wendy felt that the constant emotional transference that happens between student and



teacher when dealing with extreme challenges has an impact on the teacher in a way that could drain good teachers. She said,

I was talking to a fellow teacher about this who works at a charter school. We were both saying, I don't know if it's sustainable to be a teacher your whole life and invest in the students the way we are doing now. When I get married and have kids that's going to be a challenge. Am I really going to still want to stay after school all the time? It takes work. It takes emotional energy. A lot of people don't want to invest that emotional energy. Last year I barely cried and I don't think it was until the end of the year where I finally broke down and I realized I needed to cry more. I had the mindset that I'm not going to let these kids break me. And I think honestly that's more tiring than teaching, especially if you are carrying those stories with you. I tried to actively listen and ask questions. As a teacher there is so much to remember. You have to remember how your students learn best. You have to remember what students need socially and emotionally. You have to remember how certain students liked to be talked to.

Wendy shared an interesting story from her first year about one of her students who she felt needed to know someone cared about him. It is an interesting depiction of how empathy, validation, and accountability supported this student on his path to graduation.

One of my seniors was basically functionally illiterate and it took me awhile to realize he couldn't read and struggled with writing, but he had a great personality. He was super talkative and really fun. He was the class clown type. During the second semester, I remember us talking about his family. He's Salvadorian and really connected to his family. He ended up telling me that he was formerly part of one of the largest gangs here

in [Los Angeles]. He really liked talking to me after school. I'd sit there listening to these stories and just be blown away. He's told me how he had his back all tatted and then removed. Basically, he should be dead based on the things he's done.

Wendy also noted that the conversation with her student moved toward talking about purpose.

We started talking about purpose and I just told him your life has so much purpose. Then about a week later he comes up to me and asks me if I told anyone about what he told me. I told him no and asked why. He told me someone came and pressed him, asking him to [represent] his old gang. He was pretty scared. I couldn't believe this was his way of life. He really wanted to graduate from high school [and] he would be the first person to do so in his family. But going into the ten-week report card he was failing three classes. He and I looked at his grades together and I said, "Here's what we are going to do. You have three Fs right now and less than eight weeks to pull them up." And he just started to break down. He started talking about how this school sucks and the teachers don't care about their students. He started crying, then I started crying.

As Wendy continued speaking about this experience, she shifted her focus to teacher caring and its potential impact on both the student and teacher:

I had just had a conversation earlier that day about the struggles of getting students to care. But this kid did. So I told him, "You are right. It's pretty obvious a lot of teachers don't care and that's not how it should be." We were both sitting there and he told me point blank, "This is terrible. I just want to give up. I don't care about graduating. I don't want to try anymore." Here we are, sitting in my room, both crying. Then I said, "Okay. Let's make an action plan right now. Let's look at your grades and we will go to each

teacher one by one and ask them what you need to do to get your grades up.” And guess what? He did. He got his grades up. At his graduation, I cried. And he did, too. The moment I saw him walk onto that field I remember thinking, Here’s a young man who has endured so much. Not only was he an English language learner, he also had a severe learning disability. He’s now the first person to graduate from high school in his family. He just needed someone to tell him they were not going to let him fail. He needed someone to show him that there were teachers that did care about his success. That is something that I will always carry with me.

### **Jerry Pass**

I don’t know a lot about African American culture and Latin culture. There is a lot about their cultural identity that I have not figured out how to productively interact with and really help them see the value of what I am trying to do.

Jerry is a seventh- and eighth-grade English language arts and social studies special education teacher in Lynwood, California. In his first year of teaching, his roster was comprised of primarily Latino students with a few African American students in each period. Jerry described himself as someone coming from a White, working-class family, which in his words meant, “You get all of the benefits of being White without any of the benefits of also having money.” He credited his cultural upbringing to his religious grandparents who kept him in a very small church circle growing up. Eventually, Jerry dropped out of school at the beginning of high school but later returned to eventually graduate from high school and college.

Jerry shared his thoughts on how his own cultural background contributed to challenges in the classroom for his special education students as well as his students of color:

I have an idea of what behaviors are supposed to be in the classroom. My idea of what these behaviors are was taught to me like most of us. I was never good at this in school though. The idea of sitting still is still hard for me to do even as an adult. As a student in my Master's classes, I can't stay at my desk. I get up and I walked to the back. I know how to manage myself. But as a student or child in middle school and high school, I didn't know how to do that. I've learned, and I came to the school year knowing this about myself and hoping I could teach it to others. Yet I failed miserably in royal ways. What I noticed is I still had that idea of what being a good student was and what good behavior in the classroom is supposed to look like, which is sitting still and paying attention, not talking when the teacher is talking, making eye contact, and sitting upright while keeping your hands to yourself. Things that are not just excruciatingly difficult for someone who has a disability, but that may cause them to want to misbehave just simply to entertain themselves, or for fun, or also something culturally.

Moreover, Jerry linked his perspective to both his class and cultural lens and grappled with what was beneficial for student success. He said,

I believe my thoughts on what a good student has more to do with my class and my cultural lens. Do I want to teach those skills so that they know how to survive in another White dominant class? Is there an acceptable student behavior and a dominant learning style that is expected of them in most classrooms? Yes. So I want you to have that skill. Do I believe the skills should be taught at home? Not because it is right, but because it is beneficial. Profitable is the more accurate term. Or beneficial because it is profitable. It is only profitable because of the dominant culture in academia. It is not a right and wrong.

It's, here's how to succeed when your teacher is middle-class and White and has been positioned as the guardian to knowledge.

Though he had the best intentions, Jerry shared how subconsciously his views on what typical student behavior should be as well as his limited understanding and interactions with African American culture had adverse effects in his classroom at the beginning of the school year, saying:

There are certain things about many cultures that I certainly do not fully understand. Specifically, about Hispanic and Black cultures in the U.S. What I do know I've learned either from movies, which you can never ever trust, or from friends and colleagues. I'd say the largest source of information on Black culture has been probably Chris Rock, which I'm not sure what the reliability of that is. But I do remember hearing about this joke that he cracked in his "Bigger and Blacker" 1990s standup, like going to the movies in Black communities. He'll go to a movie and talk through the movie yelling at the screen, and that's hilariously funny. What's funny is this is totally taboo in the White community. You would get kicked out of the theater. No one would say anything to you directly, but at least five people would get up and find a manager. Yet in my class it took me awhile to realize that when my African-American students responded to me immediately, vocally, loudly, that I shouldn't view it as disrespect. This was just how they were interacting with what I was saying. That was so hard for me to accept and it still is difficult to accept because that's not what being a good student is. Honestly, I still have difficulty with my African-American students [who] do that right now.

About this, Jerry shared a specific experience:

Like one African-American student that I had last year. He would respond like that. I would try and respond as politely and as calmly as possible, but in a lot of ways I am responding to a moment when his cultural identity is conflicting with my cultural identity. I can't respond with my cultural identity without also offending his cultural identity. I don't think either one of us is wrong. Finding a way past this problem hasn't happened. I just became more aware of it toward the end of the school year. My problem was accepting the fact that it was not a matter of disrespect. This is a matter of how I interact with you. And I am just still trying to get through that because the student can't identify that yet. It's too abstract for him to understand that this is okay here and maybe here, but not okay here because the White guy at the front told you not to. That isn't going to fly.

Recognizing that he needed help, Jerry talked about seeking interventions:

So, I started having some local interventions. Asking people how I resolve this without being a White guy addressing this right now. It was emotionally draining. Based on his history, he hadn't had a lot of educators put in the kind of work that I did it to get him to participate and he was uncomfortable with it. I think a lot of it got misconstrued to be like, "You're being hard on me because I am Black. Instead of you are being hard on me because you want me to be better because you care about me." This is a very different thing because when you're suffering consequences, how do you tell the difference? From his side, how do you tell the difference from he's being mean to me because I am Black or he's being hard on me because he cares about me? It doesn't look any different on his

side. However, I know that if I didn't like him I wouldn't bother spending my time on him at all and if I didn't like you because you were Black I'd probably show you in a different way. Racists don't typically come to work in Lynnwood, California. But when you're 12 years old, I have to walk you through that logic.

Jerry believed that one of the biggest challenges to building a culture of empathy in his classroom was that middle school students, in general, were not able to communicate adequately. He felt that in order to be empathetic, one needs to understand the nature of the problem. However, if the student explaining the problem struggles to communicate it effectively, then it makes it harder for the teacher to truly empathize with that student. Therefore, Jerry spoke about relying on the skill of empathetic listening to bridge the gap:

Empathy is challenging at the middle school level because communication is so bad. I'm not talking about empathy in this sense of what I feel for a student. I am referring to empathy as verb. You have to have information about those students, about their conditions, about their lives, about their understandings, their perceptions, their feelings and realities. Getting details is everything. How do I get them there? How do I get enough information so I can work empathetically with them? Opening up those lines of communication is one of my biggest challenges. Giving them those tools is important because often times they've never had anybody try to understand them in that way.

