# Developing Empathetic Preservice Teachers Using Literary Fiction


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### Introduction

Empathetic teachers have been the keystone to the academic and social success of many students. Empathetic teachers are influential because they go beyond considering their students' perspectives, but they recognize the feelings of their students; when students are frustrated with the learning process, embarrassed by a peer, or shame resulting from bullying, empathetic teachers will identify and share the frustration, embarrassment, and connect with their students (Aldrup et al., 2022; Sprenger, 2020). Empathetic teachers do not stop there – they are compassionate and take the next step to comfort their students, ease their pains, and meet their needs. As Bullard (2018) stated, "compassion is compelled to intervene" (p. 10). Personally, I have witnessed many empathetic teachers driven to intervene in their students' lives with the intent to help, serve, and support children. However, developing empathy for students begins before a teacher's first year. Whether in the college classroom or during field experiences in the schools, teacher education programs can mold empathetic preservice teachers before they start their first year in the profession. The aim of this study was to explore the use of literary fiction to induce empathy in preservice teachers.

**The Need for Empathetic Teachers**

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, both K-12 and higher education school systems have faced student-related concerns about social and emotional wellbeing. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2023) found mental health related issues have increase during the past ten years, 2011-2021. In 2021, they found high school students had persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (42%), experienced poor mental health (29%), and considered attempting suicide (22%). Building upon the CDC's findings, according to Wiley (2024), college-aged students reported that they currently struggle with mental health related issues including anxiety (59%), burnout (58%), depression (43%), and ADHD (25%). Mental health challenges impact individuals' education. According to Attendance Works (2024) has linked mental health as one of the contributing factors for chronic absenteeism. Chronic absenteeism, missing ten percent or more of the school year, has increased from 8 million K-12 students to 14.7 million K-12 students since the 2020-21 school year (Attendance Works, 2024). These trends highlight the urgency for schools and universities to prioritize mental health as a core component of student success and engagement

Despite these wellbeing concerns, students seek relationships with teachers, faculty, and staff for assistance with their mental health. Wiley (2024) found college-aged students are likely to seek support and assistance with their mental health related issues and the CDC (2023) found 61% of high school students felt close to people at school, a sense of school connectedness. Students need to feel that they belong and form a connection to their school and to their teachers. Tinto (1987) found that the strongest predictor of whether a student dropped out or stayed in school was the perceived value of relationships with educators. Students seek relationships with educators; therefore, it is essential educators have the relationship-building skills necessary to make a connection with the students. From my experience as a teacher educator, classroom teacher, and school principal, empathy is needed for educators to successfully support their students with the array of academic and social-emotional needs in school. Wadlington et al. (2008) indicated that “one of the qualities of an excellent teacher is to possess the quality of empathy, which is necessarily tied to the concept of compassion” (p. 265). Through empathetic and compassionate approaches, educators can support students in feeling understood and connected in schools, so they are more ready to learn.

### Positionality

As a researcher and the subject of this article, understanding my positionality is key to understanding my interpretation of developing empathy with preservice teachers using literary fiction. My lived experience influences my perceptions of reality in schools and society. My professional identity includes preservice teacher, elementary (K-5) classroom teacher, elementary (K-6) gifted and talented teacher, cooperating teacher for preservice teachers, teacher-on-special-assignment coordinating gifted and talented programming, high school and elementary principal, and teacher education faculty. My perspective is also influenced by the context of my roles teaching and leading in private, public, tribal, Title 1, and rural schools. Later, I will describe my positionality as a learner and its influence on my perception of reading in school. It is important for me to reflect on my varied experiences as a researcher as each lens influences my understanding and explanation of the research topic.

## Literature Review

### Empathy

Noddings’ (2008) Care Theory presents a framework for a relational approach between individuals which centers on empathy. Based on this model, empathy involves an authentic openness to understand others’ needs, perspectives, and emotions. Noddings’ Care Theory (2008) describes the interactive relationship between caregivers and those who are being cared-for. The caregiver and cared-for relationship can be illustrated by doctor and patient, mother and child, and as teacher and student. Noddings (2008) discusses the three dimensions that attribute to a caring encounter: engrossment, motivational displacement, and reciprocity. When Care Theory is applied to the relationship between teachers and students, caring encounters begin with teachers actively attending to and listening to their students (i.e., engrossment). Then, motivated by the desire to meet the needs of the child, the teacher acts in ways to tend to the students’ needs and to meet their goals (i.e., motivational displacement). Finally, the student recognizes the care the teacher provided and shows the teacher that they have accepted and received the care (i.e., reciprocity). This could be through nonverbal communication (e.g., smile or hug) or verbally (e.g., gratitude stated) (Noddings, 2008). Noddings (2008) noted the unique relationship of teachers and students as unequal in nature, stating,

> Even under unequal conditions, however, the caring relation is characterized by reciprocity. Both carer and cared-for contribute distinctively to the relation. Clearly, this reciprocity is not contractual; the carer contributes as carer, the cared-for as cared-for. Those who regularly act as carer in unequal relations are keenly aware of how dependent they are on the response of the cared-for—on the child, the patient, the student, the client. Without that response of acknowledgement, there is a real danger of burnout in the work of caring (Noddings, 2008, p. 1-2).

