

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Perceptions of kindness in pre-service early childhood teachers

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Abstract: Research evidence on Social and Emotional Learning implementation at schools has long been recognized. Most of the research up to now has focused mainly on cultivating explicit social and emotional skills and relatively scant attention has been given to those positive human qualities or virtues such as kindness. Current study aims to illuminate pre-service early childhood teachers' conceptualization of kindness. Two hundred and nineteen pre-service students described their perceptions of kindness responding to the open question "what is kindness?". Kindness was conceptualized as a range of acts and words indicating respect, understanding and emotional support, that promote personal development and healthy relationships. Teachers' kindness trait was specifically perceived important in cultivating students' personality and teacher-student relationships. The findings of the study contribute to the topic of kindness in education which is a promising but undervalued area of school-based programming.

Keywords: kindness, early childhood teachers, social and emotional learning

1 Introduction

Teachers' role on students' academic achievement to develop expertise and instructional competences has been broadened to include students' cultivation of social and emotional skills and competences to develop character for optimal functioning (Kress & Elias, 2020). A plausible reason for this is because students enter school education ill-equipped with social and emotional skills and teachers are identified as the agents who have the capacity to facilitate Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) development to students (Binfet & Passmore, 2017).

Research has provided evidence for the pivotal role of early childhood teachers as emotion socializers in students' social and emotional outcomes (Denham & Bassett, 2019; Denham et al., 2014; Denham et al., 2012). In the classroom context, there is a strong link among emotions, activities and practices and the social moral and normative orders of the classroom, which consists of a resource for students' learning of emotional competence (Cekaite & Kvist, 2017; Grining et al., 2010). Early childhood teachers act as emotion socialization agents by *modeling* emotions, referring to the way teachers' expression of emotions teaches children which emotions are appropriate and which emotions are provoked by different situations. Teachers also act as emotion socialization agents by *responding* to children's emotional expressions, and either encourage or discourage children's emotional displays. Teachers finally use direct *teaching* to help children understand the causes of emotions and develop emotional knowledge (Morris et al., 2013). In turn, children adopt this learning more or less into their own emotional competence repertoire (Denham et al., 2012).

Teachers are responsible to help students developing skills and dispositions that enhance and enrich their relationships and well-being in schools and in their life in general. Such skills are self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. Social and emotional skills are a set of basic interpersonal competencies which can be used for good or for ill. Thus, social, and emotional skills need to be guided by values (Kress & Elias, 2020). Character education builds on the development of values and virtues, which set the guideposts for behavior (Kress & Elias, 2020). The convergence of SEL and Character Education movements denotes the importance of linking social and emotional skills with virtues. Because virtues guide SEL skills, it is important to reflect on these virtues and how we put them in action (Kress & Elias, 2020).

Up to now, research has focused on cultivating explicit social and emotional skills whereas relatively scant attention has been given to those positive human qualities or virtues such as kindness (Binfet et al., 2016). The study of kindness falls within the framework of SEL, which aims to illuminate the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive competences children learn across varied settings (Binfet et al., 2018). Kindness is in line with school's mission, that is to

learn students to consider the feelings of others, to treat others with respect, and to behave with ways that engender cohesion and respect (Binfet et al., 2018). Kindness is a salient factor which contributes to the positive climate and culture of the school (Binfet et al., 2016). The extent to which teachers motivate students to kindness or convey messages of kindness in their daily school life reflects teachers' own perceptions of its significance.

1.1 Kindness research

The study of kindness was theoretically grounded in SEL and was addressed within the context of the larger overarching term of prosocial behavior (Binfet & Gaertner, 2015). Bulk of definitions reflect broad definitions (Binfet et al., 2018), whereas the concept of kindness as a distinct concept appears relatively infrequently (Binfet & Gaertner, 2015). Kindness is perceived simply as “doing favors and good deeds for others” (Seligman et al., 2005) and “voluntary, intentional behaviors” (Eiseberg et al., 1986). Aristotle defined kindness as “helpfulness toward someone in need, not in return for anything, nor for the advantage of the helper himself, but for that of the person helped” (Book II-chapter 7: “Aristotle’s rhetoric”, n.d). The lack of a clear definition for kindness may be due to the fact that kindness is used as a synonym to compassion, altruism, caring and helping, along with generosity and nurturance (Binfet & Gaertner, 2015). Recent work by Rowland and Curry (2019) has initiated the discussion about “what is kindness” and disentangles our understanding of kindness vis-à-vis altruism and compassion (Binfet et al., 2018).