Jerry explained more specifically what he meant by “empathetic listening,” saying:

I learned the empathetic communication skill of empathetic listening, which is a skillset that you can apply in the classroom very easily. This type of communication uses a question-answer-clarification response-type of feedback loop that gets us deeper and

deeper into an understanding of what is most important. Empathetic listening and the way I'm defining empathy is a verb. It is an action. Typically I am distrusting of feelings as a general rule. I'm about facts. I understand academically that feelings are important for context. They're not the facts. The facts are here. The feelings are there. But they make meaning together. A teacher, with my personality, believes sympathy is a response to feeling and empathy is a response to the facts. I use both these to make meaning out of it, but I feel like you have to communicate in order to do that.

In his narrative, Jerry noted that he still had to work further in order to develop his own skills as an empathetic communicator:

I am still looking for the way. I don't feel like I have real answers yet to have the type of growth that is necessary to really move the mark. To really empathize affectively with my students in a way that is going to provide them with everything they need to be successful in life and even successful in middle school. Developing empathy as a skill is a process. Some develop that skill better than others. Even those that are very good at it lapse because it's so much about communication. Empathy is a form of communication and it might be the highest form of communication which makes it the most difficult to master and the most difficult to be consistent with on a daily basis. I am not there yet. I am not there.

Admittedly, Jerry also noted that he started the year with limited cultural competency, which aided in his struggle to be the type of empathetic teacher he wanted to be. Not only did this impact his relationship with students, but it also impacted his interactions with their parents. He said,



Empathy is not a natural skillset of mine. I do remember a story, though, regarding an IEP [Individualized Education Plan] meeting that I held. It was one of those meetings that had been rescheduled three times because the parent [did not show up]. When the parent finally did show, she was 30 minutes late and wearing a hat with rhinestones that had the word “Sexy” spelled out. To show up to your kid’s school for an IEP meeting like that communicates a certain lack of understanding of the importance of what we’re about to do. That interaction changed my perspective of that student. How can I expect the student to take this seriously when his elders don’t take it seriously? Yet and still, I don’t know. Maybe here is another example of cultural disconnect. Looking at it through my own middle-class White lens, maybe I misunderstood and that was her taking it seriously. Maybe that was the only hat she had and it was a hair day that required one. But I judged in that moment and said this has to be difficult for that student and I need to figure out a way to make accommodations. It made me more sympathetic to the struggle and to look for ways to be more actively empathetic toward the student.

**Natalie Gonzalez**

Referring to her shared racial identity with her Latino students:

I think just the feeling of comfortableness perhaps. My own children are the same and I guess, unfortunately, it feels natural. I also think there is more of a lack of knowledge. More than anything, I lack knowing who the person is so I automatically judge. I don’t want to say I purposely judge, but maybe it’s just based on experiences, conversations, or lack of interactions.

Natalie, a third-generation Mexican American, worked as an apprentice teacher for a charter elementary school in South Central Los Angeles. Born and raised in Northern California, Natalie knew far too well the socioeconomic challenges facing her students and their families, yet her background did not include much cultural or social interaction with African Americans, who were the majority of her student population the previous year. Natalie had a clear vision for what she wanted to accomplish as a kindergarten apprentice teacher, which was to build leaders. She felt that empathy was a valuable leadership trait that she wanted to develop in her students, which she expressed by saying,

As a teacher, I seek to develop leadership skills because I'd like to build a community of leaders. In this generation, I feel like it is important to have empathy in the classroom. If a person doesn't have empathy, it's hard for them to be a leader. I don't know if you've ever worked with someone who may have been your manager and just totally blew you off and didn't really care about you personally. Some of our students have had similar experiences where a teacher didn't even try to understand what they have been through, or where they came from, and what they have been shaped by. As a teacher, my role is to build leaders. If I can teach how to show empathy to others by showing students empathy, then at least I did a little part of my job.

In her first year, Natalie realized that it was naturally easier to relate and connect with her Latino students than it was for her to relate to her African American students. She said,

I guess also learning through different professional development sessions through my certification program, my school, and just speaking with my mentors, I learned that relationship building was a huge factor in the outcome of my classroom. So I figured I

should just try it. I also realized that I was naturally more empathetic to students [who] were the same background and culture as mine. Thinking back, I didn't do it purposely. It was just kind of a natural thing. My relationship with certain students were stronger than others and when they were stronger I realized it was this shared background.

The primary focus at Natalie's school site was placed on improving standardized test scores, and she felt that the fast-paced environment at her school and the massive, mandated teacher workload limited her ability to be empathetic. In her first year, Natalie never felt she had enough time to do it all, so she felt that she struggled with finding time to be empathetic:

I always thought I was [empathetic]. Yes, I am. I do think I am, but I've struggled with it in the classroom for sure. It's easy to be empathetic with someone when you're talking to them one-on-one, or with your family, or with your kids, but I feel like the workload is overbearing in terms of how empathetic I am. Kind of going back to what I was saying earlier, that it is really hard to have that feeling of empathy when all you're thinking about is getting through the day. I just feel like I wish I can be more empathetic. And I can.

Natalie also noted the difficulty of balancing the many expectations and "mixed signals." She said,

It's just the issue of balancing everything. I feel there's so much pressure in terms of performance that I feel like there's a lot of pressure for performance and I get mixed signals working for this school because, on one hand, they want you to build relationships, but on the other hand, all your time needs to be put toward getting high test scores. I felt like I really couldn't do much for students who needed relationship building. I don't feel like relationship building necessarily means good test scores. So I guess what

I'm saying is I wish I could be more empathetic and I really want to pin down this teaching thing so I can focus on it.

In the midst of her reflection here, she stopped and questioned her prioritization of these two competing goals:

Why do I need to feel like I need to get this teaching thing in order to be more empathetic? I don't know why I feel that way. Probably because it's just a lot of pressure and also, being one teacher to 31 students, it's really hard to try to manage and be empathetic with our ratio.

Natalie dealt with a few students who consistently exhibited extreme behaviors that required empathetic responses. However, she reflected that her initial response was not empathy but survival, which she attributed to trauma that she had experienced as a child growing up in a low-income community. Ultimately, she struggled with overcoming her own initial responses and with feeling personally offended by her students' behaviors:

I think as a new teacher you have to overcome the hurdle of not being personally offended with an understanding you are working with six-year-olds. Even though I have my own kids, you have to really get over that hurdle that kids are different and sometimes they're still learning. They're still learning how to be human beings and if they haven't learned that then they're going to act out. They're going to act out what they learned or what they see. They are having feelings that they're not able to regulate yet. I feel like I personally got offended because [while I was] growing up if I had interactions like that with other people, I went into survival mode. If I had experiences that were not necessarily positive, right away that feeling of being in survival mode comes back.

You're not going there. You've felt that feeling before. Survival mode makes you put a wall up. Even though the child is only five or six years old, you've seen this before, and you know you don't like it.

Natalie also shared a story about one particular student that highlighted her struggles and triumphs with empathy. Ultimately, it was through her investment in the teacher-student relationship that she was able to curtail the extreme behaviors exhibited by the students and assist her student to achieve academic, social, and emotional success:

When I think about empathy, one story that comes to mind is an interaction I had with one particular student last year who does not come from the same background as me. She is Black. I worked with her more toward the end of the year once she was added to my reading group. Behaviorally, she had a really hard time. It was hard for me to think about what she needed because, for me, I was taking it personally. She would do some really drastic things, almost shocking things, where she was unsafe with her body, with materials, and would hurt other students. I would sometimes go home to talk to my family or friends about her. I would also talk to her mom almost every time she would do something crazy, like kicking students in the back or throwing scissors across the classroom.

Natalie noted her instinct to give consequences rather than respond with empathy:

I didn't really know why and my instinct was always to give consequences instead of trying to understand and maybe be empathetic. I automatically didn't have that feeling of empathy for her because I felt offended by what she was doing. But once I started working with her more and more, I had to put myself aside in order to grow that empathy

and really get to know who she was. Though things were still really bad with her, at least I had the motivation to really try new things with her, like how get her to behave in the classroom. I feel like that relationship building that we had toward the end of the year really paid off because now she is in my classroom this year and she is almost completely opposite of how she was last year. She's only had a couple of instances where she was unsafe with her body, but nearly nothing nearly as drastic as it was last year.

### **Major Themes**

One of the aims of this study was to discover if there were overarching challenges experienced by new teachers working in communities in which they did not share the same racial and cultural backgrounds of the majority of their students. Of particular concern was how these five novice teachers—Helen, Jerry, Wendy, Kevin, and Natalie—utilized empathy to build teacher-student relationships and how they navigated the issue of cultural competencies. Again, the voices of the teachers remained at the forefront of the discussion by including salient points raised during the focus groups or narrative sessions. The following six major themes emerged from the data collected: empathy in the teacher-student relationship, empathy versus sympathy, empathy and content, empathy and cultural competency, empathy and trauma, and empathy limitations.

