Empathy and the Caring Classroom: A Study of Student Teachers' Attitudes and Emotions

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Abstract

A great teacher is a caring teacher, and it is therefore essential to place emphasis on the attribute of caring by exploring teachers' attitudes and emotions. In this qualitative research, the attitudes and emotions of student teachers were researched and supported through a college course entitled *The Caring Classroom*. The level of student teachers' self- awareness was assessed through case studies, exercises and critical incidents presented and discussed by the participants. Student teachers kept reflective journals throughout and upon completion of the college course, analyzed their processes and their emotions. This study was unique as the course was researched allowing a thorough understanding of the process the student teachers underwent. This process revealed emotional development, developing empathy towards learners, and generating professional and personal changes. We suggest that similar courses be offered in colleges that teach pre-service and in-service teachers.

Key words: empathy; self-awareness; teacher training; emotions; caring

1. Introduction

Emotions are the core of teaching. During a typical school day, teachers experience a variety of emotions and processes involving multiple components arising from experimental, behavioral and psychological systems (Sutton, Mudrey-Camino & Knight, 2009). Recent research has shown a growing understanding that emotional experiences are a crucial component in teaching (Day, 2004; Sutton, Mudrey-Camino & Knight, 2009) affecting both teachers' and pupils' lives (Zembylas,2011). Additionally, research has focused on emotional rules regarding teachers' work (Yin & Lee, 2012).

When teachers understand their own emotions and realize how to deal with them, empathy may be fostered towards learners. Empathy is the feeling that results from attention given or feelings that precede attention (Slote, 2007). Noddings (2012) adds that it must also prompt both feelings and understanding. Empathy is a desirable trait for teachers and helps teachers respond to learners from the pupils' perspective (Goleman,1998), and successfully intervene with their pupils (Thompson, 2010) and thus facilitates better teachers (Haberman, 2009). Although empathy is a desirable trait that teacher trainers hope to engender, the means of accomplishing this task is questionable. Further, Noddings (2012) questions whether we can educate teachers to heighten their ability for empathy. Notably lacking is research regarding the attempt to educate teachers to do so.

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1 Dr. Sharon Azaria and Dr. Rinat Halabi, Talpiot Academic College

Recent research has examined the emotions of teachers in the field (Cross & Hong, 2012), teachers' emotional regulation (Sutton, Mudrey-Camino & Knight, 2009), and observations of pre-service teachers' emotional regulation (Schwartz & McElwain, 2012). Although the topic of emotions is being more widely explored, and the question of educating teachers to develop their empathy is being considered, most teacher training programs place little emphasis on teachers' emotional development and its effect on teacher performance.

As an answer to that need, a college course entitled *The Caring Classroom*, was added to the curriculum at Talpiot Academic College in Israel. The aim of the course was to professionally develop pre- and in-service teachers by enhancing their awareness of their attitudes and emotions towards the pupils, in an attempt to promote better future teaching. The pre and in-service course participants were encouraged to discuss their emotions and how they perceived teaching, their self-understanding, and their capacity to empathize. Further, the participants analyzed their feelings regarding the college course and how the course allowed changes in their professional and personal development. The participants' process of emotional change was examined through their reflections, which were based on questionnaires pertaining to self-examinations, case studies, analysis of You Tube video clips relating to teaching, and analysis of critical incidents that the students raised. This process was unique as it was researched in a college course and gave pre- and in-service teachers an opportunity to describe their ongoing experiences and their own insights and changes.

Empathy 1.1

Empathy, "an attitude or a stance of openness to another's experience," (Marcia, 1987:83) is the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that position (Cambridge dictionary) the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would like to be in that person's situation or to "put yourself in someone else's shoes". Slote (2007) defined empathy as the feeling that results from attention or precedes attention, while Noddings (2012) defined empathy as involving both understanding and feeling. More specifically related to teaching, McAlister & Irvine (2000) defined empathy as involving the cognitive, behavioral and affective factors which are manifested in teaching. Empathy is a desirable trait for teachers, as it allows an increased sensitivity to different cultures (Germain, 1998), and helps teachers respond to others from that person's perspective (Goleman, 1998). Empathy helps us see things not only from our own frame of reference as teachers, but from the learner's point of view (Patterson, 1985). It can foster openness, attentiveness, positive relationships (McAllister & Irvine, 2000) and serve as a backbone for facilitating intrinsic motivation among learners. Empathy is a component of teachers' success with diverse learners (Ladson-Billings, 1994) in various settings (Gordon, 1999). Empathy includes both cognitive and emotional aspects, reinforces the emotional aspect and is referred to as empathetic caring (Devoldre et al., 2010). Many