Within Noddings' (2008) Care Theory, empathy is implied during the engrossment and motivational displacement stages. Empathy is described in three ways (see Table 1). First, cognitive empathy is described as perspective taking. Sprenger (2020) and Zhou (2022) described cognitive empathy is a way of 'knowing,' a common way to understand how a person feels or what they might be thinking. We hear this level of empathy when we hear phrases that include, "walk in their shoes" or "see it through their eyes." Cognitive empathy requires active listening to fully consider another's perspective (Davis, 1990; Sprenger, 2020).

**Table 1**

*Description of the three types of empathy*

| Cognitive Empathy | Emotional Empathy | Compassionate Empathy |
|---|---|---|
| • Known as perspective taking.<br>• Knowing another's mental state or emotions (Zhou, 2022, p. 3)<br>• Imagining oneself to be the subject of someone else's mental state or emotions (Zhou, 2022, p. 3)<br>• The ability to understand how a person feels and what they may be thinking (Sprenger, 2020)<br>• Requires active listening (Davis, 1990) | • Feeling, experiencing, or being affected by another's mental state or emotions (Zhou, 2022, p. 3)<br>• The ability to share the feelings of another (Sprenger, 2020)<br>• Identification with another person's feelings (Davis, 1990, p. 709) | • Displaying of care, concern, or compassion toward another (Zhou, 2022, p. 3)<br>• When one is moved to action (Sprenger, 2020) |

The second type of empathy is called emotional empathy. Emotional empathy, also known as affective empathy (Zhou, 2022), is described as the ability to share feelings with another person (Sprenger, 2020). When someone is engaged in emotional empathy, they are identifying with another's feelings (Davis, 1990). Emotional empathy is an emotional shift, a "crossing over of self" where "we feel deeply connected to another person, so deeply connected that a form of identification occurs" (Davis, 1990, p. 709). Individuals may experience emotional empathy when they feel grief along with a student in a time of mourning as well as joy along with a student in a time of celebration.

The third type of empathy moves individuals from ‘knowing’ and ‘feeling’ to acting upon their empathy; compassionate empathy. Compassionate empathy, or compassion, is described as empathy in action (Sprenger, 2020) and responding with care (Zhou, 2022). Bullard (2018) furthers this idea by describing empathy as one’s ability to acknowledge another person’s struggle and compassion as one’s ability to act and use resources to meet someone’s need. Educators will encounter an array of dilemmas while working with their students. All three types of empathy are needed to acknowledge, understand, identify with, and act with care toward students’ situations. Developing empathy leads to several positive outcomes. Greenberg et al. (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of forty-seven studies focus on empathy. In their research, they found discussed how empathy affects individual’s sense of feeling understood, ability to be open and self-disclose information, persisting with caring relationships, one’s perception of self-worth, and influenced self-healing efforts.

While preservice teachers prepare to work with students with diverse backgrounds, literary fiction are ideal tools to help them reflect on their pedagogy while developing empathy for their students. Cunningham et al. (2024) and Borba (2016) stated that literary fiction fosters empathy, perspective taking, and understanding other’s differences so to understand the lived experiences of others. “When we read literary fiction, we not only feel “with” the characters, but we also “do” what they do and our brains mirror their actions” (Borba, 2016, p. 80). Sprenger (2020) furthers the idea of using literary fiction to build empathy, “the use of literature to help students understand, identify with, and feel for and with characters and situations. Reading literary fiction enhances the ability to connect with others and empathize…literature can figuratively cause students to walk in someone else’s shoes” (p. 54). Using literary fiction seems logical for elementary education and early childhood majors to learn about varying student experiences in school with the intent to develop the empathy needed to be successful in schools today.

## Methodology

### Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is a research methodology that poses the classroom as a research laboratory and teacher as a researcher. When the teacher acts as a researcher, they ask questions about student learning, the effectiveness of their pedagogy, and collect information to find answers (Bishop-Clark & Dietz-Uhler, 2012). Through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning “we approach our teaching from a scholarly perspective, always asking why this worked or why that didn’t or how we can improve our teaching and enhance our students’ learning” (Bishop-Clark & Dietz-Uhler, 2012, p. 3). Importantly, when acting as a researcher, the teacher uses the data collected to produce change in their instructional practices and teaching strategies and make it public through publication or presentation. The research question I sought to explore was,

RQ: In my perception, in what ways, if any, did the use of literary fiction seem to create empathy in my elementary education preservice teachers?

## Context and Background: Developing a Meaningful Learning Experience

I was a struggling reader. I was not able to articulate it at the time, but for most of my K-12 experience, I struggled to comprehend text. I loved listening to my teachers read aloud novels like Bloom's (1982) *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*. However, when it came time for me to read books on my own, I struggled to make sense of it. I honestly hated reading. I vividly recall my mom reading O'Brien's (1992) *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* to me in fifth grade. We sat in the kitchen every night for a month – my mom reading aloud and me intently listening. I anchored the storyline to the Bluth's (1982) movie, *The Secret of NIMH,* so that I could see the characters interact with each other and move from setting to setting. Differences in the movie versus the book, something as simple as Mrs. Frisby's name changing to Mrs. Brisby, challenged me to create new mind-movies that were accurate. Book reports, class discussions, and chapter tests were a common task at school, but I knew that if I tried to read the book on my own, I would fail.