#### **Empathy in the Teacher-Student Relationships**

All the teachers that participated in this study agreed that empathy is significant to the establishment of strong teacher-student relationships. Natalie stated,

I believe it is important for a teacher to have empathy in the classroom. Trust is built when a teacher shows empathy toward students. I think it is important for empathy to be

shown in the classroom because students need to feel the validation. Empathy can be taught definitely more through experience. Though I feel that empathy is not a skill that can be directly taught through one lesson. I think showing empathy as a teacher can build that skill in students.

Wendy underscored the value of empathy, especially when a teacher does not share the same background as their students:

It's definitely essential, especially if you don't share the same background or experiences as your students. When I think of my first year, the majority of my students were African American. Obviously, I in so many ways do not identify with them, but I do know that by just being a constant presence, having your door open, and just being there, students come to trust you. I think that it helps in building rapport. The empathy part is key. Especially when you're working with students who you know are straight off the Aces' chart when you know they have experienced a lot of trauma and a lot of times need an adult to talk to about things. Or they act a certain way because they're trying to make sense of their experiences. So I think as a teacher, it is part of empathy. You have to have empathy to understand what they're going through and why they're acting that way, and also to be like, "Ok. Well, I understand why you're acting that way, but it's still inappropriate. So how can we work to fix that behavior or your academics?" So I think the root is being positive and having a good rapport with students because in order to have good rapport with students then they have to know you truly care. Students can be polite to you, but to have good rapport means that relationship, that interpersonal

exchange, is at the heart of empathy, which is at the root of the type of positive good rapport relationship that I think teachers truly want with students.

Kevin believed new teachers need to make an intentional effort to build those relationships with students. He said,

Last year, I made the decision pretty early in the school year to not eat lunch in the teachers' lounge. Instead, I always ate lunch in the classroom because it opened up the opportunity for students to come see me if they had something going on. I feel like sometimes you have to seek those opportunities out because if you're instructing ten to 30 students, it's not always as easy in the context of the classroom. Not to say it can't be done, but some of the other spaces are just being available at lunch or after school.

When discussing a particular student with whom she had built a close relationship, Wendy reflected on a journal entry that her student had written and shared with her:

Her situation reminded me of the Prince lyric "What's the difference between a house and a home? It's love!" I remember her writing, "A home is a place where there's love and connection, but my house is cold and uncaring." I remember reading that and thinking, "Oh, that makes sense." Empathy was me delaying my work or just sitting there like, "What do you need?" The opportunities are there [for teachers] to be empathetic, but it's a question of whether we choose to be empathetic in that moment or not. When you're working with other human beings, especially in close capacity, people are going to fail you or disappoint you. They're going to be mad, or angry, or happy, or whatever.

Whether you're working with little tiny babies, or teenagers who are trying to figure out who they are, or working with crazy co-teachers and [administrators] who suck, we have



to not only have empathy for our students but [also] for our co-teachers, for other colleagues, or the principal who you feel is terrible.

### **Empathy Versus Sympathy**

Participants discussed empathy and sympathy and the roles they played in the classroom. Most agreed that sympathy alone was not enough to build strong relationships with students. Even more, some teachers thought sympathy could be dangerous as it could lead to lowered expectations. Helen saw sympathy as being too detached from the situation: “I feel like sympathy is being one step removed from the situation, whereas with empathy you’re deliberately putting yourself into the situation to really understand the other person’s feelings and to understand their perspective.”

Wendy’s analogy brought clarity to the topic. She stated:

I am going to use the analogy of sympathy is your friend’s grandma dying and you send your friend a card—sorry for your loss. But empathy is going over to your friend’s house and sitting there, being with her, crying with her, comforting her and walking through that experience. So empathy, you don’t have to necessarily have experienced the same thing, but you’re with that person in that moment. I think the idea of walking with someone, whether it’s a student coming up and telling you about their abortion and you sit there, listen, and talk. You’re there with them. You’re like, “I hear you. I’m with you” versus being like, “Oh, that’s sad. Ok. Thanks for telling me that.” The way you approach the situation is different.

Jerry explained why he felt that sympathy was dangerous in the classroom:

I think that sympathy is dangerous in a classroom because when I feel bad for somebody, it makes me want to let them slide. I think it's when you feel bad you're like, "Aww man, that sucks. Your home life seems awful, so I'm not going to hold you to the same level of rigor that I am the kids who have healthy parent relationships, stable income sources, and places to eat and sleep." But the reality is I still have to bring the rigor and hold them to expectations because their future depends on that. Sympathy is dangerous, whereas empathy allows me to build a personal relationship that helps me to help frame and balance expectations versus just limiting them to the reality of where they're at.

### **Empathy and Content**

There was consensus among the teachers regarding the struggles new teachers faced in helping their students master content, yet their opinions differed on the role empathy played in actually helping students to improve learning. More importantly, however, these examples illustrate a deeper challenge, which is the tendency of these new teachers to dichotomize between empathy and learning. Jerry shared,

Empathy is not essential for me to teach about the American Revolution. I can teach you a series of facts. I can teach you how to interpret them. But what I probably can't teach you is how to understand how the American Revolution directly impacts you as the individual. How it can act as a guide in your own life when you draw upon those historical events for personal guidance and instruction and interpretation of your own life's events. I think content is very important, but making personal meaning and value out of the content is key. Above all else, the most important thing is that you build

personal investment in the content. If that means covering less content, then that's better.

If I spent the whole year on the Revolutionary War and my students reached a level of deep personal understanding of not only how it impacted their lives but how the lessons learned from that event can help guide their futures and the decisions they make, and how they approach challenges and overcoming the odds, then that's of much greater value than remembering a bunch of facts and dates.

Kevin agreed with Jerry and believed that given the almost unlimited access students had to information via the Internet, he put less value on students knowing the content and more stock into teaching them the skills to be able to access the content:

I agree with that, especially in the world we live in now because of access to information. Our kids are able to access more information than ever, so teaching them just facts isn't as important as is [the] usefulness of information. I'm a biology teacher. If students need to know what DNA stands for, they can go, "Hey Siri. What does DNA stand for?" and there's going to be a response. They're going to have that information right in front of them. But can I connect with them in a way that they're going to be able to make meaning, especially working at the high school level? So I'm not so concerned if they don't know that content, but that they know the skills to access that content. And I firmly believe a lot of that does come back to building those relationships and knowing what's going to work for those kids, which I still think there is a thread of empathy in there as well.

Wendy noticed at her high school the previous year that there were some teachers who were empathetic and some who were not, and she explained why she felt that was the case.

I know we all have these same experiences too of trying to find the balance between teaching content and teaching social/emotional learning, or teaching whatever. I'd rather teach someone how to learn rather than teach the content so that maybe one day they can survive in the world on their own. I remember thinking there are two types of teachers: those who want to impact and help kids grow and those who love content and want to teach that specific content. Later, I discovered a third type - those who just like the hours and the vacation. So it's the first set of teachers who are in it because they care about seeing students grow and empathy is essential to them. But if you're in it because you love English and you just want to teach kids how to write poetry and essays, then maybe empathy isn't as important to you. I think that's an important distinction because I see that in my job. There are teachers who love teaching the content and teachers who love teaching the students.

Wendy also spoke more about the differences in student attitudes about schooling and their lives:

I still taught content and taught kids how to write argumentative essays. I taught business classes and other boring English things, but at the root of it was if these kids don't care about their schooling, if they don't care about their own lives, then where do you start? Not all my students were like that. I had some who were great students and were on it. They had a stable home and just more self-efficacy. But what do you do with those kids who are just forced to come to school and hate every minute being there, and they don't want to do anything and instead will literally just sit there all day on their phones? Can they not see or are they unable to see long term? Do they care about their future? Do they

care about their lives? Do they feel like their lives are meaningful? Do they feel like they're lovable? Do they feel like they have purpose in their life? So I'm thinking about all that. I saw that a lot of students didn't see a purpose to living. Not all of them would admit that, but I had a couple of students who said, "Life is pointless. Life is meaningless, and I would rather not be here." So I think that having empathy was critical for me. I think I would have quit if I wasn't able to be empathetic because I don't think I would have been able to handle it.

### **Empathy and Cultural Competency**

Consensus emerged among the participants that empathy could be a tool to building cultural competency and understanding students' backgrounds. The challenge for them, however, was how having this information could help make you a better teacher. Jerry stated,

I don't know if understanding their background [helps] empathy in the classroom. Using empathy is a means of understanding how to help guide that student in making meaning out of their educational experience. Perhaps I'm focused too much on my role as a teacher, but I think having the consistency of someone who fulfills that role in the student's life with dedication and resolve to be a good teacher can give any student something they actually can rely on. I don't think just understanding the student's background is the point of it. The goal is to help them make meaning out of education. So it's ok if I don't fully understand the students' backgrounds. I just need to understand the person's experiences that will help me to help them.