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articles with multiple definitions have been written about the concept of empathy, yet teacher trainers tend to overlook ways of aiding teachers in developing this crucial concept, which manifests itself in teachers' caring relationships with their pupils. Although definitions and understanding of empathy have been discussed, how to generate empathy among teachers has largely been ignored. Empathetic teachers, feel empathy towards the distress of another person, and may have a deep sense of caring towards their students. These feelings may appear whenever teachers attempt to understand their student's points of view.

1.2 Caring

Teachers who display empathy and attempt to understand their students' world enhance caring relationships (Winberger & Bakshi-Brosh, 2013). We may recognize the teachers' empathy as it asserts itself in their teaching, this, in turn, may be perceived as an ethical stand. These teachers who have developed caring relationships are aware of the uniqueness of each of their pupils and reinforce their growth. Furthermore, caring relationships allow people to connect, which is an essential need in all learning. It encourages the desire to learn, the ability to make choices, enables the learning process to be fun, and allows the student teachers to feel safe (Sullo, 2007). At times, the teacher's goals and purposes are temporarily put aside to satisfy the needs of the pupils. The teacher's energy flows towards the needs of the pupils creating teacher-pupil caring (Noddings, 2010). According to Sullo (2007), when these needs are met, the desire to learn is activated through internal motivation, which results in good behavior. In turn, it provides the class members with opportunities to succeed and raises their level of achievement. Teachers need to create caring relationships in which they are not the only ones who care, and also have the responsibility to help their pupils develop the capacity to care (Noddings, 1992). Teachers who model such behavior, conduct dialogues with the children, practice and confirm behavior, are fair with their pupils and have high expectations of them (Klem & Connel, 2004) are teachers who strive for a caring classroom. Caring teachers are considered a critical factor of successful interventions (Thompson, 2010), especially with at-risk pupils.

The factors related to caring teachers are beginning to be examined, though there is a lack of information concerning what caring teachers do. One factor that appears to be essential is for the teacher to develop empathy. When teachers are not aware of their emotions and attitudes, they may lack empathy, and may fail to become caring teachers. Being able to empathize with the learners can enable the teacher to restrain negative feelings and focus on the positive ones (Demetriou, Wilson & Winterbottom, 2009). Logan and Skamo (2007) stated that teachers who empathized with their learners through listening and obtaining learners' feedback reflected their learners' attitudes and interest teaching the subject matter.

1.3. Emotional experiences

In order to empathize with their learners, teachers must initially examine their own emotions. Emotions play a crucial role in communication, are evaluative, are related to someone (or something) valuable to us, and form part of our ethical reasoning (Nussbaum, 2001). Research has shown that emotional experiences affect both teachers' and pupils' lives (Zembylas, 2011. Swartz and McElwain (2012) discussed the emotions of teachers through observation of pre-service teachers' positive and negative emotional displays. Teachers reported more reappraisal strategies in their own emotions toward the learners' responses. Teachers who were aware of their own emotions were also more supportive with fewer non-supportive responses to learners' negative emotions and were more accepting of the beliefs of learners' emotions (Swartz, McElwain, 2012). A further look at the emotional component of teaching has shown that emotions influence the motivation of learners and teachers, as well as teachers' retention in the field. Incorporating emotional engagement in teaching aids and forming rapport with the learners may instigate and accelerate learning (Swartz, McElwain, 2012). Teachers are beginning to realize the importance of emotional engagement with the various advantages that it may comprise. Some of these advantages are more effective management, discipline and relationships with learners. These are the reasons why teachers believe it is important to practice emotional regulation (Sutton, Mudrey- Camino, & Knight, 2009). Experienced teachers believe they are more effective when they up-regulate their positive emotions (Sutton, et al., 2009). This is congruent with findings that show that positive emotions are essential in a good teacher's productive learning environment (Turner, Meyer, Midgley & Patrick, 2003). Haberman (2009) differentiates between a great teacher and a burnt out teacher. The great teachers understand their emotions and realize what makes them anxious and angry and how to deal with these emotions without it interfering with their teaching. They have an awareness of their self-understanding, which also allows teacher growth. Learning and practicing new behaviors lead to growth, while teachers who cannot control their anger and do not understand what initially makes them anxious, negatively escalate their problems with their pupils (Haberman, 2009). Teachers who cannot reflect on their own feelings and reactions may feel hostile, which, in turn, fuels their anxieties, placing them in a state of anger and they may easily explode at pupils' minor misbehaviors. Haberman (2009) further states that they blame others for the external state and their anger accelerates. This makes a poor teacher. Only when teachers confront themselves, reexamining their behaviors and feelings and gaining self-understanding, will they cease to be hurtful to themselves and to their pupils. Teachers' emotions must be understood in relation to their work and their need to attain self-understanding (Kelchtermans, 2005). Teachers who are able to identify and describe their emotions will be able to regulate them. Furthermore, locating their emotions in their teaching experiences enables them to develop healthy and effective teaching practices (Cross & Hong, 2012) and foster empathy.