I was good at fake reading during silent reading time. I would scan the page, picking up random words that I was able to decode and make sense of while remembering to turn the pages at 'just the right pace' to make it appear that I was reading. I was able to stay 'under the radar' for many years until my tenth-grade teacher realized that each of my book reports were also movies. I do not remember my parents being brought in for, what would be called a MTSS-type of meeting, but something happened behind the scenes and the school intervened.

When I first started teaching in 2001, I was comfortable working with students who struggled to read. I understood their situation and shared my story openly with all my elementary students. As a result of my experience as a struggling reader, I was inclined to move to compassionate empathy and intervene to help my students develop as a reader and make their experience better than mine. My undergraduate schooling prepared me to engage students in literature studies, prompt meaningful discussion, and ask probing questions about the text. However, I was not prepared to work with students with specific learning challenges related to literacy such as dyslexia. In fact, I never heard of a student being diagnosed with dyslexia. It was a diagnosis that I heard of but knew little about. At that time, teachers were rarely provided professional development about dyslexia, and the little we did learn included misconceptions like students with dyslexia struggled to read because of the letter reversals or vision issues. We believed these myths about dyslexia because the facts to debunk them were not widely shared or discussed in education.

In 2020, legislation passed in Minnesota mandating screening for dyslexia. For many educators, we were still uneducated about what a diagnosis of dyslexia entailed, how it was characterized, or warning signs for dyslexia. Knowing this mandate, teacher education quickly responded by emphasizing the science of reading in our pedagogy and our course curriculum to ensure preservice teachers were familiar with the characteristics of a student with dyslexia and the instructional strategies and skills teachers needed to focus on during classroom instruction.

### *Implementation in a Literacy Course*

In 2021, I first started teaching literacy methods courses in higher education. When I first began planning for my English/Language Arts methods course, I knew I wanted to focus on the five pillars of literacy (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) to ensure my preservice teachers understood the foundational skills so that they, in turn, could teach these skills to their K-12 students. As I prepared a lesson, I recalled learning about Patricia Polacco's, children's literature author, struggle with dyslexia. For years, I read Polacco's (2012) autobiography, *Thank you, Mr. Falker*, to my elementary students. This book engaged students with Trish's story about her resilience from moving schools, losing her grandparents, and being bullied because she could not read. I knew that this picture book would serve my preservice teachers well when learning to identify characteristics of dyslexia and how the impact of a teacher's intervention.

In Polacco's (2012) autobiography, Trish's academic struggles are described in the narrative to help readers understand the characteristics of a student with dyslexia:

> "But when Trisha looked at a page, all she saw were wiggling shapes, and when she tried to sound out words, the other kids laughed at her" (p. 6).
>
> "And numbers were the hardest thing of all to read. She never added anything right…the numbers looked like a stack of blocks, wobbly and read to fall" (p. 11).
>
> "When she tried to read, she stumbled over words: "the cah, cah…cat…rrr, rrr…ran." She was reading like a baby in the third grade" (p. 15).
>
> "She had learned to memorize what the kid next to her was reading. Or she would wait for Mr. Falker to help her with a sentence, then she'd say the same thing that he did" (p. 27).

As we read the book, I had the preservice teachers analyze the story for signs of gaps in phonological awareness and reflect and discuss the implications. It was a textbook lesson – first read the state adopted definition of dyslexia and then use the book to identify signs of dyslexia and the lifelong implications/consequences of learning with dyslexia. While my intention was to help my preservice teachers understand the characteristics of dyslexia, there was more for my preservice teachers to learn about dyslexia than identifying the characteristics of dyslexia. During the story discussions I observed my preservice teachers consistently feel empathy for Trish as they considered her lived experience struggling to learn to read, and many identified with her struggles. They were demonstrating cognitive and emotional empathy for Trish. However, reflecting on my dyslexia lesson, I fell short of instructing my preservice teachers about the 'whole story.'

The following year, I wanted to push my preservice teachers further when thinking about students learning with dyslexia. In my research, I found other university faculty who grappled with finding authentic ways for preservice teachers to understand their role when working with students with dyslexia. Wadlington et al. (2008) explored the impact of participation in a dyslexia simulation. Two themes from their research included heightened awareness of empathy (i.e., being more empathetic toward students) and reflective practice (i.e., new insights into the challenges students with dyslexia face). This stood out to me because they found that cognitive empathy was developed because of the simulation. While I could not find a simulation to implement in my literacy methods course, I found Ho's (2020) Sundance film, *Mical*. The short biographical movie tells the lived experience of Michael (Mike) Jones, a struggling reader, growing up in the 1970s and his mother's (Pat) efforts to support and challenge him to learn to read. By using a movie, my preservice teachers could see and hear Mike struggle to read and experience the emotional turmoil Mike experiences because of this struggle. Cunningham et al.