Kevin highlighted that when you do not share the same background as your students, having that understanding helps level the playing field. Kevin also found that it helped students when their teachers exposed them to backgrounds and cultures different from their own.

I wonder how much empathy I would need if I worked at the high school where I grew up and went to school? I think it would require a much lower threshold in order for me to connect with the students. Part of that is the fact that I more so share their cultural backgrounds. Also, most of those kids aren't experiencing the same level of trauma or the same level of negative influences or whatever may be around them. I do feel like you need a little bit more empathy with the work I was doing. It does help us to know our students' background to some degree. I've also found that it's a two-way street in terms of empathy and the idea of them even understanding my background. Perfect example, literally fifty students asked me about my eyebrows because they've never seen someone with such blonde eyebrows to the point that this year it was the first slide on my first day of lessons. I told the students, "We're getting this out of the way. I'm telling you now that I don't dye or bleach my eyebrows. They are this way. I've never thought about them before like this. If any other new student comes in and asks questions about my eyebrows, now you guys can answer it for them."

Kevin further discussed this idea by connecting it with "teaching style." He said,

That's part of my teaching style. I'm very much laid back or more open than some teachers. Since they're seeing someone who doesn't look like them, who also has a different background from them, I've tried to open up parts of myself to them. I've told them a little bit about my background so that there is this acknowledgement of the

differences between us, but that, over time, they also start to see me as a person. I think that opened up the door for making empathy at times a little more powerful. I've done a little bit more of that this year just in the last two days than I did at the beginning of last year. I'm already starting to see some connections building between students that wouldn't have happened last year. That's not to say every teacher should go out and talk about their eyebrows on the first day. But there was something to be learned from that type of experience since so many kids were asking me about them. I realized that they really hadn't worked with many people that looked like me. And I began to ask and answer the questions, "What does that mean to them? What does that connection mean to relationships and empathy? So if I'm trying to get to know them, and I don't put any of myself out there for them to know me, will I truly get to know them?" Hence, why I started with the conversation about my eyebrows.

Helen shared how the age of her students and the cultural differences between her and them underscored the importance of her ability to be empathetic and culturally competent so that she could build a safe, comfortable environment for all students:

For me, because I teach such younger students and because I look so different from my kids, I have to really make an effort to make them feel more comfortable, so making that extra effort to show that I can relate to them in terms of their language or the cultural things they enjoy, the shows they watch, the type of foods they like eating, really builds that personal relationship. That helps because it brings me closer to their little bubbles of a world and makes me more personal in the classroom.

Wendy, who taught predominantly African American students, realized many of her high school students were disconnected from their Black history. For her, this opened up additional challenges being a White female and feeling responsible for helping her students gain more understanding of their own backgrounds. She said,

In my first year, that's where I felt I had to begin with my students, telling them, "Your life matters." Also, a lot of the students, specifically the African American students, don't understand history. They are very disconnected from Black history. I remember in my business class when my co-teacher was talking about the African diaspora. To me, it was really interesting. The first time I'd heard it, my mind was blown. I was like, "Why didn't I learn this in school?" But while we were talking about it in class, one student raised his hand and asked, "Why are we learning about this? This is a business class." I remember talking to my co-teacher after, saying, "These students just don't see the connections." So without a root of their own cultural ethnic identity, without something that's steadfast and not the newest styles in their hood or whatever their "repping," they don't have a sense of who they are.

Wendy also noted that students did not know how to describe themselves or their strengths:

I have seniors about to enter the world and when I asked them to describe themselves, they didn't know how. They didn't know what their strengths were. They didn't know what their characteristics were. I had to show them a list of characteristics and explain to them each one. I remember I had one student who really hates life and he's brilliant, like brilliant, brilliant. But he has such negative perceptions about who he is and about life in general. He struggled to describe himself. I remember I got on him. I said, "You are



almost 18 years old and you don't know one strength you have? I can tell you all these things about who you are and what I see in you, but you have to believe in these yourself."

### **Empathy and Trauma**

Given the communities where all the participants worked, trauma continued to be a reoccurring theme. The participants felt that empathy was most needed when helping students to process some type of traumatic experience. However, this became all too real for Wendy, who endured a traumatic experience of her own during her first year of teaching. She reflected on this experience and how it motivated her to be more intentional about creating opportunities to be empathetic:

Toward the end of the school year, a guy was shot by my house. I live right across the street from a liquor store. I remember talking to my neighbor about it and my neighbor was saying, "Be careful. It's really hot out here. It was gang related. There'll probably be some shootings. There will probably be some drive-bys. Just make sure you're not outside at night. They shouldn't bother you during the day. They know you live here. They're just trying to get each other." This was the beginning of June and people in my neighborhood were constantly lighting fireworks. I remember for probably a week, I was really on edge. If I heard a firework, I would twinge. Number one, I'm not used to that. I grew up in a neighborhood off the street. My parents' house was on the corner house so I never had to deal with that. Then I remember going on a date but was so shaken because that night I thought I heard gunshots. Then when I came home there was tagging right by my house. I remember thinking, "I have to get out of my house." Then it hit me: Oh, this is what my

students go through all the time, their whole lives. No wonder why they're on edge.

They're not sleeping or they get angry really quickly or they're scared because they are having these experiences constantly, or they've had these experiences constantly growing up. So, as educators, knowing that there is a threshold is important. So I see my job as trying to be empathetic and understanding to some degree while also holding them to some semblance of rigor because that is our job as well.

Similar to Kevin's narrative earlier, Wendy spoke to the essential need for empathy when working with students who are from a different cultural background from that of the teacher:

Empathy is definitely essential, especially if you don't share the same background or experiences as your students. When I think of my first year, the majority of my students were African American. Obviously, I in so many ways do not identify with them, but I do know that by just being a constant presence, having your door open, and just being there, students come to trust you. I think that helps in building rapport. The empathy part is key. Especially when you're working with students who you know are straight off the Aces' chart. When you know they have experienced a lot of trauma and a lot of times need an adult to talk to about things. Or they act a certain way because they're trying to make sense of their experiences. So I think as a teacher, it is part of empathy. You have to have empathy to understand what they're going through and why they're acting that way, and also to be like, "Ok. Well I understand why you're acting that way but it's still inappropriate. So how can we work to fix that behavior or your academics?" So I think the root is being positive and having a good rapport with students because in order to have good rapport with students then they have to know you truly care. Students can be

polite to you, but to have good rapport means that relationship, that interpersonal exchange, is at the heart of empathy, which is at the root of the type of positive good rapport relationship that I think teachers truly want with students.

### **Empathy Limits**

Teaching can be emotionally draining at times. It's no secret that when navigating the demands and stresses of the job and the emotional pull from students, teachers sometimes have to overcome mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion. Several teachers shared their thoughts on when and how they reach their limits. Feelings of anger, tiredness, and despair are all too real and zap their strength and limit their empathetic responses. For example, Helen stated,

I think we are only human. I feel like we have a lot to deal with in our work. In addition to studying, we also are learning how to manage our school responsibilities and teach content but also be infinitely empathetic. For my kids, I spend so much time with them not just focusing on content but also teaching social skills. I'm telling them not to touch this, don't eat that, and don't pick that up. So I feel like you can only give so much.

Wendy explained a similar sentiment, saying,

The thought that came to my mind was the term compassion fatigue. I think it's related to empathy. I think there is that threshold of like, "Wow I'm really tired for whatever reason." Maybe it is due to anger or the vowing that when I go home I'm just not doing any work. That was me. That was me for probably three-fourths of the school year. I wouldn't do work at home. I was able to survive and I felt great. People were always asking me, "Why are you so happy?" I was like, "Because I don't do work at home! And I have a network of people [who] support me."

Jerry expressed the manifestation of his limitations of empathy by linking it to feelings of anger. He stated,

I have a wall near empathy and it's called anger. When I hit that wall I know that I'm done. I've reacted poorly to students who have internalized defeat and it makes me angry. I now know at that point I need to step back for a second because I know I'm not being empathetic. Frankly, I'm not even being a good teacher at that point because that's the baggage I brought into my classroom. I have anger issues and most of the time it's not a problem. I can understand that this student has a terrible situation and doesn't know not to think that way, but it still makes me angry. As soon as I can feel that, I know it's time to back off. So no, I don't have a never ending well of empathy.

