

How Do Social Work Students Learn to be Empathetic?

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Empathy and Social Work

Empathy is a topic of significant interest in the social work profession. There is general consensus that social workers who are able to demonstrate and convey empathy are more effective and that clients who experience empathetic responses from social workers tend to have improved outcomes. (Gerdes, Segal, Jackson & Mullins, 2011; Gerdes & Segal, 2011). Given this, it is imperative that undergraduate social work programs effectively teach about empathy and help students develop empathetic mindsets and skills.

There is more written in the literature about how to teach empathy, less written about how students best learn to be empathetic. This study examined how effective a 3-step teaching strategy was on student learning and development of empathy mindsets and skills. In addition it asked students to evaluate what specific teaching methodologies influenced their learning process.

Research Design

- The research question was “**How do social work students learn to be empathetic?**”
- Forty students in two social work classes were asked to take two pre and post measures and one post learning activity survey. Thirty seven students participated.
- A specific teaching intervention utilizing cognitive, affective and behavioral components was delivered in the classroom.
- Three data collection measures were used;
 - The **Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy (QCAE)**, a 31 questionnaire designed to assess different scales of empathy.
 - **Four hypothetical scenarios** asking students to select what kind of response they would give in the situation.
 - A **Learning Activity Survey** that asked students to rate on a scale of 1 (least useful) to 5 (most useful) how influential the various activities used during the teaching intervention were on their understanding and practice of empathy.

References

Gerdes, K., Segal, E., Jackson, K., & Mullins, J. (2011). Teaching Empathy: A Framework Rooted in Social Cognitive Neuroscience and Social Justice. *Journal of Social Work Education, 47*(1), 109-131.

Gerdes, K. E., & Segal, E. (2011). Importance of Empathy for Social Work Practice: Integrating New Science. *Social Work, 56*(2), 141-148

Findings

QCAE:

	Mean	N	Std. Devtn	Std. Error Mean	T	Sig (2 tailed)
Pr 1: Pre	2.9736	37	.33159	.05451	-3.830	.000
Post	3.1679	37	.30742	.05054		

The measure showed statistically significant change in student responses between the pre and post test. Specifically the change in the mean indicated that students showed an increase in empathetic responses to the 31 questions from pre to post measure.

Scenarios

	Mean	N	Std. Devtn	Std. Error Mean	t	Sig (2 tailed)
Pr 1: Pre	2.6757	37	.65049	.10694	-7.498	.000
Post	3.5946	37	.45396	.07463		

The measure showed statistically significant change in student responses between the pre and post test. Specifically the change in the mean indicated that students showed an increase in empathetic responses to the 4 scenarios and that post answers were more empathetic.

Learning Activity Survey

	Videos	Discussion	Breathing/ Statements	Journaling	Skills: Easy	Skills: Hard
N Valid	36	37	37	37	36	36
Mean	4.5833	4.5676	4.5676	4.0270	4.6667	4.7222

The learning activities were rated on a score from 1 (least helpful) to 5 (most helpful). As indicated above the students felt that all learning activities were influential in their learning, with skill practice rating slightly higher than other activities.

Discussion

Initial conclusions would indicate that the teaching intervention heightened student’s ability to think empathetically and as demonstrated in the change in scenario scores respond with more empathy to various situations. The findings with the learning activities indicate that all 6 strategies were influential in shaping student understanding of and ability to develop empathetic mindsets and skills.

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