# Paedagogia

## Journal of Teacher Action Research

# Do Socratic Seminars Increase Empathy in a Secondary English Classroom?

**Courtney VanDerLip**

Department of Education, Lake Forest College

Empathy is a skill, not an attribute people can be born with. This skill needs to be taught and practiced so students can make connections to people who have a variety of different experiences than they do. Current research lacks a concrete method on how to teach empathy in a classroom setting. In this quasi-experiment, the researcher uses modeling and two Socratic Seminars to determine if it increases students' empathy scores. The data was inconclusive for a variety of factors, but the researcher views this as a steppingstone towards understanding the best ways to teach empathy.

*Keywords*: Empathy, Socratic Seminar, Social-Emotional Learning

## Introduction

Empathy is often presented in public discourse as a virtuous attribute people can be born with. Research on empathy suggests otherwise. Rather than it being a feeling or an inherent characteristic, it is considered a skill that can be worked on and improved; a reaction to another person's assumed thoughts or feelings (Warren, 2014, p. 394; Espelage et al, 2018, p. 46). Due to this mindset, empathy is a popular topic in many fields of education, such as higher education where professionals are advocating for an empathetic curriculum (Jaeger el at., 2015; Johnson, 2019; Segal & Wagaman, 2017; Treichler el at., 2020). It is also seen with teachers using it to help students develop an understanding of the past (Wright-Maley & Joshi, 2017), to understand its role in bullying (Ryzin et al., 2019), and to see the impact on students of teachers being empathetic (Meyers et al., 2019; Philips, 2020; Warren & Hotchkins, 2015). There has been an increasing number of schools including an SEL (socio-emotional learning) curriculum, many of which include empathy as one of the main skills. With the increased focus on empathy, it is important for teachers to know how empathy can manifest and be taught in the classroom. This quasi-experiment explores the impact teaching empathy on students' empathy. Students will take a pre-

and post-test to understand their current empathy levels and observe empathetic responses during Socratic Seminars.

The study looks at how students self-identify in terms of race, ethnicity, gender/sexuality, and their hobbies to gather information on how students empathize with characters who do or do not represent any one of these aspects of identity. The class will be attempting to make textual connections to see if students will empathize with the characters in the book and apply empathy to the real world. When referring to students' empathy, the researcher is looking for patterns of when students are empathetic and how often they attempt to understand another person's point of view (peer or character) and to see if this grows throughout the experiment. The goal is to see how students reflect on themselves and if they make an effort to understand someone else in some way through literature or in the classroom. The pre- and post-tests are used as a guide to determine whether the empathetic actions are increasing or if little to no change is happening.

The study looks to teach empathy to understand if it changes how students view the world and/or if it changes their empathy score. This is important especially after many of the changes the world has gone through in the last couple of years. The lack of interpersonal interaction and the anxiety that comes with the pandemic has been hard on students, especially with the political unrest, which shows there is a lack of empathy from far too many. The purpose of focusing on empathy is to encourage students to be reflective of the power they hold, to be caring citizens, and to attempt to embrace what they do not know about the world. Empathy is a complex skill that is required in this ever-changing world we live in. I believe it is my duty as a teacher to teach empathy to prepare my students for the world as it adapts so they can also adapt and be constant learners.

## Review of Literature
### THEORETICAL LENS

Empathy is complicated. It is not as simple as labeling someone's actions as empathetic. You will never truly know if their actions were authentically empathetic. All that can be done is to try to dive deep into a person's reasoning and what could have led to those actions. Was it for their convenience? Or was it a genuine interaction? Was it something they were born with? Were they taught this? Research attempts to answer these questions and has come to a consensus that empathy is teachable. Even philosophers like Nel Noddings discuss the need to be caring and provide a possible path to begin to be empathetic.

Noddings talks about her notion of caring in moral education. While it might be confusing to consider caring to be similar to empathy, the researcher would argue that caring is a needed component before empathy can be taught. Noddings (2016) gives four steps to implement caring: (a) Modeling, genuinely showing you care, (b) Dialogue, establishing a caring relationship through conversation, (c) Practice, where students implement and reflect on their caring experience, and (d) Confirmation, where the teacher provides positive feedback to the students practicing (p. 230-233). Through this process, students are engaged in and applying the skill of caring outside the student-teacher context. This allows them to be able to make errors and reflect on their experiences of being cared for and giving care to others. These steps are also applicable to

teaching empathy. We will further explore Dialogue and Practice.

Caring, like empathy, is a hard skill to be able to truly understand and must be held to some measure of doubt. It can be argued that students simply demonstrating these skills at the surface level is enough as they understand what is socially acceptable to say or do in a given situation. However, there needs to be a focus on where students should be empathetic and caring at a deeper level. Arguably, the intent behind the action is also an important factor to consider. Yet, people could be displaying empathetic behaviors for the wrong reasons. Someone could manipulate you into thinking they care while they take advantage of your situation by demonstrating the appropriate actions. Can they still be considered empathetic? Can they be if they do not take that necessary next step of understanding another person's situation and reflect upon how it might affect them? Thus, keeping the purpose of empathy in mind is necessary when teachers make the decision to teach it so that students can practice this skill in its entirety, rather than what is only convenient for them.