Throughout this research we will refer to the emotional growth in developing the empathy of the student teachers through focusing on their emotional engagement in teaching (Demetriou et

al, 2009) leading to their own caring classroom. The aim of this research was to describe and analyze the process of professional change, among student teachers who participated in the "*Caring Classroom*" course. The research questions were:

(1) What changes occurred among the student teachers as a result of their participation in the "caring classroom" course?

(2) What course features enabled the student teachers' changes and growth?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research approach

This qualitative research demonstrates a phenomenological approach which presents subjective experiences of the student teachers who participated in the course: "The Caring Classroom".

2.2 Participants

The fifteen participants in the course were female pre-service and in-service teachers who studied at Talpiot Academic College in Israel for their B.Ed. and/or teacher's certificate in English. The participants were 22-50 years old. The youngest participants were third year students. All had participated in practical work or had worked in the field in some capacity. Three were teachers in the field at the time of the course.

2.3 The course

The, "Caring Classroom" course took place during the first semester (14 weeks) of the 2012/2013 school year, two academic hours per week. Methods employed throughout the semester in teaching the class included; (a) case studies (b) self-examination questionnaires, (c) exercises for self-reflection, (d) You Tube video clips related to teachers, and (e) critical incidents. For each lesson the student teachers wrote their reaction to the lesson, how the lesson affected them, and their feelings related to the issues presented in class. The case studies of pupils were extracted from selected articles and books and the student teachers discussed how to deal with the dilemmas. The questionnaires were a tool for the student teachers to understand themselves and their reactions in various situations and their dealings with difficult situations on a daily basis. These included how the student teachers deal with stress, their problem solving strategies, and their conflict resolution style. Exercises for self-reflection were taken from articles which presented behavior of pupils in the classroom and how the teachers reacted. The You Tube video clips included ones regarding the importance of teachers who care and ones on the topic of influential teachers. The students were given questions to think about while watching the videos to provoke their thoughts regarding their place as teachers. Critical incidents were taken from situations that the student teachers encountered in their own classes. The students presented their critical incident and the class discussed it through specific questions relevant to that particular critical incident.

Student teachers reflected on all of the above topics and expressed their opinions and feelings. All of the topics mentioned above were initially analyzed individually, then discussed with a

partner to draw comparisons, followed by small group discussions, and finally as a whole class discussion. These exercises served as triggers. As the students heard other students' answers, some changed their perspective, others had additional insights as to why they reacted as they did, what caused their reaction, and why other student teachers who were exposed to the same situation reacted differently.

2.4 Data collecting

Throughout the semester, all the student teachers in the course kept a detailed journal, writing their experiences and reflections of what happened in each lesson at the college. All their reflections were uploaded onto the college Moodle website open to the participants of the course. Other students could not read their reactions, only the two researchers. Lessons were either recorded or a student volunteered to write down the class discussions. A follow-up reflection was completed upon conclusion of the course. The reflection was detailed, including their experiences and the process that they underwent from the beginning of the year. Once again, this was uploaded to the Moodle platform.