(2024) stated deliberate pairing of themed stories will support both content knowledge and "new understanding of the lived experiences of themselves and others" (p. 27). This was what I needed to help my preservice teachers understand the holistic approach to working with reading challenges. The pairing of *Thank you, Mr. Falker* and *Mical* would offer my preservice teacher the opportunity to build their content knowledge of dyslexia and make an emotional connection to individuals living with dyslexia. My preservice teachers were shocked, sitting in awe, when they heard harsh and cruel comments made by educators and students in the film, including scenes of bullying and public ridicule.

> Teacher: "No excuses for being lazy, Jones."
>
> Mike: "I'm not lazy, miss?"
>
> Teacher: "And maybe you're just stupid. You do not spell *finger* t-h-i-n-g-r. Even a three-year-old could spell better than you."
>
> Mike: "I tried to remember the words, miss."
>
> Teacher: "Well, clearly your brain stopped working." (1:05-1:20)
>
> Then later,
>
> Peer: "M-i-c-a-l. You should change your name to s-t-u-p-i-d. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid." (2:17)

With the intention for my preservice teachers to think deeper about the lived life of a student with dyslexia, I incorporated a new assignment which moved away from a traditional research paper to a research-based dialogue of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting with Mike Jones' parents. I wanted my preservice teachers to focus on the learning experience of the child and the accommodations the teacher would incorporate in the classroom to support the child. Preservice teachers' thinking grew beyond describing dyslexia and the implications of dyslexia to how to include providing instructional accommodations that support a student's learning process. While this provided an application aspect, the papers were just regurgitation of facts from books and articles.

After reading assignments that parroted the same information over and over, I had a suspicion that there was more I could be doing to teach my preservice teachers about dyslexia. While exploring IDA's (2017) *Dyslexia in the Classroom* document, I read about the social and emotional connection to dyslexia. It was then I realized that while in teacher education, my preservice teachers needed to understand the learning and living experiences of students with dyslexia. According to IDA (2022; 2017), students diagnosed with dyslexia may experience poor self-image, anxiety, depression, and anger. I wanted my preservice teachers to empathize with students with dyslexia. Moreover, I wanted my preservice teachers to read and watch the lived experiences of living and learning with dyslexia – to hear their struggles, pains, heartaches, triumphs, and celebrations. I returned to *Thank you, Mr. Falker* again and challenged my preservice teachers to identify ways that Trish is living and coping with dyslexia as it impacts her socially and emotionally at school. The preservice teachers understood Trish's personal, social, and emotional struggles as she endeavored to learn to read while fending off bullies (Polacco, 2012).

> “And while the other kids moved up to the second-grade reader and the third reader, she stayed alone in Our Neighborhood. Trisha began to feel “different.” She began to feel dumb” (p. 6).
>
> “How come you are so dumb?” Other kids stood near him, and they laughed. Trisha could feel the tears burning in her eyes” (p. 15).
>
> “Now Trisha wanted to go to school less and less. “I have a sore throat,” she’d say to her mother” (p. 17).
>
> “He got all the other kids to wait for her on the playground, or in the cafeteria, or even in the bathroom, and to jump out and call her “Stupid!” or “Ugly!” And Trisha began to believe them” (p. 24).

In Ho’s (2020), *Mical*, preservice teachers were able to engage further as they watched Mike release his inner turmoil with tears, screaming, and destruction as he struggles to read. The movie allows preservice teachers to experience both cognitive and emotional empathy as they listened to Mike and Pat question the institutional compliance toward struggling readers and sort through the emotional heartache of being different.

> Mike: “What’s wrong with me? Why am I different?” (8:26)
>
> Pat: "I have lived years with the frustration and torment of seeing my son go through hell. I've seen happy child turning to a defeated, introverted child, full of anger” (16:51).

In Fall 2023 I incorporated a novel unit within my weekly content to thread the storied life of Ally, an elementary-aged student who has been keeping her dyslexia a secret from teachers, administrators, and classmates. Hunt’s (2017) novel, *Fish in a Tree*, tells of Ally’s struggles living and learning with dyslexia as well as her amazing visual-spatial and creativity gifts. Hunt compared Ally’s internal frustration with the world when she compared Ally’s lived experience to a can of soup:

> People act like the words “slow reader” tell them everything that’s inside. Like I’m a can of soup and they can just read the list of ingredients and know everything about me. There’s lots of stuff about the soup inside that they can’t put on the label, like how it smells and tastes and makes you feel warm when you eat it. There’s got to be more to me than just a kid who can’t read well (p. 95).

As the focus shifted to understanding the lived and learned lives of our characters, the preservice teachers were able to experience the devastating social and emotional experiences of our characters. In all three literary fiction, the preservice teachers,

1. saw the desperate efforts students with dyslexia went to protect their emotional safety from ridicule and failure by avoiding school or classwork by acting sick, asking to be excused from class, or acting out to get sent to the office,
2. felt the students’ deep sadness, always wondering why they were different from everyone else, often calling themselves the names they heard too often, “dumb,” or “stupid,”
3. witnessed the social alienation as students teased and bullied the characters because of their inability to read, and

4. experienced the defeat of constant failure as our characters desperately wanted to stay under the radar by using every coping skill, they could include cheating and making teacher impatient that they answer their own question.

The compounding implications to the disruption to the learning process became evident for my preservice teachers; students with dyslexia may struggle to read but also feeling different, that they do not belong in their classroom community, may avoid school, miss essential content information and thus, compounding the learning experience.