When looking at how empathy can be taught, from a philosophical standpoint, it is necessary to not only look at Noddings, but also Paulo Freire and John Dewey. Much like in Nodding's model, Freire discusses the importance of dialogue. Though dialogue in Freire's context was typically one where people with similar experiences would come together and overcome the oppression facing them. Dialogue is a way to critically think about the world (Cahn, 2021, p. 384). Without dialogue, it would not be possible to collect different perspectives and revise what was thought about the world or attempt to redefine and understand it. This is necessary for empathy to be enacted. A lack of willingness to connect with other people restricts individual growth. This can be further developed using John Dewey and his argument that communication is necessary to be able to continuously gather new knowledge.

Dewey mentions how everyone's experiences build on or connect to their previous experiences (Noddings, 2016, p. 31), as each experience presents an opportunity to reevaluate what they know from previous situations. Dialogue is relevant because it makes sense to be able to connect how talking with someone with different experiences will build on or connect to your own experiences. Following Dewey, the goal is to continue to grow your knowledge. By communicating and sharing a dialogue, students develop the skills needed to be empathetic and begin to apply empathy.

Dialogue is a possible method to teach empathy as it encourages students to connect and challenge the way they see the world so they can attempt to understand what others are thinking or feeling and gives them time to practice being empathetic. Even though these philosophers do not answer the question of how to make sure these possible empathetic interactions are genuine, they do provide a method that encourages students to look at the world in a certain way that supports empathy.

**WHAT IS EMPATHY?**

It is important to be able to distinguish empathy from sympathy, as there is some

understandable confusion in terms of how the two differ. Empathy is ingrained within social interactions (Espelage et al., 2018, p. 47; Gunawan el at, 2019, p. 170; Segal & Wagaman, 2017, p. 204) as it can build feelings of connectedness and lead to successful relationships. It is the skill of being able to recognize another person's emotions or thoughts (Bullough Jr, 2019, p. 509) and reacting to it (Espelage et al., 2018, p. 46; Warren, 2014, p. 394). Sympathy, in turn, is sharing someone's emotions where you can understand from your own perspective, typically feelings of sadness, because you have personally felt and have been in that person's situation, while empathy is attempting to understand someone without needing to experience the emotion yourself. It is attempting to put yourself in their shoes and asking yourself how you would feel in their situation.

As expressed before, empathy is a complicated topic. There are many results seen in studies that are contradictory, but researchers have reason to believe teaching empathy has multiple benefits. It can reduce bullying (Ryzin & Roseth, 2019; Zych & Llorent, 2018, p. 554). It is a necessary skill "to be effective" in the workplace and provides a "tremendous advantage in any relationship" (Johnson, 2019, p. 8) as higher empathy levels help "regulate...emotions, display less aggression, and acts in pro-social way" (Kaushik et al, 2021, p. 91-92) leading to more positive relationships. It is a skill that benefits a person in multiple aspects throughout their life.

This skill can be broken up into two different types of empathy: cognitive and affective empathy. Cognitive empathy is attempting to understand someone else's thoughts, emotions (Johnson, 2019, p. 8; Ryzin & Roseth, 2019, p. 644; Swan & Riley, 2015, p. 222; Tarlow & La Greca, 2021, p. 18), or point of view (Stansfield & Bunce, 2014, p. 9). It is the more logical side of empathy where it is possible to reason and infer what another person could be thinking or feeling based on what you know of the person. Affective empathy is the more emotional side. Affective empathy is being able to share or feel another person's emotions (Stansfield & Bunce, 2014, p. 9; Swan & Riley, 2015, p. 222; Tarlow & La Greca, 2021, p. 18; Zych & Llorent, 2018, p. 548) without having experienced it directly. This focuses on how humans connect to each other and develop a relationship. Without connecting in a way that is selfless (Tarlow & La Greca, 2021, p. 19), it becomes harder to connect on an emotional level. Both types of empathy support a person's development and build relationships with others.

The three necessary skills for empathy to happen are: perspective-taking, listening, and self-reflection. Warren & Hotchkins (2015) define perspective-taking as taking the point of view of someone else (p. 268) and as the "centerpiece of empathy's application" (p. 397). Without doing so, it can become harder to attempt to understand or feel another's perspective. Similarly, listening skills are necessary for empathy to occur (Johnson, 2019, p. 9). Discussions can work very well to bring all of these skills together. Discussion needs to occur for people to get the stories of those they cannot relate to, so assumptions do not transpire, and their conception of the world expands. These skills are only effective when paired with self-reflection. The better a person understands who they are and the role they play in society (Gunawan el at., 2019, p. 170), the more it "enhance[s] the capacity for empathy" (Sawn & Riley, 2015, p. 226). Otherwise, it becomes false empathy. For example, it is important to reflect on how your race impacts your beliefs and decision-making and challenge dominant (or white) ideologies to not perpetuate the systems of racism and oppression. This can be done when you have discussions (making use of these three skills) repeatedly. It does not happen automatically and most of the time and does not happen

quickly. The more diverse experiences that are heard, the better, and reflecting on how our background influences assumptions about others (Warren & Hotchkins, 2015, p. 289) contributes to being empathetic.

## WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT EMPATHY?

Research agrees that empathy is beneficial for social interactions and relationships as it results in "the development of accountability and constructive feelings" (Kaushik et al., 2021, p. 92). With that idea in mind, it can be theorized that students with lower levels of empathy are more likely to bully others as it can be hard to understand the consequences of their negative interactions. Low empathy is linked to indirect peer aggression behaviors like exclusion, ignoring, and spreading rumors (Tarlow & La Greca, 2021, p. 21-22), as well as more direct aggressive behaviors (Ryzin & Roseth, 2019, p. 644). Yet, Espelage et al (2018) found that empathy does not necessarily predict bullying, as other factors can be more important (p. 57). While it is a common characteristic, it does not necessarily mean that low empathy is the cause of bullying. Indeed, this study also explores how students with low empathy are also likely to be victims of bullying, as empathy is linked to socialization, showing the complexity of empathy and bullying.

Even with the many studies done on bullying, there are not as many studies on empathy that focus on ethnic and racial differences in comparison to gender differences, but rather there are theories on why there can be differences. Studies involving gender differences have mixed conclusions. Some say there are no differences as they get older (Kaushik et al., 2021, p. 92), while multiple studies have found that girls, typically, have higher levels of both affective and cognitive empathy compared to boys (Dereli & Aypay, 2012, p. 1267; Gunawan et al., 2019, p. 173; Kaushik et al., 2021, p. 93; Tarlow & La Greca, 2021, p. 20). This has been theorized to be because of social norms. As Gunawan et al., (2019) described in Indonesian context:

> "female characteristics are perceived to be soft, polite, sensitive, merciful, responsive, and tolerant, while male characteristics are perceived to be brave, insistent, self-confident, authoritarian, dominant, assertive, and ambitious, and being leaders and taking risks" (p. 173).

More theories are presented when talking about race and ethnicity regarding empathy. Espelage et al., (2018) theorizes that racial and ethnic minority children could have lower empathy rates due to repeated "exposure to violence" and social disadvantages; they have a different view of aggressive behavior as being normal, even positive, rather than deviant (p. 49; Jiang et al., 2020, p. 7). Tarlow & La Greca's (2021) found affective empathy to not play a role for Latinx students as it did for white students, further leading to the idea that cultural variations could impact the role of empathy (p. 23). Kaushik et al. (2021) found parenting styles to play a big role in "encouraging empathy" (p. 94) within students. There is, however, little information on how culture plays a role in students empathy levels.

**WHAT IS TEACHER EMPATHY?**

Empathy is not limited to students and its impact on their lives, but it also applies to how teachers are empathetic and how the empathy they demonstrate impacts their students. Teacher empathy is more specific as teachers are focusing their empathetic efforts towards their students. They work to care and attempt to understand each student and their personal situation, such as race, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity (Meyers el at., 2019, p.161; Swan & Riley, 2015, p. 223), and react in a way that adapts their emotions and lessons to students' needs. This is something teachers already attempt in response to students' more academic needs. This focus draws more on the students' emotional and human needs (Davis, 2019).

Often, teacher empathy is seen as a necessary teacher disposition or responsibility (Bullough Jr, 2019, p. 508; Swan & Riley, 2015, p. 89; Warren, 2014, p. 396 quoting Gordon 1999; Wrobel, 2013, p.584) that teachers should take on, as teachers have "an influential role in teaching empathy" (Philips, 2020, p. 93). Research has shown that teacher empathy is one of the "strongest predictors of positive student outcomes" (Meyers el at., 2019, p. 162) like emotional and behavioral components, and academic performance. Philips (2020) reiterates student-teacher relationships with high empathy benefits "withdrawn" students (p. 89). Research also infers that empathy can "decrease prejudice against marginalized groups" (Navarro-Mateu et al., 2019, p. 3; Warren, 2014, p. 339) as its purpose is to develop an understanding of others' experiences that teachers do not understand, especially since most teachers are white.

Even with its benefits, empathy can cause teacher burnout (Wrobel, 2013, p. 583). It is one of the most common reasons for teachers to leave the profession. Teacher burnout happens when teachers become emotionally exhausted due to empathizing and stressing with students' pain, especially since "teaching staff reported higher levels of empathy than the general population" (Philips, 2020, p. 89-93). Meyers et al. (2019) found that teachers with high empathy set boundaries as to not be "overwhelmed by the intensity of students' negative experiences," refer students to campus resources, and "prioritize student learning" (p. 161). Teachers can protect themselves while also providing students with what they need, allowing teachers to focus more on things they can control: their classroom.

Teachers can also control, and reflect on, their mindset. It is possible for teachers to be displaying false empathy, which is a person's bias to "think, believe, and act as if [they] possesses [*sic*] more empathy than what can [be] personally confirmed" by those on the receiving end or can be observed (Warren & Hotchkins, 2015, p. 267). These teachers believe they are incredibly empathetic, but their actions do not reflect it. Warren & Hotchkins (2015) claim that there are five main components of false empathy.

1. Believing that you know more than you actually do of those who are oppressed. This maintains oppression (p. 269) instead.
2. Your reasons for being empathetic are inherently selfish (p. 269).
3. Not understanding, or assuming, the reality of oppression from the oppressed (p. 270).
4. Representing the dominant voice or not using their voice to "leverage, appreciate, esteem,

and incorporate the perspective of the individual(s) most impacted by the response to the interaction" (p. 271).

5. Instead of considering the wants, needs, and desires of the most vulnerable population, they consider the dominant agenda (the goals of the people in power), which usually results in white saviorism (p. 271).