2.5 Data analysis

Analysis of the data was based on 195 reflective reports. In addition there were 24 reports that documented the class sessions. These were written up by students who volunteered their services. Of the reflective reports, 180 were written on a weekly basis throughout the course and fifteen reflective reports were written at the end of the course as a final summary. The analysis sought to identify major themes. The first stage was open coding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002), followed by mapping of categories according to identified qualities. Finally, these were grouped into four major themes: (a) gaining self-understanding, (b) developing empathy and caring, (c) consolidating a refined concept of teaching, and (d) course features that initiated the student teachers' personal and professional development. Each of the themes covers a number of sub-categories as shown in section 4. It should be noted that the analysis was performed twice, independently by both researchers, in order to ensure the reliability of the analysis.

2.6 Research ethics

The students were told that the lessons would be taped or recorded and another researcher would also be analyzing the course. As this was not a compulsory lesson for their degree, no student was obligated to participate, but all agreed to do so. Marks were given for writing a reflection in their journal at the end of every session and a final summary. Students received their mark by completing the assignment. A student who completed all of the assignments by reflecting and reacting to the class assignment, received 100% in the course, irrespective of their comments. Therefore, the students could feel free to write any type of comment, as it would not affect their mark.

3. Findings

Four major themes emerged from the students' weekly and end-of-course reflections. The first three themes pertained to the first research question regarding the changes that occurred among the participating student teachers. These themes were: (a) gaining self-understanding, (b) developing empathy and caring, and (c) consolidating a refined concept of teaching. The fourth theme pertained to the second research question, which refers to the course's features that initiated the student teachers' personal and professional development.

3.1 Gaining self-understanding

The first theme that emerged through participation in the course was the change in the student teachers' self-understanding. Gaining self-understanding contained four sub-themes: enhancing self -awareness, developing the ability to expose feelings and thoughts, changing priorities in life, and perceiving the difficulties in life as a challenge.

3.1.1 Enhancing self-awareness

The students felt that they had modified a change in how that they coped with their life through raising their self-awareness. Their self-awareness was developed through class exercises, discussion and the reflections both after the lesson and the final reflection. For example, Sara referred specifically to a session dealing with students' reactions that may upset us:

> It gave me the insight of analyzing the things that really disturb me and how I react to these scenarios. I realized that when a certain issue consistently irritates me, then either something is wrong with the way I handle the situation or I misinterpret it.

Anat referred to the same situation and discussed the change she would make, but more specifically discussed her external reaction.

> I think today I am more aware of this kind of incident that could happen and think I will be able to give the right consequences or attention and whatever is needed in this kind of circumstance.

However, she also referred to her internal feelings:

> Raising awareness of what makes me upset .....I could see how I react and what I do, and now I feel my reactions come from a calm place inside me.

Furthermore, many students stated that the learning process and the reflections on their experiences helped them improve their self-image. This was summed up nicely by Ellen who wrote:

> Reading my previous reflections was actually real enjoyment for me. It made me like and respect myself more.

3.1.2 Developing the ability to expose feelings and thoughts

The second subtheme that appeared in the reflections was student teachers developing their ability to expose themselves, to involve others in their feelings and thoughts, which led to accepting others as they are. As the students started to feel more comfortable in the course they opened up and began expressing their feelings regarding issues they would have refrained from discussing in other situations. Ellen said the following, referring to two of the students in the class:

> ……. *it's not good to keep things bottled up inside of ourselves for a long time. We should find the courage to talk about what ails us. I found the courage to do so!!*

When the students started hearing others express themselves in the safe haven of the course, they became more aware of the need to accept others just as they wish to be accepted. Ann referred to the change that she experienced in accepting others.

> *Another thing that was very special was my ability to accept the different ideas and opinions of the girls in the group.*

3.1.3 Changing priorities in life

The third sub-theme that appeared in the reflections was the balance between career and home life. This was very difficult for both veteran teachers and especially new teachers to deal with. Teachers spend most of their day with the pupils and during the short breaks meet with other teachers who have spent their time with pupils. It is difficult for the students to find a place to express what they went through that day, especially on a difficult day. Therefore, they tend to bring their problems, anger, and disappointment home with them. These feelings were expressed in various ways and reiterated by all the students. Regarding the students' behavior at home, Miriam referred to the positive reactions she gave to her pupils, but forgot to give to her family.