### **Summary**

This chapter has presented data on the question of empathy gathered from novice teachers who taught students whose cultural background was different from their own. As much as possible, the voices of the teachers were preserved in this process and six major themes were identified. In the following chapter, an analysis of this data will be presented in ways that respond to the central research questions that guided this study. A conclusion and recommendation will identify actions that can be taken to nurture and cultivate teacher empathy, particularly for teachers who find themselves teaching in cultural contexts very different from their own backgrounds and experiences.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Darder (1998) expounded on Freire's belief that if educators are truly going to solve the educational difficulties of students from oppressed communities, they must look beyond the personal. Educators must look for answers within the historical realm of economic, social, and political forms so that we might better understand the forces that give rise to our humanity as it currently exists. By focusing on empathy as a tool for building cultural competency, I sought to examine the social construct of the teacher-student relationship. Through the theoretical lens of critical pedagogy and Wang et al.'s (2003) definition for ethno-cultural empathy, I explored the teacher-student relationship through the storytelling of five first-year educators who were currently working in low-income communities of color and who did not share the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the majority of their students. My desire was to understand how these educators defined empathy, the role empathy played in the development of their own cultural competencies, and to hear specific examples where empathy—or the lack thereof—played a role in the teacher-student relationship.

My hope was that this research would uncover answers that would ultimately give rise to more culturally democratic classrooms, thus providing a more socially equitable educational opportunity for all students regardless of race and socioeconomic status. Through the use of focus groups and one-on-one narrative inquiry sessions, I was able to gather a wealth of qualitative data which I shared in Chapter 4. In this chapter, I will share my analysis of the findings as well as consider implications and recommendations based on the research.

These five educators openly shared personal stories of both failures and successes about the role empathy played during their first year of teaching. Specifically, it is in the stories of triumph that we see the full potential of empathy in the classroom. Culturally empathetic educators are primed to facilitate an excellent educational experience for students. In addition to uncovering multiple opportunities for teachers to be empathetic in the classroom, I discovered evidence of a symbiotic relationship between ethno-cultural empathy and critical pedagogy. Though all of the participants demonstrated empathy on some level with students, Wendy, a high school Resource Specialist (RSP), was most able to integrate ethno-cultural empathy into her classroom. The next section synthesizes the evidence demonstrating this symbiotic relationship between ethno-cultural empathy and critical pedagogy while also supporting this idea with teachers' own reflections.

### **Ethno-Cultural Empathy and Critical Pedagogy**

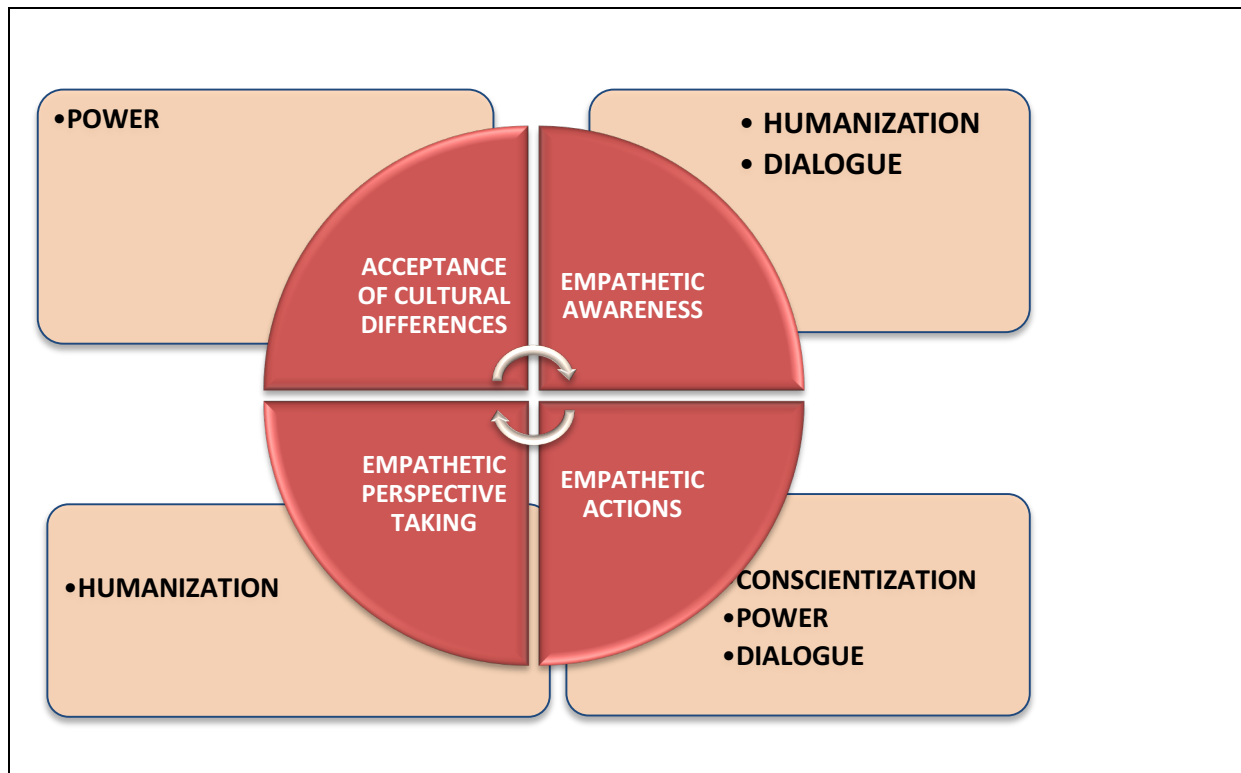
Wang et al. (2003) described ethno-cultural empathy as consisting of four distinct attributes: (a) acceptance of cultural differences, (b) empathetic awareness, (c) empathetic perspective taking, and (d) empathetic action. As Darder, Baltodano, and Torres (2008) stated:

In the practice of critical pedagogy, dialogue and analysis serve as the foundation for reflection and action. Students learn from the teacher; teachers learn from the students.

Hence, the actual lived experiences cannot be ignored nor relegated to the periphery in the process of coming to know. (p. 13)

According to Freire (1970), dialogue constitutes an educational strategy that centers upon the development of critical social consciousness. Dialogue, I discovered, is the place of most significant overlap between critical pedagogy and empathy. However, overlap was not limited to

dialogue. Other findings also speak to agreement and alignment of the two theories. Figure 5.1 illustrates the symbiotic overlap between ethno-cultural empathy and critical pedagogy.



*Figure 5.1.* Overlap between ethno-cultural empathy and critical pedagogy.

### **Acceptance of Cultural Differences**

The empathetic response to the acceptance of cultural differences is based on the premise of intellectual empathy. For teachers, intellectual empathy involves the manner in which teachers pay special attention to the way children define, describe, and interpret phenomena and problem-solving situations in their daily experiences and can begin to understand these experiences from the unique perspectives of children (Tettegah & Anderson, 2007). For participants in my study, empathy created opportunities to communicate and validate knowledge forms and experiences

that were significant to their students. Critical pedagogy also seeks to eliminate bias of some voices over others as well as eliminate the silencing of the students' lived experiences, which unfortunately happens often in the process of hegemonic schooling.

Dominant school culture functions to support the interests and values of the dominant society while marginalizing and invalidating knowledge forms and experiences that are significant to oppressed groups (Darder, 2004, 2012; Gay, 2002, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Nieto 2004;), yet, in these instances we see how educators were able to be both accepting of cultural differences and empowering of students' interests and values through empathy. This underscores the process of students engaging the world within its complexity and fullness in order to reveal the possibilities of new ways of constructing thought and action beyond how they currently exist (Darder, 2004, 2012). Wendy's statement gives evidence to how the ideas of cultural acceptance and the integration of students' cultural values and thoughts became foundational points for students to explore knowledge and make meaning in their classrooms:

Empathy does help you understand students' backgrounds and culture. I also think it just comes with having experiences with a specific community and that takes time. It takes time to know what they eat, how they talk, how they dress. So maybe a deeper way of understanding empathy helps me to understand why our students are the way they are, act the way they do, or love the things they do or don't. I have a conceptual understanding of their background and to some degree their neighborhood. With what they tell me about their lives, I am then able to have an understanding and by utilizing empathy I can say, "Wow, I know why you smoke weed. I really do. It makes sense. But is it the best thing to do before you come to school? Probably not."



Wendy's statements clearly indicate how she embraces the value of empathy in building her own cultural competencies. They also speak to her understanding that there is more for her to learn. The work by educators to understand their students and their communities is never done. Conscious building in educators happens when they, too, embrace the posture of being students. Cultural identity markers rarely are static but are constantly evolving. Therefore, like Wendy, educators must embrace an understanding of continuous development. Understanding those cultural identity markers and valuing students' voices, backgrounds, and lived experiences help educators to understand their students. In doing so, educators can create personalized learning environments that integrate these cultural values into the classroom to help students make meaning out of the content as well as create opportunities for additional personal growth through dialogue. This principle should be considered fundamental to any education reform. As Jerry said, "All the technology in the world isn't going to get it done until we figure out how to communicate across cultural lines."