Studies in adult populations revealed that performing intentional acts of kindness and recognizing kindness in others has positive mental health outcomes, including reducing depressive symptoms and increasing subjective happiness and life satisfaction (Buchanan & Bardi, 2010). The limited existing research suggests that kindness education programs may improve students' SEL and the whole school climate, having positive impacts on both students' well-being, and academic achievement (Kaplan et al., 2016). Students who display high levels of kind behavior are likely to engage in less aggressive behavior, leading to reduced interpersonal conflict (Binfet & Gaertner, 2015). Researchers argue that kindness could have benefits beyond personal happiness, academic achievement, and social acceptance (Layous et al., 2012).

1.2 The present study

Teachers are increasingly expected to foster students' social and emotional competences along with the development of students' intellectual development and find themselves expected to teach students skills historically taught at home (Binfet et al., 2018; Triliva & Author, 2006). Based on the axiom that early childhood teachers model prosocial behavior and act as emotion socializers, it is important to understand how pre-service early childhood teachers conceptualize kindness within their profession and as a life stance in general.

A review of the extant psychological and educational literature revealed limited studies on students' (Binfet et al., 2016; Binfet & Gaertner, 2015; Binfet et al., 2018) and teachers' perceptions of kindness (Binfet & Passmore, 2017; Jin et al., 2021; Krane et al., 2017). Research on kindness comes mainly from Binfet's foundation studies on students and in-service teachers' understanding of kindness. Although kindness is considered a valued personality trait in western society, and has received much lay attention, yet remarkable little is known about teachers' perceptions of what constitutes kindness (Binfet & Gaertner, 2015).

Current study aims to add to this limited area of research and explore pre-service early childhood teachers' perceptions of kindness. We assume that how teachers understand kindness influences the expectations they hold for the students in their charge, that signifies the need to identify how teachers define kindness while they are still in their pre-service education. Understanding how teachers think about and enact kindness represents the first step towards unfolding the different ways teachers model kindness for students. The exploration of teachers' perceptions of kindness could offer insights into school's hidden curriculum, that is the “subtle messages” (Jerald, 2006) teachers convey in their daily life. It also reflects how teachers promote school's vision or mission around the promotion of students' prosocial behavior.

Thus, the dearth of work on kindness in teachers coupled with evidence of the benefits (Layous et al., 2012) highlights the need for extending research in this topic, especially in the area of pre-service early childhood teachers. The purpose of the present study is to identify how pre-service early childhood teachers conceptualize kindness.

1.3 Aim of the study

With these in mind we aim to explore pre-service early childhood teachers' conceptualizations of kindness and generate interest in the study of kindness and emotional development in teachers

by reporting some very new research.

2 Methods

2.1 Measurement

This study employs a qualitative constructivist design in which information was gathered from pre-service early childhood teachers. Students who attended a compulsory taught course in educational psychology were asked to respond to the question: “What is kindness for you”. Students were asked to write their responses anonymously with no instruction, or time limits. In this study a qualitative methodology was chosen as the optimal means of acquiring a deeper understanding of students’ perspectives (Krane et al., 2017).

2.2 Participants

Convenience sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) was used to recruit participants for the study. Students of the second grade of studies in the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education, University of Patras, were invited to participate. Following 4 years of graduate studies, these students serve as early childhood teachers (children’s’ age range 4-5 years old). The students were divided into two groups, due the large number of participants in the compulsory course. The first group (99 students, 97 female and 2 male) received the taught course in class, and gave their responses in paper and pencil (October, 2019), whereas the second group (115 female and 5 male) received the taught course on-line due to Covid-19 restrictions and therefore, they responded to the question on-line (April, 2020). All students were asked to voluntarily participate in the study. In total 219 participants (212 female and 7 male) aged 19-20 years old gave their responses to the open question about kindness.

2.3 Data analysis

After all the responses were collected, each response was reviewed independently by both the principal investigator and a colleague resulting in an initial coding of the responses. Qualitative conventional content analysis was used to understand and make sense of the responses with a “systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Conventional content analysis is best suited to capturing prevalent themes found within participant-generated data. Given the dearth of empirical work on pre-service teachers’ perceptions of kindness, this approach offers advantages over other content analysis approach. Each response was coded by hand at first, and then transferred to an electronic codebook contained the codes, brief description of the codes and exemplar quotes of the data (Saldana, 2013). Short phrases were used to identify the topics of a passage of text. When the first round of initial coding of the answers was conducted, the coding process became more focused in a second cycle of coding (Saldana, 2013). Pattern coding was now used to disclose the conceptual and thematic organization of the data. The preliminary codes were recoded, reorganized, and further categorized within the electronic codebook. The second step involved a collaborative winnowing approach between the two coders to reduce redundancy (Wolcott, 1990), in which general categories were collapsed into prevalent themes. This process resulted into 5 themes. Examples of each theme were identified and listed next to the theme to assist with the coding (Table 1). Coders came to consensus on the internal coherence and consistency within those themes.