These components reflect what the teacher truly values and believes about the problem. Students can pick up on this contrast, resulting in more harm than good. Teachers can take action to prevent this from happening. It is important to remember that empathy is about "understanding life through the eyes of the individuals for whom empathy is meant to benefit" (Warren & Hotchkins, 2015, p. 286) rather than assuming you know their needs or experiences. Teachers need to reflect on reality. They need to talk and accurately interpret students/families' needs and it needs to be visible through the outcomes of the students (Warren & Hotchkins, 2015, p. 274). Teachers need to reflect on their mindset towards students, especially those of color. They need to find ways to self-reflect, listen, to respect others (Swan & Riley, 2015, p. 228), and decode their emotions (Wrobel, 2013, p. 589). This is the first step of being authentically empathic.

## CAN YOU TEACH EMPATHY? HOW DO YOU PUT EMPATHY INTO PRACTICE?

Research has consistently shown that it is possible to teach empathy. In fact, there are many ways that teachers are already empathetic in practice, such as building positive student-teacher relationships (Meyers et al., 2019, p. 161; Swan & Riley, 2015, p. 226; Warren, 2014, p. 407; Warren & Hotchkins, 2015, p. 287), creating a safe environment (Meyers et al., 2019, p. 164; Warren, 2014, p. 406; Warren & Hotchkins, 2015, p. 289), having high and reasonable expectations (Warren, 2014, p. 409), and respecting students (Johnson, 2019, p. 12; Meyers et al., 2019, p. 162; Warren, 2014, p. 410). Specifically, respecting students in the sense of their humanity has multiple components. Students should be seen as partners (Warren, 2014, p. 410) in their education as their learning should benefit them. Teachers should always assume the best in students as students have more on their plate than just school. Home stress makes its way into the classroom and expecting all students to behave in the same way is not fair as a response to student's needs (Davis, 2019; Johnson, 2019, p. 12). Students need to be treated as people who are more than just their identity as a student, as their identity is made of multiple aspects. These factors usually have to do with the teacher's mindset. There are some techniques and strategies studies have used to attempt to teach empathy.

Gunawan et al. (2019) found that modeling was more effective than role playing as it took less time and produced better results (p. 173). The researcher finds this interesting but became more skeptical when the modeling they referred to was using video recordings to demonstrate the sought-after behaviors (Gunawan et al., 2019, p. 171). While this does not sound like a problem initially, empathy is being taught explicitly, and while that is good, it could be argued that they knew the "correct" answer, what was expected of them, and not answering authentically.

Modeling in terms of showing how to be empathetic as a person through teaching methods like scaffolding (slowly letting go of the reins in efforts to have students be more independent in their practice of a skill), creating positive relationships, and being conscious of students' needs is very important as students see teachers as an authority figure. Role playing, in comparison in this study, refers to being given a prompt, acting out a role, and then also observing others in those same roles (Gunawan et al., 2019, p. 171) This can be hard for students, as seen with Rantala's et al. (2016) study. This could be because students did not have enough information in terms of character or overall context, or due to stage fright (Rantala et al., 2016, p. 341). Despite this, one of the students commented the need for "more multiperspective views on history" (Rantala et al., 2016, p. 341) as students were learning about the complexity of history and how it impacted people then. Neither study showed enough of an increase in empathy to claim role playing was effective for teaching empathy, even though it engages in perspective taking.

Reading fiction is associated with higher empathy (both affective and cognitive) as stories provide people a way to look at life in a different way and not just our own (Johnson, 2019; Stransfield & Bunce, 2014, p. 10). By reading fiction, it exposes readers to differing viewpoints for every story they read, building an understanding of others over time, resulting in cognitive empathy (Stransfield & Bunce, 2014, p. 15). It can also be immediate if students are transported (absorbed/engaged at a high level) into the story, provoking affective empathy (Stransfield & Bunce, 2014, p. 17). Stransfield & Bunce (2014) acknowledge the fact many studies on this focus on children rather than adults but can link that empathy felt for fictional characters extends to real people (p. 9). Knowing that fiction is associated with both cognitive (through exposure overtime) and affective empathy (through transportation), it is important to cater to the students' needs and interests to encourage this development.

Cooperative learning, using Contact Theory (the conditions which social contact leads to a "reduction of biases and prejudices" (Ryzin & Roseth, 2019, p. 644)) as the outline for these interactions, has also been successful in increasing empathy within students, especially in bullying prevention programs (Ryzin & Roseth, 2019, p. 649). Cooperative learning uses purposeful group-based activities to enhance learning, while Contact Theory focuses on creating a safe and inclusive environment for students to productively work together under a supportive teacher (Ryzin & Roseth, 2019, p. 644). The goal is to provide students with more opportunities to discuss and listen as they work towards a common outcome. Students build "collaborative social skills" and have a lot of "face-to-face interaction" as a result of this framework (Ryzin & Roseth, 2019, p. 647). By building these skills, students can develop an understanding of someone else's reasoning and apply that to other situations: being empathetic.