**Data Collection**

Over the past two years, I recorded my reflections in my field notes as I graded the preservice teachers' assignments, listened to their weekly video recorded reflections, and in-class discussions. To challenge my preservice teachers to think deep and make their thinking visible to me, their peers, and to themselves about the stories, I designed multiple assignments using various platforms. Assignments included:

When reading *Thank you, Mr. Falker*, preservice teachers analyzed the story in groups in class to position the preservice teachers in discourse about what they noticed about both the academic and affective facets of Polacco's autobiography. This discussion was open-ended to allow flexibility when discussing their observations. Prompts included:

- How would you approach designing a meaningful learning experience to help Trisha?
- How would you approach talking to Trisha's mom?
- What resources would you seek out at the school to help Trisha?

After watching *Mical*, preservice teachers created a script of an IEP meeting which they envisioned themselves as Mike's general education teacher. Preservice teachers scripted what they anticipated they would say at Mike's IEP meeting during the portion of the IEP meeting where a general education teacher provides a summary of a child's progress in the general education setting. Prompts included:

- Introduction: Greet the parents. Begin with your general observations about Mike. Generally, how is Mike doing in your class. Then, specifically, what are Mike's strengths and challenges in your classroom?
- Learning: What are potential accommodations you would offer to support Mike's learning in your classroom? Address how you will support Mike's phonological and orthographic processing.
- Living: What strategies will you use to support the social and the emotional development for Mike? (consider classroom culture, building a sense of belonging, emotional needs, social needs, etc.)
- Parent Involvement: What questions would you ask Mike's parents to learn more about Mike's personal and academic needs? What questions would you ask Mike's parents to gain (or strengthen) a home-school partnership? What suggestions do you have for Mike's parents of what they could do at home?

While reading *Fish in a Tree,* preservice teachers reflected and recorded their thinking on a recording app on Canvas called Harmonize. They chose a prompt of their choice and talked for five minutes, which allowed them to process aloud for me to hear their thinking and to understand their interpretation the story. Examples of prompts are included in the *Fish in a Tree Book Study Assignment Description* (Wolff, 2024) and below:

- How does this week's chapters illustrate how Ally is living with dyslexia? Learning with dyslexia?
- How does Ally's gifts and/or disability illustrate how she copes with dyslexia in this week's chapters?
- Throughout the novel, Lynda Mullaly Hunt incorporates various clues, some obvious and some subtle, about the characteristics of living and learning with dyslexia. What were some in this week's chapters? Why are these characteristics important to be aware of?

At the conclusion of the book, *Fish in a Tree*, preservice teachers reflected on theme-based questions to spark reflection about the whole book. Prompts included:

- Throughout the novel, there are subtle analogies/metaphors used to illustrate 'being different' (e.g. butterflies, coins, soup cans, etc.). Which analogy stands out to you and how does it connect to the larger themes in the book (Hunt, 2015, p. 275)?
- The title, Fish in a Tree, is derived from a quote from Albert Einstein: "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." What is the significance of this quote as it relates to the novel? Is this quote relevant today?

Between the preservice teachers' recorded video reflections, during class, I facilitated small- and whole-group discussions. Prompts included:

- How is Mr. Daniels and Mr. Falker from, Patricia Polacco's *Thank You, Mr. Falker*, like each other (e.g., personality, instructional approach, philosophy of education, etc.)?
- What kind of learning activities or discussions does Mr. Daniels bring to his classroom that promote learning (Hunt, 2015, p. 275)? How might you use Mr. Daniels' learning activities or discussions in your field placements or in your first classroom?
- Beyond dyslexia, what does Mr. Daniels want Ally to understand about herself (Hunt, 2015, p. 276)?
- Mr. Daniels introduces several famous people who are believed to have dyslexia and made significant impact in history. What can educators learn from this? How does this challenge our thinking about our educational system?

During this time, I reflected on 18 in-class discussions, 115 course assignments, and 745 recorded reflections.

**Data Analysis**

Field notes were coded in two rounds. The first round of coding established initial codes using descriptive coding. Descriptive coding was used to summarize my personal reflections. According to Saldaña (2021) descriptive coding encapsulates the topic of what is being talked about in "a word or short phrase – most often a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (p. 134). Table 2 shows examples of initial codes for a variety of field notes. During the second round of coding, pattern coding was used to summarize the initial codes into a smaller number of codes. Pattern codes "pull together a lot of material from first cycle coding into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 322). Table 3 shows examples of how pattern coding summarized initial codes. Repeated or related final codes led to theme development. Four themes emerged: Holistic, Genuine, Perception, and Professionalism as shown in Table 4.