### **Empathetic Awareness**

Empathetic awareness, as described by Woolfolk (1998), involves empathetic listening. She posited that it is important for teachers to use empathic listening to hear the intent and emotions behind what another says and reflecting them back by paraphrasing. In the classroom, empathetic awareness is demonstrated when students feel heard, valued, and loved by others. In essence, students are not viewed as subordinate subjects but as human beings with something of value to bring to the learning process. This idea is congruent with the idea of humanization that underscores the driving force behind Paulo Freire's (1970) work and critical pedagogy (Darder et

al., 2008). Educators must intentionally resist the dehumanization process that often happens with historically disenfranchised students.

Freire and Betto (1959) stated:

A humanizing education is the path through which men and women can become conscious about their presence in the world. The way they act and think when they develop all of their capacities, take into consideration their needs, but also the needs and aspirations of others (pp.14–15).

Love is the cord that binds both the humanizing consciousness and the empathetic awareness in educators. Darder (2002) further expounded on Freire’s ideology by shedding light from her own experience with him. “It is a love that I experienced as unconstructed, rooted in a committed willingness to struggle persistently with purpose in our life and to intimately connect that purpose with what he called our ‘true vocation’—to be human” (p. 567).

Ultimately, one of the visible manifestations of an empathetic and humanizing educational experience is the presence of continuous discourse between the student and the teacher that creates conscious building in both. Critical pedagogy incorporates an understanding of critical discourse, and the goal of conscientization evolves from the dialogical relationships that shape the structure of classroom life (Darder, 2011, 2015). Wendy gives voice to how the relationship between empathetic awareness and critical pedagogy manifested themselves in her classroom. “I think an important opportunity [to show empathy] is just putting aside what you have to do to listen to your students, whether it's during your lunch or passing periods, or giving up your grading time.”

Wendy went on to share an interaction that she had with one of her students that highlights the role educators play in the development of their own consciousness through love and discourse:

All students want to feel valued by adults and their teachers. I believe there has to be some aspect of empathy, especially if you don't share their backgrounds. You have to find a way to come to their level and walk with them. I also try to invest a lot in them like some teachers do. I would tell students come talk to me whenever you want and I'll listen. I'll put whatever aside and listen. I remember I had one student who really hates life and he's brilliant, like brilliant, brilliant. But he has such negative perceptions about who he is and about life in general. He struggled to describe himself. I remember I got on him. I said, "You are almost 18 years old and you don't know one strength you have? I can tell you all these things about who you are and what I see in you, but you have to believe in these yourself."

By creating this space, Wendy leveraged the skill of empathetic listening to engage in a dialogue about some of the challenges this student was facing. In doing so, the student was able to engage in an educational experience that further aided the formation of his own consciousness regarding his own identity and his community.

### **Perspective Taking**

The attribute of perspective taking within ethno-cultural empathy is the ability to pay attention to the feeling of a person or persons from another ethno-cultural group to the degree that one is able to feel the other's emotional condition from the point of view of that person's racial or ethnic culture (Tettegah & Anderson, 2007; Wang et al., 2003). This aspect of empathy

correlates well with critical pedagogy's principle of humanization and the validation of one's human experience in society. It is in this realm where perspective taking of the teacher is rooted in the ethnic and cultural experience of the student in a way that humanizes the student in the eyes of the teacher as well as creates opportunities for the teacher to make learning more applicable. Educators who facilitate humanizing experiences for students must then work to eliminate all dehumanizing oppression and surmount all cultural norms in which men [and women] are reduced to things (Freire, 1970). Wendy shared her experiences of perspective taking through validation:

I tried making connections and validating them, and then I tried to go a step further and help process through their situation and identify the next steps we should take together. So maybe an essential part of empathy is the validation of what someone is experiencing in a genuine way, and then helping them to move forward. I definitely think the emotional aspect or side of their background affects who they are and how they navigate in the world.

Wendy's empathetic nature aided her in developing cultural awareness and enabled her to build strong relationships with her students. For educators, the ability to engage in perspective taking also develops the humanizing lens that helps teachers see past the stereotypes and generalizations of students of color. Through entering into a humanizing process with students, educators are better equipped to develop an educational experience that incorporates multiple aspects of students' cultures and identities (Darder 2012; Gay 2002, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Nieto 2004). This is vital for teachers who don't share the background of their students. Without

perspective taking, ignorant assumptions and stereotypes can arise, resulting in lowered expectations and poor teacher-student relationships.

### **Empathetic Action**

Gerdes et al. (2011) suggested that empathy requires a voluntarily action in response to the cognitive processing (perspective taking, self-awareness, emotion regulation) and affective (emotional) reaction. Therefore, empathetic action involves conscious decision making. This is also true for critical pedagogy (Darder et al., 2008). Both empathy and critical pedagogy begin with conscious building and result in a visible manifestation of this deeper consciousness. Part of the intent of an emancipatory education is for both teachers and students to embrace themselves as historical subjects, capable of beginning to transform themselves in the now, rather than waiting for some illusive fixed historical moment in the future (Darder, 2012). Therefore, the power structures enacted through curriculum, pedagogy, and racist ideologies must be intentionally navigated, challenged, and ultimately dismantled. Therefore, educators must find ways to do this for students.

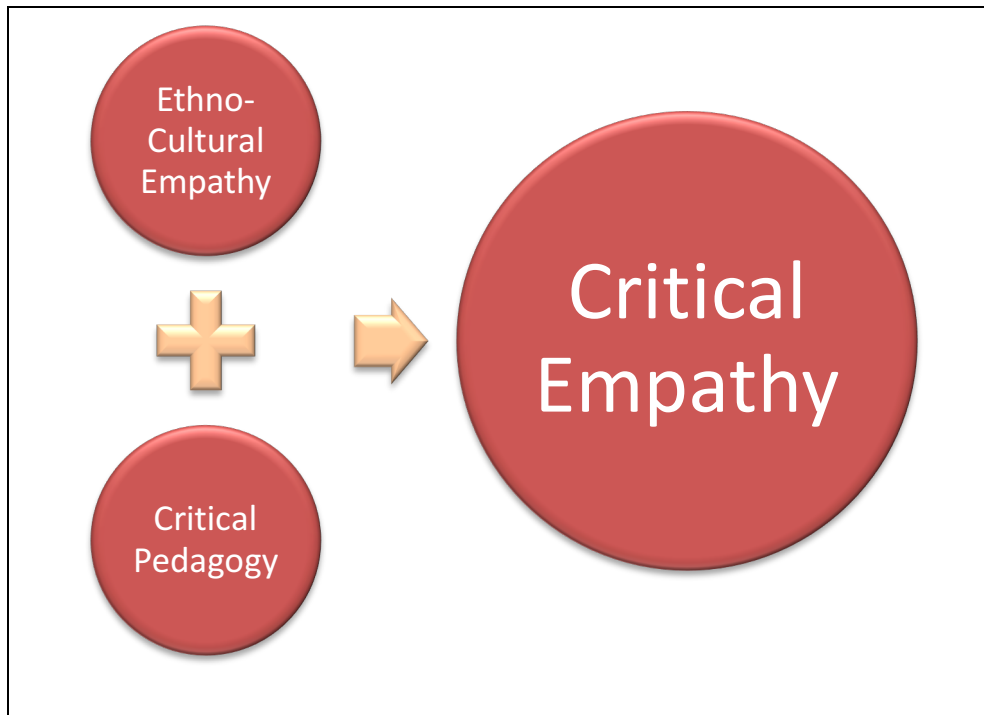
Wendy shared a story of how empathetic actions on her part led to navigating and challenging the traditional power structure for one of her students. She described how she created a space for this student to share his feelings, which Wendy went on to validate. She and her student moved forward to collaborate on finding a workable solution that aided in his graduating from high school. Her action helped the student to understand he had the power to change his current situation. She stated:

He started talking about how this school sucks and the teachers don't care about their students. He started crying then I started crying. I remember you and I had just had a

conversation earlier that day about the struggles of getting students to care. But this kid did. So I told him, “You are right. It’s pretty obvious a lot of teachers don’t care and that’s not how it should be.” We were both sitting there and he told me point blank, “This is terrible I just want to give up. I don’t care about graduating. I don’t want to try anymore.” Here we are, sitting in my room, both crying. Then I said, “Okay. Let’s make an action plan right now. Let’s look at your grades and we will go to each teacher one-by-one and ask them what you need to do to get your grades up.”

By creating a classroom where students’ cultures and voices are given power, educators are able to improve student achievement. Through ethno-cultural empathy, teachers can truly understand how best to empower students by creating opportunities for students to dialogue and make meaning about issues important to them.

Based on my analysis of the ethno-cultural empathy and critical pedagogy in conjunction with the teacher narratives, the data support the interdependent relationship between critical pedagogy and ethno-cultural empathy. Therefore, I believe a new adapted theory, which I refer to as *Critical Empathy*, aligns both frameworks and should be considered (Figure 5.2).