Bullough Jr (2019) would argue against empathy being necessary or even being teachable. He notes that many studies on empathy rely on "self-reporting" data, which can be influenced by "'social desirability, desire for positive self-evaluation, and stereotyping'" (as quoted in Bloom (2016; Bullough Jr., 2019, p. 512). This can be a potential issue with most studies. Empathy is difficult to measure (Johnson, 2019, p. 12) as it has to do with someone relaying information about themselves. They do not need to know they are being tested for empathy to understand

subconsciously what an ideal answer would be. This is why, for this study, the researcher will be gathering observational data to determine whether students are responding empathetically to the characters they read about.

Whether empathy can be taught presents new challenges to researchers. Most studies rely on self-reported data, raising the question of whether empathy is testable or not. Yet, this is not enough reason to consider empathy unteachable either. This study is attempting to minimize that bias by appropriately managing students' access to research information consistent with ethical research norms. Empathy presents different perspectives that is necessary to build and support student growth as it has them reflect and look outside, and inside, themselves and attempt to understand the world.

## Methodology

This quasi-experiment took place in a large Chicago suburban high school that only holds freshman and sophomores during the researcher's student teaching experience. The study takes place with freshman who do not meet the reading benchmark on their MAP test and struggle with reading and writing. There are three different classes that take part of this study. Together, there are around 50% Latinx students, 25% African American/Black students, and 23% students with other racial demographics (White, Pacific Islander, Asian, and those who identify with more than one race/ethnicity).

The researcher gathers anonymous pre- and post-tests that detail student empathy levels and aspects of their demographics to find additional possible correlations. The researcher uses Research Collaborations Empathy Formative Questionnaire (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2015) to determine student empathy levels and the technical guide (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2018) to help interpret the meaning of the empathy scores. This questionnaire looks at two different aspects of empathy: whether they make efforts to understand others and if they communicate their understanding to a person's situation, and then finds the average of them combined (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2018). It allows the researcher to look at the data on a hundred-point scale and to interpret the data as one does letter grades (A, B, C, D, F). There is an additional survey attached that gathers more information like race/ethnicity and students' experiences reading in and out of class, and in the Socratic Seminars done in class. Most students were already exposed to the teacher attempting to model empathy during class as relationships were formed.

This study focuses on the Socratic Seminars held in class to further gauge whether students' responses are empathetic as the teacher models how to be empathetic through the discussion. Socratic Seminars are more formal discussions that are based on digging deeper into a situation, novel, etc. that encourages students to ask and respond to questions to get at the core of what is being discussed. Discussions involve many components of empathy like listening, perspective taking, and self-reflection. Through these discussions, students were to develop a more empathetic mindset, whether it be towards the characters or their peers. The researcher coded the different type of responses that students use that connect to empathy. The researcher looks at other

interactions to see if they lean towards an empathetic response or provide more context to the data.

The primary threat to validity, as noted, is the use of self-reported answers. While the students have not been explicitly told the experiment will be focusing on empathy, the questions that test empathy levels do appeal to socially acceptable answers. Ideally, with the surveys being anonymous and the researcher expressing how important it was about students being honest, the responses are accurate reflections of the students' feelings.

There are also concerns with the researcher displaying false empathy unintentionally. While the researcher is doing their best to be as genuine as possible with modeling empathy, there is still the risk that the research is biased due to social expectations and expectations with the research. The researcher uses self-reflection as well on the discussions on whether her modeling was genuine or could be considered false empathy. There is also the worry that the questions will lean too heavily on empathetic responses, resulting in a biased discussion. While it is not necessarily a bad thing to guide students in that direction, it could impact the results in understanding where students are at.

There is also the need to stress that this study is looking for instances of cognitive empathy rather than affective empathy. The researcher believes there are few ways to identify whether students are truly feeling another person's emotions (affective empathy), as it can be them wanting to give the "correct" and expected answer. The research believes that it is hard to truly know whether students are feeling/are being authentically empathetic. Students can make the attempt to be, as it is a skill that needs to be developed. The researcher is looking for students to attempt to understand what the characters might be feeling or could feel, perspective taking, and attempting to understand their peers' opinions/thoughts. By saying things like "Juliet could be feeling…", "I feel that I would…", "I don't understand how…".

## Results

The data collected came from the pre- and post-survey and two different Socratic Seminars. These surveys are anonymous to encourage students to answer as truthfully as possible and eliminate bias from the researcher. The pre-survey had 31 responses in total and the post-survey had 26 total responses. The research compares data from the surveys and then details the results from coding the Socratic Seminar transcripts.

**Table 1: The average of each survey by class.**

| Mean Student Empathy Scores | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Class 1 | Class 2 | Class 3 |
| Pre-survey | 61.1 | 60.1 | 63.3 |
| Post-survey | 52.8 | 63 | 64.7 |

**Table 2: Paired Samples *t-test* comparing each class' pre- and post-survey.**

| | | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Paired Samples Test | | | | | | | | | |
| Paired Differences | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | Lower | Upper | | | |
| Pair 1 | C1Pre-C1Post | 7.4444 | 11.79100 | 3.93033 | -1.61892 | 16.50781 | 1.894 | 8 | .095 |
| Pair 2 | C2Pre-C2Post | -5.85714 | 13.14570 | 4.96861 | -18.01489 | 6.30061 | -1/179 | 6 | .283 |
| Pair 3 | C3Pre-C3Post | -1.40000 | 20.30435 | 6.42080 | -15.92486 | 13.12486 | -.218 | 9 | .832 |

Table 1 presents the mean of the three classes' pre- and post-survey scores showing their differences. As seen in Table 1, Class 2 rose three points, and Class 3 rose less than one point, while Class 1 dropped significantly by nine points. Class 2 has the lowest empathy average in the pre-survey and increases the most in the post-survey. Now each class had 1-2 less students for the post-survey than the pre-survey. So far, this does not indicate that empathy increases through Socratic Seminars overall.