> *One of the questions that came up during the lesson was, "Who gets more of our smiles?" and I automatically answered that my pupils get more smiles than my own family. I also added that I know that my family will always be there for me. BZZZZZ! WRONG ANSWER! I needed that alarm to wake me up. All the way home, I kept thinking how come that the most important thing in the world for me gets less attention. When I spoke out and gave words to the way I behaved it sounded awful and it literally broke my heart.*

The feeling of changing priorities recurred throughout the students' reflections throughout the sessions and the reflections at the various stages.

3.1.4 Perceiving the difficulties in life as a challenge

The fourth sub-theme discussed was the development of a positive attitude in life and perceiving the difficulties in life as a challenge. Students referred to various difficulties they were having

in school. Although the as the springboard. After hearing others in the course Sharon comments and discloses how she will overcome her challenge:

> *At first I was getting scared hearing all those things, because I consider myself a very social person and it is very hard for me to imagine that I could be an isolated teacher just because I'm more enthusiastic than they are. However it makes me a little bit motivated to make sure that it won't happen to me.*

Just as Sharon wrote about a positive attitude in reference to teaching, Ellen wrote in a more general context of being positive and not getting hurt by others comments or behavior. This was initially expressed in reference to pupils, then colleagues and principals, and, lastly, with all situations and people.

> *I was influenced by Karen's words about not being hurt by other people, because if they do something bad - it's their problem, not mine. Sometimes it helps me when I feel hurt by someone…*

The different sections above with the comments help us perceive the changes the student teachers underwent as a result of enhanced self-understanding.

3.2 Developing empathy and caring

The second major theme that emerged from the students' weekly and end-of-course reflections was in their feelings and behaviors toward others. The learning process that occurred during the course allowed the students to develop empathy towards the pupils. This transformation was very significant, as empathy is the basis of a caring teacher. Changes that the student teachers experienced in themselves allowed them to make professional changes in their attitude towards their pupils. By understanding themselves better, they could understand the pupils' needs, look more openly at their different backgrounds and separate themselves from their pupils' needs. This, in turn, allowed the students to feel more open and relaxed and develop empathy towards their pupils. Orit wrote:

> *I understood how important it is, for me, to be able to identify what motivates me and how I choose to react in different situations. Only then, was I able to better understand my own pupils. I was able to analyze their responses differently. I was able to understand the diverse causes of their actions. A new set of priorities has enriched the way I approach my pupils.*

With tolerance and understanding, as expressed by the students during the session, came empathy. Empathy, the core of a caring teacher and a caring class was noted by many students. For example, Corinne wrote:

> *I feel that I have a huge responsibility towards each child I interact with. My job is to make sure I provide a nurturing and caring environment. Creating a caring classroom*

can start from educating for friendship, caring , respect and trust for others and ourselves.

Osnat also stated:

...what I would want is to maintain a nurturing, supportive, and inspiring environment for my pupils.

3.3. Consolidating a refined concept of teaching

In reference to this theme, all the students reported that after participating in the course, changes had occurred regarding their professional development that altered their definition of their role as teachers.

3.3.1 Perceiving teaching as a virtuous profession

The first sub-theme in which this change was made was in how the students perceived their disposition as teachers, or through their perception of their internal locus of control. This included taking responsibility for what transpired in the classroom and realizing that the teacher has a direct influence on the pupils.

When summarizing the course in her final reflection, Sara placed additional emphasis on her perception of her internal locus of control:

In the course, I learned that teachers should take responsibility for any problem, act differently in every situation, make changes in their behavior when needed and not consider the discipline problems as an inhibiting factor beyond their control. We have the ability to influence each student and make a change in his life. We have to figure out what causes the problems, if it involves socio-economic or social problems, or learning difficulties.

In response to a movie about teachers, students described the heavy responsibility and influence they have as teachers along with an additional feeling of apprehension about their ability to be successful teachers. These feelings and thoughts were not recognized by most of the students until they watched the movie and participated in class discussions. They viewed teaching as a profession in which they strive to teach the pupils, but many readily stated that they knew that they would not succeed with a lot of the children and felt it was legitimate. Yael commented that she had a better idea of the heavy responsibility that teachers bear, something she was not aware of before participating in the course.

Malka described her feelings:

Our work is not just work, it's a sacred responsibility because we work with kids who have gentle souls and are very sensitive. In his great book, The Students'Responsibilities (translated) Rabbi Kalonymus Shapira says: a shoemaker steps on leather, a carpenter steps on wood chips and a teacher steps on SOULS!!! This great saying leads me to the message of the movie. The teacher is so important, he can build or ruin (the pupil).