*Figure 5.2.* Proposed theoretical framework for Critical Empathy.

In concert with the results of this study, I recommend the integration of critical empathy, a new concept that would not only improve the educational experience of students by further supporting students' self-determination and liberation, but also the praxis of new teachers. By supporting the development of critical consciousness, perspective taking, and the empathetic actions in new teachers, educators will be better equipped to create a truly empowering learning experience for their students.

I further believe a greater curricular intention should be adopted by preservice teacher-education programs to include the formation of critical empathy as part of the competencies necessary for all new teachers. Given that empathy is not a thing or a place to get to, but rather a human process linked to human connection and intimacy, preservice programs' ability to support

the development of critical empathy and its impact on student-teacher relationships and instructional pedagogy could lay a solid foundation for continued professional growth in educators. This is especially needed for educators who seek to work in contexts where they will not share the cultural and class backgrounds of the majority of their prospective students.

### **Further Suggestions for Study**

In the process of conducting this study, five themes and possible ideas for further study surfaced. These include:

1. The high rates of teacher turnover in urban schools and their impact on students' views of authority. One teacher believed it furthers students' lack of trust in authority and lack of desire to build trusting relationships with adults since they may be conditioned not to trust.
2. The impact that traumatic experiences have on students and the role empathetic teachers can play in helping their students process and overcome negative experiences. Several teachers shared their frustrations with their own inability to help students deal with trauma.
3. The role empathy plays in developing classroom culture and behavior management systems. Disciplining and providing consequences was a stated source of tension with empathy in the eyes of one participant.
4. The "arc of teacher development" with respect to empathy for the generation of Millennials coming into teaching, with a greater focus on their experiences and their needs for building empathy.



5. Future study on teacher differences and some specific ways that teacher education must be responsive to those differences.

### **Empathy Formation Recommendations**

The intent of this study was to uncover solutions for some of the educational difficulties facing our students from oppressed communities. By targeting the social construct of the teacher-student relationship, I was able to examine the impact of empathy on the development of the cultural competencies of first-year teachers who didn't share the backgrounds of a majority of their students. In hearing personal accounts from K–12 educators on the role empathy played in their classrooms, I found that empathy was a critical element to building strong teacher-student relationships. Therefore, my recommendation is that targeted professional development opportunities that lead to increased empathy formation in teachers be integrated into preservice institutions, teacher pilot programs, and teacher preparation programs that prepare educators entering the workforce. In addition, it is important for school administrators and district staff who are currently responsible for mentoring new teachers in schools to work to adopt the following recommendations, which are tied to establishing and/or increasing professional development in the following areas:

1. Critical Empathy Development
2. Self-Awareness
3. Managing Administrative Responsibilities
4. Self-Care Strategies

## **Critical Empathy Development**

All five of the educators shared stories about the lack of professional development regarding empathy and cultural competency. In the cases where they did, the content included no more than cursory overviews of their importance in the classrooms. The participants' thoughts below illustrate the limited nature of their professional development experience.

Helen stated, "Within the district I don't think it's a big priority. Social emotional PD's are optional." Kevin explained, "Yes, it's something that was talked about. No, it's not necessarily something we practiced a lot." Jerry noted:

Empathy was discussed. We used the word quite a bit. I've heard the word a lot in my first year. But I think the evidence of our struggle to answer your first question today, "What is empathy" is telling. We all looked around as if none of us had really sought to define it before, and that tells me quite a bit. I wouldn't say we developed those skills, rather we just talked about those skills or the idea of empathy as if those skills were going to manifest themselves in the process. I would say I never had a clear tutorial of [my] first step toward empathy.

Research suggests that both empathy and cultural competency can be developed over time (Alnabhan, 2008; BarOn, 2002; Wang et al., 2003;). McAllister and Irvine (2002) concluded that the most impactful professional development happens when teachers are provided opportunities for simulation of and immersion in cultures other than those of the participants so that the teachers have a chance to experience life through their diverse students' eyes. This moves the notion of cultural competency from the abstract to the lived. The knowledge required to be effective in urban education is more sophisticated than just understanding the differences in

foods and holiday celebrations of diverse cultures. Gay's (2002) research suggested that a great understanding of learning styles, preferences for cooperative versus individual problem solving, expectations for behavior between children and adults, and gender roles to the standard categories of values and traditions should also be targeted. I believe development in these areas would also build greater consciousness and improve instruction, helping new teachers eliminate the tendency to dichotomize between empathy and learning. Therefore, my recommendation is that teacher preparation programs develop professional development opportunities that aid educators in developing strategies for implementing critical empathy as a tool for building cultural competency and deepening relationships with students.

### **Self-Awareness**

Identity development must become a vital area of focus for new educators. Self-awareness of one's own identity is the starting point for true consciousness building around the area of critical empathy and cultural competency development. Based on the research conducted by Grant and Asimeng-Boahene (2006), self-awareness for teachers begins when they come to terms with their own preconceived notions of the abilities of students from diverse backgrounds. From this place of personal reflection, they are able to see past the stereotypes of underachievement of their students from differing backgrounds.

Multiple teachers shared stories on how their own cultural identities and backgrounds have impacted their views on empathy and cultural competencies; yet, simultaneously, they shared stories that highlight their millennial views of colorblindness, which unfortunately only serves to reproduce inequalities. Therefore, I recommend that all teacher-formation programs prioritize self-identity work, as well as create opportunities for teachers to reflect on their own

perceptions of race, class, and cultural backgrounds, thereby engaging in the development of a critical form of empathy that recognizes the different social locations (race, class, ethnicity, etc.) of students and the need of teachers to be aware of their own positionality, as well as the process for effectively engaging across differences. This is especially critical for educators who are or will be working in low-income communities of color.

Wendy explained that her own development came from exposure opportunities she had as an undergraduate student that led her to have deep reflections on race, class, and her own perceptions of her identity. As a White woman, she felt this experience was vital to her conscious building and directly impacted her ability to be culturally empathetic. She stated,

I grew mainly because people spoke truth to me about what it really was. Through storytelling, and the power of hearing others' experiences, perceptions of others can be changed. It's also a deeply personal thing for White people. You have to be open to that change and not be resistant like a lot of them are.

Kevin also discussed this point when sharing about his own empathy limitations. In his statement, he called out the importance of identity work that educators should do before they begin teaching. He stated:

I want to circle back to this idea of how much empathy you must have, the wall, and not having an endless supply of empathy. Wendy was talking about students not knowing their identities. As a first year teacher, you need to know, be developing, or have a greater understanding of your own identity so you know your limits because you're probably going to get pushed past them.

Helen also reaffirmed this belief when she shared, “I think with empathy you have to take into consideration your own background and your students’ backgrounds and make a conscience effort to reach the same angle at the end of the year.” Given how vital identity development is to the teacher-student relationship, urban schools and districts should not make the assumption that their teachers will automatically do this identity work that encompasses critical empathy independently. Therefore, I recommend that a strategic and intentional plan for identity development be adopted—one intentionally grounded in a curriculum that centers on the development of critical empathy.

### **Managing Administrative Responsibilities**

Multiple teachers mentioned the constant struggle of managing their mandated job expectations, making it difficult to find time to invest in empathy and relationship building. Kevin shared, “I think the workload and the challenges for the teacher make it hard to just connect with the kids.” Also, when referring to one troubled student his school assigned him to work with as a last resort for the student, he said:

It was legitimately hard to feel any sense of empathy for him and a big part of that was because I just didn't know him. I'm sure he had stuff going on back at home that I didn't even know, but it was difficult to feel empathy for someone that I don't even really kind of know.

Other participants also spoke to this issue. Helen stated:

All the additional responsibilities outside of instructing students can impact a teacher’s empathy level. It’s frustrating trying to prioritize instruction and district mandated

paperwork over spending time with the kids. I can't spend time doing what I want to do because there is so much I'm required to do.

When responding to my prompt to self-rate her own cultural competency in her first year, Natalie shared, "I'd say four or five [out of 10] because coming in as a new teacher you're just trying to get caught up with the routines of the day." Wendy said, "I think some of the limitations that I faced being empathetic toward my students was learning how to balance the additional responsibilities of being a teacher, such as IEP case management."

This time management challenge does not only impact new teachers. With the prioritization to raise standardized test scores, educators find themselves navigating the tension of tying academic performance to standardized test scores. Orfield (1999) and Nieto (2004) explained that teachers are placed—with exceeding tension and pressure—to increase test scores, which in turn, impacts their daily instruction. Teachers have voiced that test preparation and test readiness have limited their teaching of other subjects (Vinovskis, 2009). Therefore, I recommend an intentional focus in all teacher formation programs on the development of systems and routines for managing the district and schoolwide administrative responsibilities. This focus, aligned with a pedagogy aligned with critical empathy, would develop a teacher's capacity to focus on the relationship building needed for students.