Table 2 shows that the result is not statistically significant using a paired sample *T-test*. That is, the result does not suggest that Socratic Seminars impacted students' empathy scores for any of the classes. If anything, the test tells us that it is more likely that the scores changed based on chance.

Table 3 shows that Class 1 has more students scoring in the lower 25% range than the other two classes. These surveys are also anonymous and do not consist of all the same students in each survey, making it hard to determine if the same students' scores dropped or if different students taking the survey had lower empathy scores than the first set of students.

The researcher had attempted to code the discussions by looking for instances of perspective taking (putting yourself in someone else's shoes), attempting to understand a character's emotions or decisions, and attempting to understand their peer's opinions and thoughts. There is a gray area with perspective taking and attempting to understand a character's emotions or decisions. The researcher attempted to draw the line where perspective taking has more to do with "what if" situations and the other focused more on the scenes taking place in the play and character motivations.

**Table 3: Aspects of empathy elicited by Socratic Seminar**

| | Class 1 | | Class 2 | | Class 3 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Socratic Seminar-Coded Discussions | | | | | | |
| | Socratic Seminar 1 | Socratic Seminar 2 | Socratic Seminar 1 | Socratic Seminar 2 | Socratic Seminar 1 | Socratic Seminar 2 |
| Perspective Taking | 5 | 11 | 3 | 4 | 13 | 14 |
| attempting to understand a character's emotions or decisions | 12 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 9 | 5 |
| attempting to understand their peer's opinions and thoughts | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Overall Empathy Average (pre- and post-survey) | 61.1 | 52.8 | 60.1 | 63 | 63.3 | 64.7 |

The coded responses were put into numerical order to help comprehend in ways the class was empathetic and how many times they were. Table 3 does not show that the more empathetic responses students give, the higher their empathy levels. Now, there is an increase in all classes where they give a response that was considered perspective taking. Answers such as:

> And another I think is while she really doesn't want to marry Paris anyway, because she—. Remember they were saying like oh you, she'll marry him because he has money, he brings our family lots of money and this this and that. She doesn't care about that. She was not looking for money and you know to bear some children, people, people, she looking for the love of her life. And then, and then, I think they have set like um that's something, one of them had something like, he was like really handsome or something like that. Like I think it was like the nurse or something and um, that she'll be lucky to get with his, so she might as well do it now. And also think that's kind of like, her rebelling, being like, oh no, I'm not gonna do it, just cause all y'all don't want me to. I want to find like the person that I want by myself. (Class 3, Alex).

I think, um, yeah, I think she's immature his first. All she knew his age and then she knew he was from the other family. And I knew, like my family was like beefing with another people. I wouldn't go ahead and marriage them because my family was literally killed me. And then him like. (Class 3, Sloane).

Well she just, not saying that like okay if she just stuck to what her parents wanted her to do, even though she didn't want to do it, she's 14. I mean, I don't know the difference between back then and now, but she should have just listened -- Some people would thought that she should have just listened to her parents and got married to Paris and called it a day. But that's not, obviously if you love somebody, you're not gonna do that. (Class 1, Jordan).

These are only a few responses that show students attempting to put themselves in the characters' shoes and thinking about how they might react in those situations. By doing this, they are showing that they can apply this skill to someone in a book, which can be much harder than applying to it someone you know.

## Discussion

Much of the data collected would be considered inconclusive as there is not enough for it to support either side of whether Socratic Seminars increase empathy. There was a small sample size of less than forty students combined from the three classes, and based on the stereotypical student in the program, it is less likely for them to have high levels of empathy to begin with as suggested by Espelage et al., (2018). Many of the students come in with trauma and with lower reading scores on their MAP tests. The lives of many of these students have not been easy, especially with the pandemic, which can explain their relatively low empathy scores. Most students scored between 50 and 69 on a 100-point scale, with only a few above 70, and even fewer below 50. That is not to say that the students are not empathetic, but the survey tells us more so how they understand how they interact with other people.

It is important to note that there are a lot of things that happen outside of the researcher's specific classroom that cannot be controlled or noted in this study. There are too many factors that cannot be accounted for when it comes to how students interact with other people. In each of the classes in the study, students share many of their core classes, with little variation in students who switch classes. Two classes are not as open with each other as the other class can be. Even if the teacher has attempted to create a warm and welcoming environment for students to share their thoughts and experiences, there are still other factors at play that can impact how the students interact with each other.

Class 1 is a group of students who work hard and actively participate in class, though many of the students have an interesting relationship with one student in particular that can make it hard for other students to open up and share their opinions or experiences due to conflicts that student can spark and encourage. Espelage et al., (2018) also talks about, as previously stated in the study, that those with low empathy tend to be bullies and the victims of bullying, even if empathy does not predict it. By looking at where my students are on a letter scale, their scores can

be considered low. When considering the class average dropped 9 points, it makes the researcher wonder what could cause such a big gap. It could be due to a bigger difference between students taking the pre- and post-survey. It could be the extended period of time in between the last Socratic Seminar and the post-survey. It could even be due to factors that have nothing to do with school. But when looking at Table 3, there is an increase of students making use of perspective taking in the discussion, which is necessary to have to be empathetic (Warren & Hotchkins, 2015, p. 397). This can either mean that the questions were biased to get those reactions or that through the researcher's modeling during their daily instruction that they began to put themselves in the characters' shoes.