**Table 2**

*Examples of Initial Code Development*

| **Initial Code** | **Example** |
|---|---|
| Advocate | "Advocate for support systems for students" |
| Aware | "Know the nuances of each student" |
| Work Ethic | "Need a strong work ethic to work with struggling learners" |
| Fit in vs. Stand Out | "Fit in with everyone else or stand out and be different" |
| Make Possibilities | "Make reading possible for all students" |
| Value Unique | "Look for the uniqueness of each child" |
| Perspective | "Put yourself in other's shoes" |
| Proactive | "Don't wait or hesitate" |
| Attentiveness | "Be present, in the moment with each student" |

**Table 3**

*Examples of Final Code Development*

| Final Code | Example Initial Codes |
|---|---|
| Emotional Well-being | Compassion<br>Soothe pain<br>Hope<br>Cope |
| Strength-based approach | Assets vs. Deficits<br>Strengths with challenges<br>Recognize assets<br>See strengths<br>Strength detective<br>Affirm strengths<br>Speaking affirmations |
| Empathy | Perspective<br>Assist Students<br>Comfort Defeat<br>Understand |
| Professional Dispositions | High Expectations<br>Provide Opportunities<br>Resources<br>Make Possibilities<br>Support struggling students<br>Push Students |

| Final Code | Example Initial Codes |
|---|---|
| | Individualize<br>Reading Brain<br>Address bullying<br>Educate Self |

**Table 4**

*Final Codes and Theme Development: Summary*

| RQ: In my perception, in what ways, if any, did the use of literary fiction seem to create empathy in my elementary education preservice teachers? | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Theme: Holistic<br><br>Final Codes:<br>• Relationships<br>• Emotional well-being<br>• Personal Growth<br>• Active Engagement | Theme: Genuine<br><br>Final Codes:<br>• Strength-based approach<br>• Future possibilities<br>• Individuality | Theme: Perception<br><br>Final Codes:<br>• Awareness<br>• Empathy<br>• Impact | Theme: Professionalism<br>Final Codes:<br>• Act<br>• Professional Dispositions<br>• Personal Character |

Note. Source of table format (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

## Findings

I began this research asking, in what ways, if, any, did the use of literary fiction seem to create empathy in my elementary education preservice teachers? As a result of the coding process, four themes developed from the final codes. In my perception, the themes holistic, genuine, perception, and professionalism illustrated empathy emerged in my elementary education preservice teachers.

### Theme Details

Engaging with literary fiction helped preservice teachers develop empathy by shifting their perception to view dyslexia through the eyes of their students. This exposure to authentic student experiences through literary fiction reflected the emotional and academic challenges present in real classrooms, promoting a more holistic approach to teaching. These learning experiences fostered a sense of professionalism grounded in advocacy, compassion, and a commitment to meeting the diverse needs of learners.

#### *Holistic*

A holistic approach to education recognizes that effective teaching depends not only on content expertise but also on building meaningful relationships with students. A holistic perspective in education focuses on seeing ‘the big picture’ of teaching: that learning requires both expertise in the content area as well as a relationship between the students and the teacher. These literary stories seemed to help preservice teachers understand this the importance of developing a relationship with their students as an important part of being a teacher. The holistic theme included the final codes: relationships, emotional well-being, personal growth, and active engagement.

To help conceptualize this theme, below are examples from my field notes about each final code represented in this theme:

- *Relationships*, "as teachers we need to make sure we are making connections with each student," (Field notes, 3/10/24).
- *Emotional well-being*, "students felt their pain and wanted to make thing better for them," (Field notes, 4/7/24).
- *Personal growth*, "teachers need to encourage our students to push beyond self-doubt," (Field notes, 11/19/23).
- *Active engagement*, "students need teacher to be present, paying attention to their needs," (Field notes, 11/5/23).

Notice that these four field notes are connected: a teacher's responsibility to make connections, build relationships with students. Teachers do this by immersing themselves with their students. They support the emotional well-being of students by helping students when they struggle and encourage them when they have self-doubt in their abilities.

***Genuine***

Literary fiction provided preservice teachers with genuine student experiences that closely reflect the realities they are likely to encounter in their future classrooms. The theme, genuine, represents how the literary fiction provided genuine student experiences that preservice teacher would encounter in their practice. The preservice teachers could expect to work with individuals just like Ally, Mike, or Trish regardless if it is with the students' academic needs or their social and emotional needs. Notes included comments about students having both a learning disability and gifted with Trish in *Thank you, Mr. Falker* and Ally in *Fish in a Tree*, as well the ripple effect learning differences have on the character's family and teachers. The genuine theme included the final codes: strength-based approach, future possibilities, and individuality.

To help make sense of this them, below are examples from my field notes describing how each final code was represented in the theme:

- *Strength-based approach*, "Strengths over Struggles," (Field notes, 11/5/23) and "Support students and see their strengths," (Field notes, 4/14/24).
- *Future possibilities*, "Students possess amazing capabilities to accomplish their goals," (Field notes, 3/10/24).
- *Individuality*, "Why should students fit in with everyone else, when they differentiate themselves from everyone else," (10/13/24).

There is a commonality across these three final codes: authentic learning experiences with students. Strength-based approaches to teaching allows students to thrive in a learning environment where they can feel a genuine sense of self. Students want to be seen for their unique talents as contributions to the classroom. When teachers foster a community in their classroom where students are assets, the student in turn, begin to envision what they can do, and not the barriers preventing them from reaching their potential.

### ***Perception***

Engaging with literary fiction shifted preservice teachers' perception, allowing them to view dyslexia from the students' point of view for the first time. Field notes described how preservice teachers saw the in- and out-of-school experiences of students with dyslexia through the lens of the students. I also noted the emotional response observed by preservice teachers in the recorded reflections, which included preservice teachers laughing with, crying for, and cheering on the characters. Field notes described how preservice teachers felt like they understood what the protagonists felt through the experiences depicted in the stories.