3 Results

The open question on “what kindness is” resulted into 5 Themes (Table 1). At first, participants characterized kindness as a virtue and a personality trait (27.3) that we need to develop (“*kindness is a virtue for me, it is a gift that not many people have it*”).

The definition of kindness in pre-service teachers’ eyes revealed similarities. The majority of them defined kindness as respect to others (64.8%), understanding (15.06%), help and caring (20.54%) and solving problems or challenges peacefully (7.76%).

Following a general definition of kindness, perspective teachers described manifestations of kindness. At this point, three main subthemes were revealed: A group of respondents described kindness as a set of behaviors or “good manners” (38.81%), such as behaving in an acceptable way, avoid offensive attitudes and live within the societal norms (“*kindness is nice behavior which does not insult others*”). They reasoned that kindness is mainly a formal and intentional behavior aiming to social acceptance of the kind person. The majority of pre-service

Table 1 Kindness themes and examples

Themes	Description/examples
1. Definitions of kindness	
Virtue	Set of moral principles
Respect	Respect others and their limits
Understanding	Relating to others with understanding
Help/caring	Help, offer with no return
Solve problems peacefully	Solving conflicts quietly with no anger
2. Manifestations of kindness	
Formal kindness	Socially accepted ways of behavior
Non-intentional acts of kindness	Use nice words, smile, forgiveness, empathy, lack of selfishness
Positive stance to life	Positive energy, be optimistic
3. Benefits of kindness	
No return	offer with no return
Improve self/feel better	Being kind make us feel good with ourselves
Improve relationships with others	Being kind reflects to our relationships
4. Sources of kindness	
It is a matter of nurture	We learn to be kind from our parents and family
5. Teachers' role	
Teachers need to teach kindness	Teachers need to teach kindness to shape an harmonious classroom environment

teachers responses were gathered under the second subtheme, non-intentional acts of kindness (52.05%), including words and actions which describe kindness as being broader than a set of verbal and non-verbal behaviors with cues that cannot be measured (*"kindness is not rules of behavior, kindness are actions from your heart"*) including verbal indications such as using nice words like "thank you" and "please", or "*words of acceptance*", as well as non-verbal indications such as "*look straight in the eye to the person you are talking to*", "*smile to someone*", "*show empathy*", "*love*", "*patience*". Under this category, pre-service teachers referred to any authentic and genuine, intentional, or random tendency to be nice towards known or unknown people. A percentage of 8.21% pre-service teachers' responses was gathered in the third subtheme. Teachers did not provide specific manifestations of kindness (*"Kindness is everything from tiny to huge actions: it is an 'ok'"*), or they did provide general statements denoting positive stance to life (*"kindness is hope, happiness, converse in face of disappointment and ugliness in the world"*).

Pre-service teachers further referred to the benefits of kindness. Thus, 6.39% mentioned that kindness is an intentional act people decide to perform with no expectations (*"we are kind with no return"*), whereas 10.9% reported that kindness improves one-self and promotes personal development and well-being. The improvement of one-self stems from positive feelings for self (*"being kind can make you feel better with yourself"*), and the acceptance of others as a consequence of kind behavior. Kindness further ameliorates our relationships with others. There was a 19.17% who argued that kindness helps developing healthy relationships with people around us (*"kindness facilitates developing healthy relationships with others"*).

A percentage of 23.74% of pre-service teachers pointed out the way kindness is cultivated. They attributed kind behavior mainly to nurture and the family values, *"it is an indication of the way someone was brought up"*.

Finally, 11.41% of teachers emphasized the importance of kindness in teacher's behavior as a prerequisite for facilitating positive relationships with students, harmonious classroom climate and building students' kindness (*"kindness is foundational for teaching practice, it is the key for good communication with students and positive classroom climate"*).

4 Discussion

Early childhood teachers' role as emotion socializers for students implies the need for teacher educators to investigate how pre-service early childhood teachers themselves conceptualize kindness within their professional context and their attitude in life. The aim of this study was to better understand pre-service early childhood teachers' perceptions of kindness and contribute to the scant research devoted to defining kindness in pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers understanding of kindness as a broad set of social and emotional skills guided by virtues and values reflects the recent educational trend in Character Education and addresses teaching and assessing kindness at schools as an additional challenge for early childhood teachers.