There are also instances in class where students in Class 1 have shown that they can demonstrate empathetic actions. In the beginning of the semester, a student Jackie had come up before one of the researcher's observations and said that she will stay off their phone today to help encourage the observer to get a better score. It was a very flattering interaction considering Jackie makes it known that her parents do not care about school or their grades and has a habit of being on her phone during class. Another instance was a student named George who turned in a writing assignment towards the end of semester and mentioned how he had figured his handwriting was hard to read and had sectioned off his writing for the researcher to have an easier time reading, due to her being dyslexic. These students are showing they can be empathetic, despite the scores presented on the test. This does not mean the other classes do not display empathy, but these are the most explicit instances of empathetic interactions that the researcher had recorded in any of the three classes. Showing that there is always more than can be shown in the survey.

Class 2 has a somewhat different situation in terms of classroom environment. This class is made up of mostly males and has a more resistant approach to school, especially when it requires their participation. As you can see on Table 3, they have the lowest numbers in terms of empathetic responses during the discussions. While it still is not a lot, they have made a few improvements from their previous Socratic Seminars. But it should be noted that despite the fact that they had the least number of surveys, they also made the most change between the pre- and post-survey; around 3 points. Now it could have changed based on one person's response, but it is believed that they grew as class. While they still resist in the school process, they are talking and joking more (mostly with not wanting to do their work), but the researcher has found that they are more engaged, even if it is not considered significant.

Class 3 is a very open and honest class who know each other very well and it can be seen in the way they treat each other in the classroom. They help make the classroom to be open and welcoming for all. This class also has the highest averages based on student surveys. Which is interesting because in Table 3, they also have the highest number of responses that fit into the perspective taking category, building on the idea that it is important for empathy. The Socratic Seminars for this class relied less on the teacher and more on students taking the time to respond to each other with their understanding of the book and helping each other gain new perspectives of the story. Now, this was mentioned because there is one student that had an active role in the discussion and made an active contribution to the results, which can present a new perspective about the data.

**Limitations/Conclusion**

There are numerous limitations to be aware of in relation to this study. There was a lack of time. This entire study took place during the researcher's student teaching over the course of most of a semester (14 weeks). The Socratic Seminars were four weeks apart from each other and could have an impact if it was more consistently used. If there was an opportunity for this type of study to take place over the course of a full school year, where there would be more opportunities for Socratic Seminars as part of the normal curriculum, it would help to see the long-term effects Socratic Seminars could have on student's empathy. Moreover, to make them less guided over time would let the researcher see how they attempt to include each other and understand each other's thoughts.

Due to certain restrictions, there was not an opportunity to add a third Socratic Seminar, even though it was anticipated. This caused the post-survey to be a couple weeks after the second Socratic Seminar, possibly impacting the results. Providing the tests in a reasonable time frame would have helped to eliminate this potential issue.

But one of the most important things the researcher would suggest to change is to provide more opportunities for students to self-reflect on a deeper level than: What did you think of the Seminar? Did it help clarify aspects of the book? By making self-reflection an important aspect to the process, it could help students become more self-aware of themselves (academically and emotionally) for them to make improvements. Self-reflection is necessary for empathy to develop, since if one is unfamiliar with oneself, it becomes harder to understand others and their perspectives.

This study found little data that supported or denied the question of whether Socratic Seminars increased empathy but can be used as a steppingstone to look closely at classroom practices that individual teachers can incorporate as SEL becomes more popular in schools. This study continues to support the idea that empathy is complicated and so much goes into it that it is almost impossible to know whether students are responding a certain way due to societal expectations or do not know themselves well enough to answer the survey honestly. It is also important to note the environment and modeling empathy does make a difference when working on the skill as part of the hidden curriculum. Sometimes it is the classes you do not expect that take the most out of what you teach.

While the researcher has gathered inconclusive results, the researcher is confident that with more research on specific and applicable methods to the classroom, it will be possible to determine whether teachers can impact students' empathy levels. If nothing else, the researcher encourages you to take at least one thing from this study: be authentically empathetic, because the possibility of students receiving any form of benefits from such empathetic acts should be enough of a reason to implement them.

## References

Bullough, R. V. (2019). Empathy, teaching dispositions, social justice and teacher education. *Teachers & Teaching*, *25*(5), 507–522. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2019.1602518

Davis, F. E. (2019). *The little book of race and restorative justice black lives, healing, and Us social transformation*. Good Books.

Dereli, E., & Aypay, A. (2012). The Prediction of Empathetic Tendency and Characteristic Trait of Collaboration on Humane Values in Secondary Education Students and the examining to Those Characteristics. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice*, *12*(2), 1262–1279.