### **Self-Care Strategies**

Teaching is a mentally, physically, and emotionally demanding profession. Oftentimes, teachers spend many additional hours outside of the normal work week on planning, administrative responsibilities, and building relationships with students. Based on state regulations, many teachers also find themselves enrolled in graduate-level education programs to

fulfill the state-required licensing and credentialing expectations. Without proper habits of self-care, these constant demands can lead teachers to exhaustion. Empathy becomes increasingly challenging when you are approaching exhaustion. Therefore, I recommend a greater focus on supporting new teachers to adopt healthy and sustainable rituals and routines so that they avoid the pitfalls of exhaustion that lead many to leave the field of education entirely. Several teachers gave light to this phenomenon while sharing their stories.

Wendy referred to this burnout and lack of energy to demonstrate empathy as compassion fatigue. Though Wendy consistently demonstrated the ability to be empathetic, she also struggled with compassion fatigue. She stated, “The thought that came to my mind was the term compassion fatigue. I think it’s related to empathy. I think there is that threshold of like, ‘Wow I’m really tired for whatever reason.’” Helen spoke of teacher burnout as her biggest obstacle to showing empathy, and highlighted the value of self-care in her first year of teacher. She shared:

Teacher burnout is the biggest one. Something I took away from my first year was self-care. I think if you're not ready to teach in the classroom, you're not going to care about anything. Some days I was just not happy to be in the classroom. I felt like I struggled with a lot of anxiety and lethargic feeling. I couldn't wait until the day was over. I realized I was just exhausted.

Jerry’s analogy regarding this topic perfectly sums up the importance of educators being able to rejuvenate and take care of their physical, mental, and emotional needs. He said, “It’s like the oxygen mask on an airplane. They always tell you to put yours on first, then your kids. Because if you don't, you’ll both run out of oxygen.” This remark illustrates the notion that critical empathy must be understood dialectically; if the teacher is not experiencing empathy

within the school environment with respect to their own human needs, it will be difficult for them to extend empathy to their students. This, again, signals the interdependence that must be at work between critical pedagogy and empathy within the educational environment where teachers must work and students must learn.

### **Epilogue**

This entire research process, especially hearing the fascinating stories from my participants, inspired constant reflection of my own journey. In many ways, I have been a poster child for what is possible for young children from my community. I have seen those movies before where the young man who overcame great odds finally has his moment in the sun, celebrating ecstatically at his graduation. But that's far from the end of my story. My graduation from Morehouse College was celebratory and also burdensome, as that moment represents in my eyes my desire to bear the great responsibility of becoming an educator and helping other children to one day achieve their dreams.

I remember my first class of students at Herndon Elementary School, located around the corner from the Herndon Homes housing projects in Atlanta, Georgia. The mixed bag of anxiety and excitement I felt that first day of school in the fall of 2003, as my first set of nine-year-old students greeted me with a sense of bewilderment and hopefulness. Those feelings are best comparable to how I felt leaving the hospital following the birth of our first child, wondering why the doctors actually trusted us enough to leave with such a precious gift. Like that first year of parenting, I felt unprepared but resolute that I would grow to be what I needed to be for our son. And so, too, I felt about my students.



I learned as much as I could from everyone, including my colleagues, my principal, and my peers. Knowing the odds my students would be required to overcome, I felt my students deserved better than me as a new teacher. They deserved to have a veteran teacher, with an empathetic heart, a conscious mind, an evolved pedagogy, deep content knowledge, and a tool box of unlimited teacher tricks to inspire student motivation. Hoping not to screw it all up, I set my vision on becoming Mrs. Redway, my fifth-grade teacher, who was so impactful in my life. I gave everything to trying to be like her. And when that was not enough, I gave more. For the next six years, I used that same mentality every year, wanting to be the best teacher I could for my students because I knew it wouldn't be me who paid the price if I was not good.

So, when hearing the teachers' stories, I also heard the weight of the burdens they now carry. They, too, all have desires to be great teachers and hated that they were failing to become the teachers they already aspired to be. I believe this is the struggle for most teachers entering the workforce today given the lack of formation in both cultural competency and critical empathy. We have talented and passionate people who want to be great for kids but are not prepared to do so, and it is ultimately the students who suffer for teacher underdevelopment.

I would love to see a greater value ascribed to educators in our society that would lead to more resources becoming available to prepare prospective teachers for careers in education. However, as educational leaders, we cannot wait around hoping someone else brings about this change. We must continue to work within the system to better prepare teachers for the realities of what they face in their teaching lives. We need to continue developing teachers to build safe spaces for students to learn, grow, play, and explore. We need to develop educators who are able to root out the inequalities tied to racism, sexism, and classism, which inhibit all students from

experiencing a high-quality education. While in the process of it all, we must also work to dismantle the current structures that impede student development. This is by no means easy, but great feats of social transformation never are. We can no longer settle for just surface level change. We must embrace a more radical approach to education reform. Efforts have failed in the past because they never really addressed the root problems of academic and social inequality—that is, economic injustice; economic exploitation; and social stratification based on race, class, and gender (Darder, 2002).

Just like in my first years of teaching when I looked to my mentors and scholars to show the way, I continue to gain inspiration from those who came before me to successfully persevere through the struggle to enact social change. I read this quotation daily as a source of strength and I hope it inspires everyone who reads this dissertation to act for deeper social change in our public education system. So, in the resolute words of Frederick Douglass (1857):

If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.

## **Appendix A**

### ***Interest Survey Email***

**Subject: Marcus Hughes Needs Your Help**

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

As part of my Loyola Marymount University doctoral program, I am conducting research on the unique connectedness of empathy and cultural competency in first year teachers. Specifically, I want to hear stories of how teacher's empathetic actions impact cultural competency and the teacher-student relationships. I am currently looking for participants who are interested in being involved in my research. Below, you will find a link for a brief interest survey. If you can, please complete this 10-question interest survey now. It will take you no more than 5 minutes to complete. Your responses will help me to gauge the interest of all potential participants and by completing this survey you are helping me out tremendously. Below you will also find the undemanding commitment that is required to participate in this study. Thank you for your consideration.

#### **Participation Commitment**

- (1) Selected participants will commit no more than 4 hours total toward this research over the course of 1 month.
- (2) Participants will participate in one introductory focus group (approx. 1 hour), one personal narrative (approx. 2 hours), and one culminating focus group (approx. 1 hour).

## **Appendix B**

### ***Interest Survey***

Part 1: Please complete the following demographic information.

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Race/Ethnicity:
4. Years of Teaching Experience:
5. Telephone:
6. Email:

Part 2: Please answer the following questions.

1. Where do you teach?
2. Do you share the same racial/ethnic background as the majority of your students? If not, what is the most common student racial/ethnic background in your classroom?
3. Would you be interested in serving as a participant for my research study on empathy and cultural competency?
4. Can you commit to 4 hours over the course of 30 days?

If Yes, please Click on links below.

Link 1: Focus Group Doodle Link

Link 2: Google Sign Up for 1-on-1 Interview

## Appendix C

### *Focus Group Questions*

#### **Focus Group Questions**

1. What is empathy?
2. Is empathy essential to building strong teacher-student relationships? Why, or why not?
3. What typical opportunities do teachers have to demonstrate empathy towards students?
4. Is it a challenge for teachers to show empathy for their students? If so, what are some of those challenges?
5. Can the utility of empathy help teachers to better understand their students' backgrounds? If so, how?
6. Was empathy as a skill or issues discussed extensively in your teacher education program?

## **Appendix D**

### ***Personal Narrative Prompts***

#### **Personal and Social**

- How do you identify racially? How do the majority of your students identify?
- Talk to me about empathy. What does it mean to you?
- What role did empathy play in your day-to-day interactions with your students?
- Talk to me about cultural competency. How culturally competent do you believe you are of your students' cultures?
- How did the cultural exchange between you and your students help you to grow as a person this year? As a teacher?
- Imagine you are one of your students. How do you think they perceive you?

#### **Continuity**

- How have your views on empathy and culture changed over the course of the year?
- In what ways have you developed your cultural understanding of your students? How did that happen?
- What is your desire for teacher-student relationships next year?
- What were some of the biggest relationship challenges you had this year?

#### **Situational**

- How did you, as a teacher, paying special attention to the way children defined, described, and interpreted phenomena and problem-solving situations in their daily

experiences and show evidence of understanding these experiences from the unique perspectives of children?

- Describe a time when you were at your best empathetically?
- Describe a time when you personally didn't feel like you were culturally empathetic?
- Can you describe a time when you, as the teacher, heard the intent and emotions behind what students were saying and then reflected back to them by paraphrasing?
- In what ways have you, as a teacher, shared in a cultural experience and physically responded to those whom you were interacting with?
- Tell me about a specific situation where you felt like you responded empathetically? Why did you respond the way you did? What did you say?

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