Below are examples from my field notes to illustrate each of the final codes used to form the theme, perception:

- *Awareness*, "Pay attention to student needs," (Field notes, 9/8/24).
- *Empathy*, "Put yourself in others' shoes," (Field notes, 10/6/24) and "Help students when feeling defeated," (5/7/23).
- *Impact*, "understand students learn and cope differently in our classrooms," (11/19/23).

Awareness of others needs is the foundation for understanding yourself and others. Empathy builds upon awareness fostering deeper connections with other as you feel alongside others. When you someone is aware of others' needs and show empathy toward them, your actions are more likely to be caring and selfless, leading to a more positive impact.

### ***Professionalism***

Preservice teachers' reflections revealed a growing sense of professionalism, as they expressed aspirations to be patient, kind, encouraging, and advocate effectively for their students. Many preservice teachers noted how their own content knowledge grew to better understand the learning process (e.g., learning to read or second language acquisition) students go through. Notably, during in-class discussions preservice teachers were eager to know more about how the teachers in the stories problem-solved the situations they faced and debated the dilemmas to reach the interventions they did to help.

To make sense of the theme, professionalism, examples for each of the three final codes are provided below:

- *Act*, "Have the confidence to stand up for students rights and needs," (Field notes, 3/10/24).
- *Professional dispositions*, "Create individualized time for each student," (Field notes, 9/24/23) and "Teachers must educate ourselves about dyslexia," (Field notes, 2/4/24).
- *Personal character*, "Position students which they can succeed," (5/7/23).

At the core of being a teacher is one's character which drives decisions, actions, and is the basis of one's dispositions. Professional dispositions include the values and attitudes the influence how one interacts with students, families, and colleagues in a professional setting.

# Discussion

Through this study, I found that literary fiction offered a meaningful way to help my elementary education preservice teachers grow in empathy—shifting how they perceived their future students, connected with diverse experiences, and understood the relational heart of teaching. To understand the phenomenon of observed empathy, the researcher used Noddings' Care Theory (2008) as a theoretical framework. Noddings (2008) posit caring encounters are demonstrated through the interactions between a caregiver and a cared-for, beginning with the caregiver being engrossed with the needs of the cared-for, moving to motivational displacement which the caregiver takes action for the cared-for, and finally the cared-for replicates care toward the caregiver to acknowledge the care given. Three types of empathy are suggested in Noddings' Care Theory: cognitive, emotional, and compassionate empathy.

As a teacher educator, I was encouraged to see that my preservice teachers were not only engaging in cognitive and emotional empathy by considering the impacts of dyslexia on a child, but more importantly, they were beginning to move into compassionate empathy—demonstrating a desire to act on behalf of their future students. However, more importantly, my preservice teachers were moving into compassionate empathy when they were asking questions about the modeled teachers – how they problem-solved, intervened, and advocated for their students. Through the stories, preservice teachers were moved to think and act like a teacher of students with dyslexia.

I found that the themes of Holistic and Perception closely aligned with Noddings' Care Theory, as my preservice teachers began to demonstrate both an awareness of their students' needs and a commitment to relational, responsive teaching. The first phase of a caring encounter was engrossment, which the caregiver is attentive the other's needs and actively listens to their concerns and needs, see Table 5. This also aligned with cognitive empathy, see Table 6. Cognitive empathy describes when individuals know others' mental state or emotions, in other words, they understood how others think and feel (Sprenger, 2020; Zhou, 2022). Therefore, to be engrossed with the needs of another, you need to have cognitive empathy. Preservice teachers commented on topics regarding building relationships with students as a professional responsibility, caring for the emotional well-being of students, being actively engaged with students' needs, being aware of students' needs, and needing empathy for our students. Based on comments such as these, I infer that by engaging in literary fiction about students with dyslexia, preservice teachers experienced cognitive empathy. The preservice teachers gained a new perspective on what the lived and learned experiences is like for students with reading challenges, especially gaining new perspective on the impact of having dyslexia can have on an individual's life. The preservice teachers identified with Trish, Mike, and Ally, making connections with each of their struggles and dilemmas.

**Table 5**

*Themes and Noddings' Care Theory*

| | Engrossment | Motivational Displacement | Reciprocity |
|---|---|---|---|
| Theme: Holistic | X | | |
| Theme: Genuine | X | | |
| Theme: Perception | | X | |
| Theme: Professionalism | | X | |

**Table 6**

*Themes and Types of Empathy*

| | Cognitive Empathy | Emotional Empathy | Compassionate Empathy |
|---|---|---|---|
| Theme: Holistic | X | | |
| Theme: Genuine | X | | |
| Theme: Perception | | X | X |
| Theme: Professionalism | | X | X |