Espelage, D. L., Hong, J. S., Kim, D. H., & Nan, L. (2018). Empathy, Attitude Towards Bullying, Theory-of-Mind, and Non-physical Forms of Bully Perpetration and Victimization Among U.S. Middle School Students. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, *47*(1), 45–60. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-017-9416-z

Gaumer Erickson, A.S., Soukup, J.H., Noonan, P.M., & McGurn, L. (2015). Empathy formative questionnaire [Measurement instrument]. Retrieved from http://www.researchcollaboration.org/uploads/EmpathyQuestionnaireInfo.pdf.

Gaumer Erickson, A.S., Soukup, J.H., Noonan, P.M., & McGurn, L. (2018). Self-Regulation formative questionnaire technical report. Retrieved from http://www.researchcollaboration.org/uploads/SelfRegulationQuestionnaire Info.pdf

Gunawan, I. M. S., Wibowo, M. E., Purwanto, E., & Sunawan, S. (2019). Group Counseling of Values Clarification to Increase Middle School Students' Empathy. *Psicologia Educativa*, *25*(2), 169–174. https://doi.org/10.5093/psed2019a5

Jaeger, P. T., Cooke, N. A., Feltis, C., Hamiel, M., Jardine, F., & Shilton, K. (2015). The Virtuous Circle Revisited: Injecting Diversity, Inclusion, Rights, Justice, and Equity into LIS from Education to Advocacy. *Library Quarterly*, *85*(2), 150–171. https://doi.org/10.1086/680154

Jiang, S., Dong, L., & Jiang, C. (2020). Examining the link between economic strain and adolescent social behavior: Roles of social bonds and empathy. *Journal of Adolescence*, *84*, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2020.07.015

Johnson, D. (2019). Empathetic Skills and School Libraries: Critical for Both Students and Librarians. *Teacher Librarian*, *46*(5), 8–13.

Kaushik, P., Chawla, A., & Vig, D. (2021). Relationship of altruism with empathy among adolescents: A gender study. *Indian Journal of Positive Psychology*, *12*(1), 91–95.

Meyers, S., Rowell, K., Wells, M., & Smith, B. C. (2019). Teacher Empathy: A Model of Empathy for Teaching for Student Success. *College Teaching*, *67*(3), 160–168. https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2019.1579699

Navarro-Mateu, D., Franco-Ochoa, J., Valero-Moreno, S., & Prado-Gascó, V. (2019). To be or not to be an inclusive teacher: Are empathy and social dominance relevant factors to positive attitudes towards inclusive education? *PLoS ONE*, *14*(12), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0225993

Philips, A. (2020). Empathy in teaching staff across educational settings. *Psychology of Education Review*, *44*(2), 89–94.

Rantala, J., Manninen, M., & van den Berg, M. (2016). Stepping into other people's shoes proves to be a difficult task for high school students: assessing historical empathy through simulation exercise. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *48*(3), 323–345. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2015.1122092

Ryzin, M. J., Roseth, C. J., & Van Ryzin, M. J. (2019). Effects of cooperative learning on peer relations, empathy, and bullying in middle school. *Aggressive Behavior*, *45*(6), 643–651. https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.21858

Segal, E. A., & Wagaman, M. A. (2017). Social Empathy as a Framework for Teaching Social Justice. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *53*(2), 201–211. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2016.1266980

Stansfield, J. and Bruce, L. (2014). The Relationship Between Empathy and Reading Fiction: Separate Roles for Cognitive and Affective Components. *Journal of European Psychology Students*, *5*(3), 9-18, DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/jeps.ca

Swan, P., & Riley, P. (2015). Social connection: empathy and mentalization for teachers. *Pastoral Care in Education*, *33*(4), 220–233. https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2015.1094120

Tarlow, N., & La Greca, A. M. (2021). The role of empathy and social anxiety in Latinx adolescents' indirect peer aggression during the transition to high school. *Aggressive Behavior*, *47*(1), 17–27. https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.21926

Treichler, E. B. H., Crawford, J. N., Higdon, A., & Backhaus, A. L. (2020). Diversity and Social Justice Training at the Postdoctoral Level: A Scoping Study and Pilot of a Self-Assessment. *Training & Education in Professional Psychology*, *14*(2), 126–137.

https://doi.org/10.1037/tep0000281

Warren, C. (2014). Towards a Pedagogy for the Application of Empathy in Culturally Diverse Classrooms. *Urban Review*, *46*(3), 395–419. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-013-0262-5

Warren, C., & Hotchkins, B. (2015). Teacher Education and the Enduring Significance of "False Empathy." *Urban Review*, *47*(2), 266–292. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-014-0292-7

Wright-Maley, C., & Joshi, P. (2017). All Fall Down: Simulating the Spread of the Black Plague in the High School History Classroom. *History Teacher*, *50*(4), 517–534

Wróbel, M. (2013). Can empathy lead to emotional exhaustion in teachers? The mediating role of emotional labor. *International Journal of Occupational Medicine & Environmental Health*, *26*(4), 581–592. https://doi.org/10.2478/s13382-013-0123-1

Zych, I., & Llorent, V. J. (2019). Affective Empathy and Moral Disengagement Related to Late Adolescent Bullying Perpetration. *Ethics & Behavior*, *29*(7), 547–556. https://doi.org/10.1080/10508422.2018.1521282

# Paedagogia

Journal of Teacher Action Research

For more information about this Journal, visit
**lakeforest.edu/paedagogia**.

1857

**LAKE FOREST**
**COLLEGE**

LAKE FOREST
COLLEGE

1857