Pre-service teachers perceived kindness in comparable ways, involving the concepts of respect, understanding, and helping behavior similar to previous research on students and teachers' perceptions (Binfet & Passmore, 2017). They did however make a robust differentiation between

kindness as a set of formal actions and manners consistent with societal norms, and kindness as a set of authentic and genuine set of emotions and actions that “*stems from our heart so it cannot be fake*”. Although it was not the aim of the present study, a variation in pre-service teachers’ responses was found between the group of students who attended the course before and after Covid pandemic. The percentage of pre-service teachers’ definition of kindness mainly as understanding of others following pandemic (9.58%) was higher compared to the percentage of pre-service teachers who defined kindness as understanding before pandemic (5.47%). Interestingly, this first group also emphasized the importance of kindness to develop healthy relationships with others (13.24%), in a higher degree compared to the latter group (5.93%). These findings may imply that pandemic somehow changed the way we reflect on our relationships, an assumption though which requires exploration.

Our study revealed the wide spectrum and complexities of kindness in pre-service early childhood teachers’ understanding. Pre-service teachers’ definitions of kindness involved helping, caring, empathy and respect. Being kind however is more than “doing good” and from pre-service teachers’ perspective there are many different ways to be kind (“*words themselves cannot express your kindness, it takes your heart*” or “*it is the light in your eyes when you say good morning*”). Pre-service teachers named a range of verbal and nonverbal cues, even small actions of caring that signify kindness (“*I forgive you*”). It is argued that various facial expression such as smiling inform about the internal states and emotions of the sender (Thomas et al., 2007). Interestingly, pre-service teachers strongly emphasized the difference between authentic and fake kindness (“*the most important is that you mean the words and actions*” or “*There is no point to say thank you without meaning it.*”).

Pre-service teachers in our study also valued the contribution of teachers’ personal kindness in cultivating students’ personality and teacher-student relationships, in a similar way that teachers’ beliefs have a strong to moderate influence on shaping students’ kindness (Binfet & Passmore, 2017; Krane et al., 2017). Finally, in terms of kindness in the teaching profession, pre-service teachers admitted that their own behavior and attitude during teaching could shape students’ kindness traits through the mechanisms of emotion socialization (Denham & Bassett, 2019), consistent with Binfet & Passmore’s (2017) notion of “pedagogical kindness” (p. 47), an approach to teacher role that combines academic and social and emotional support (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012).

5 Limitations of the study

The present exploratory study -the first to our knowledge in the Greek context- consists of an initial step towards understanding how pre-service early childhood teachers conceptualize kindness. Certainly, the results found do not preclude how teachers are going to enact kindness in schools. The information came from a convenience sample with pre-service teachers with no purpose to generalize the findings. Observations for verbal and nonverbal expressions of kindness during preservice teacher’ practice would enrich our data and build upon the current study. Future studies are needed to investigate how perceptions of kindness translate into teachers’ daily actions.

6 Implications of the study

Pre-service early childhood teachers’ perceptions of kindness are important indicators of the school climate they will promote with their students and will further enhance teaching and learning (Thapa et al., 2013). It is well evidenced that teachers’ own personality traits and social emotional learning impacts the quality of teacher-student relationships (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Poulou, 2017), students’ sense of school belonging (Lee & Huang, 2021) and students’ sense of self-esteem and social self-efficacy (Datu et al., 2021), as well as teachers’ well-being (Jin et al., 2021). Pre-service teachers’ perceptions of kindness could signify the broader learning context and the degree to which schools could protect future students against conflicts and deterrents of positive school environment.

We suggest that we need to conduct research with a renewed focus on kindness in teacher preparation programs. A focus on kindness and other human virtues although self-evident needs to be systematically addressed. There is growing consensus that kindness is a valuable social-emotional skill and a component that should be explicitly taught in schools (Kaplan et al., 2016). Research suggests that school-based kindness education programs may benefit the learning and social emotional development of students and school environment (Kaplan et al., 2016; Pearson, 2017). Understanding how teachers think about kindness helps elucidate how teachers are going to enact kindness in schools and further contribute to the school mission

for character education. There is much discussion on how to promote social and emotional competences among students, yet remarkably little is known about pre-service early childhood teachers' perceptions of what constitutes prosocial behavior such as kindness. Given the dearth of studies on teachers' prosocial behavior and virtues, the present study contributes to an effort of understanding the concept of kindness in potential teachers' mind. It is hoped that this exploratory study will add to research on kindness and the shift towards positive education movement.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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