I also noticed how the themes of Genuine and Professionalism aligned with Noddings' Care Theory, as my preservice teachers expressed a desire to show up authentically for their students and take responsibility as caring, compassionate advocates in the classroom. In the second stage of the theory, caregivers are moved to act through a process called motivational displacement, see Table 5, which aligns with both emotional and compassionate empathy, see Table 6. Emotional empathy is a shared experience when an individual's emotions are affected by another's mental state, feelings, or emotions (Sprenger, 2020; Zhou, 2022). Compassionate empathy is an action, a display of care or concern for another person (Sprenger, 2020; Zhou, 2022). These were demonstrated by the preservice teachers when they were moved to tears by the protagonists bullying or emotional meltdowns, angry when bullied, and joyous when each overcame their many obstacles to learn to read. Comments were made about seeing Trish, Mike, and Ally's strengths were often overlooked by their teachers and classmates. However, each protagonist had one educator that saw their individual potential and celebrated their differences as something special. In addition, compassionate empathy was shown when preservice teachers wanted to know more about how teacher can intervene with the academic and social-emotional needs of students with reading challenges. They commented how they learned from the model educators to advocate for the needs of their students and find the resources necessary to ensure their students are successful. I infer that by engaging in literary fiction about students with dyslexia, preservice teachers experienced both emotional and compassionate empathy.

**Recommendations**

Building on the work of Cunningham et al. (2024) and Borba (2016), I found that literary fiction served as a powerful tool for helping my preservice teachers develop empathy by engaging deeply with the lived and learned experiences of students with dyslexia. With the rise of legislation and district action to change literacy pedagogy, it is vital preservice elementary teachers know how to structure effective lessons to support the reading development of all children as well as support the social and emotional well-being of the same children. By keeping a holistic perspective of teaching, teachers can support both the academic, social, and emotional needs of the students in their classrooms.

I believe all educators can benefit from engaging with literary fiction to cultivate empathy for diverse learners; drawing from my findings, I offer the following recommendations (see Table 7). If empathy can arise within individuals to feel for and feel with student with dyslexia, then I recommend all educators, in instructional, support, or administrative roles, should read books that offer diverse perspectives on culture, language, ability, refugee status, or housing status for their own professional development and pedagogical approaches. For example, books such as Applegate's (2008) *Home of the Brave* help teachers understand the perspectives of a refugee transitioning to a new life in America. Draper's (2012) *Out of My Mind* may help teacher understand the perspectives of a twice-exceptional child learning to communicate her ideas to the world while overcoming the challenges of cerebral palsy. While Conner's (2016) *All Rise for the Honorable Perry T. Cook* which might help teacher understand the complexities of having incarcerated family members. When developing empathy, instructional strategies such as bibliotherapy are useful in designing guided reading experiences with the goal of helping others solve problems through reading books (American Library Association, 2025). At the collegiate level, I recommend teacher education faculty should use literary fiction to develop empathy for the diverse lived experiences of the students which preservice teachers will encounter in their field experiences and teaching career. I recommend that preservice teachers learn how to use literary fiction to write guided questions for both reading comprehension as well as for social and emotional comprehension through bibliotherapy.

**Table 7**

*Findings through Recommendations*

| Findings | Interpretation | Conclusions | Recommendation |
|---|---|---|---|
| If I found, in my perception, literary fiction seemed to create cognitive, emotional, and compassionate empathy in my elementary education preservice teachers. | Then I think this means literary fiction could be used to build empathy with preservice teachers regarding other topics such as English Learners, Gifted students, students living in poverty, or students experiencing trauma. | Therefore, I conclude that…<br>Literary fiction can evoke three types of empathy.<br><br>Literary fiction can be used with preservice teachers as well as K-12 students.<br><br>Literary fiction supports the initiation of caring encounters. | Thus, I recommend that…<br>teacher education faculty strategically use literary fiction in their course to support preservice teacher' construction of knowledge of teaching students in all content areas.<br><br>All educators use literary fiction in their own classroom or schools to promote cognitive, emotional, and compassionate |

| Findings | Interpretation | Conclusions | Recommendation |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | empathy among their K-12 students.<br><br>All educators use literary fiction in their own professional development to promote cognitive, emotional, and compassionate empathy.<br><br>Educators explore literary strategies like bibliotherapy to created guided reading experiences with the goal to develop social and emotional comprehension. |

Note. Source of table format (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

**Conclusion**

As preservice teachers enter the profession, they will likely encounter a wide range of student needs—including mental health challenges, the effects of childhood trauma, neurodiversity, and academic recovery following learning disruptions. In addressing these needs, empathy plays a crucial role—not only in the initial approach to students but throughout the entire process of providing care and support. I hope that teacher education programs offer multiple opportunities for preservice teachers to engage in meaningful learning experiences that nurture empathy and prepare them to connect with and support every student they will serve.

The idea of life-long learning is a concept familiar with teachers. Learning is job-embedded in the work of a teacher and teacher educators (DuFour et al., 2010). Engaging in the learning process should be an important part of a teacher's daily work in the classroom through reflective thinking and a commitment to professional improvement and growth. DuFour et al. (2010) stated that "a key step in any effective improvement process is an honest assessment of the current reality – a diligent effort to determine the truth" (p. 16). Through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, teacher educators can make their teaching intentions visible for wonder and reflection. By making this thinking public, other teacher educators can learn from their lived experience and apply the learnings in their classrooms with the goal of better preparing our preservice teachers for the realities in our schools.

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