His influence on the pupil's future is critical. Therefore, we as a teachers need to pay attention to what we say to the pupils, how we react in class, and that we do not hurt their feelings.

With their new beliefs, succeeding in teaching had a different meaning. The teacher's belief meant making a difference with each pupil. Sara stated:

"A good teacher should be true to himself and his beliefs."

Orit added to that how crucial her responses are in the class, the effect that they have on the pupils and how her responses may aid or inhibit their learning. In addition, she commented that the teacher can never respond automatically, but must be aware of what they are doing and think things out.

3.3.2. Developing a positive attitude towards pupils

The second sub-theme where there was an important change, and which was repeatedly brought up was how teachers treat pupils and the need to develop a positive attitude towards the pupils. Pupils should know that teachers support them and believe in their success, and have expectations of them. Yael explains:

I believe that our part as teachers is not only to teach English, but, we are also a role model for our pupils. We need to be there for them not only by helping them in their studies, but also, to be attentive, how to behave and of course to believe in them!! We need to be patient with others and not to get angry right away. We need to remember that we are a role model for our pupils, they look at us and will behave the way we are going to behave.

The students tackled the problem of how to impress upon each pupil that they care when the classes are so large. They expressed the importance of encouraging all the pupils, but more specifically the pupils who are having more difficulties. Many of the students sensed that other teachers, especially some of the veteran teachers, did not have the same conviction of the significance of being there for each and every pupil. Judith expanded on this point and her personal credo was:

…………pupils do wish that we, as teachers, never give up on them and try not to stick stereotypes to each and every student. No matter how many times they fall down, it is our obligation to give them a hand and help (them).

3.3.3. Understanding the importance of forming pupils' values

The third sub-theme, helping pupils form values and deal with their feelings and manage their conflicts was another professional change discussed by the student teachers. They emphasized the need to help the pupils become better people and agreed that teaching values

should be a very important part of the hidden curriculum, as it is not overtly stated in the curriculum. Orit described it as more important than grades. As a continuation of that Anat said:

> *"I think the best thing in being a teacher is listening and talking to my pupils, helping them be better people."*

Referring to the change that she underwent, Orit explained:

> *I was able to have better understanding of how is it possible to guide our pupils in social situations, even those with great complexity, and how I can better consider each child with his own unique background, his unique communication skills, and his unique way of managing his anger and other extreme emotions.*

For teachers to help their pupils develop values and deal with their feelings and conflicts, the classroom climate is an essential concern. If the atmosphere in the class is positive and the pupils feel at ease, teachers can better influence the pupils, encourage them, help them create their values, resolve conflicts and be there for the pupils. In the middle of the course, Orit decided that she wanted to improve her class atmosphere as she said:

> *I understand that the classroom climate influenced by my reactions have a major impact on my pupils' motivation and attitude towards learning. That is a great responsibility I need to treat with great care.*

Karen mentioned other effects of a positive classroom atmosphere and talks specifically of making the atmosphere one of caring. She commented:

> *My job is to make sure I provide a nurturing and caring environment. Creating a caring classroom can start from educating for friendship, caring, respect and trust for others and ourselves. Belonging and being part of a group is important to children.*

3.3.4 Change in relation to classroom management

The fourth sub-theme the students expounded on was the change in their approach to the pupils. Many chose to adopt a holistic approach. The holistic approach took into consideration a number of factors, which included their decision-making as teachers, the various multiple backgrounds of the pupils in the class, and the way in which the pupils' background affected their behavior. The students became more aware of the different background variables and the reactions they may cause. Malka commented:

> *The teacher deals with many kinds of conflicts every day. An example is how to react when a pupil talks nonstop during lessons. The question is how should the teacher react? In every conflict that you have you must consider many parameters. Some of the parameters should be the background of the child, his academic achievements and more.*

Another change in herself as a teacher and her attitude towards the pupils was described by Orit:

> *I definitely feel I have become a more effective teacher; I am better able to manage my classes and most of all I see my pupil as an individual, as a whole, with strengths and needs, which I keep on reminding myself always to take into consideration.*

The students also learned to differentiate between the pupils' behavior and themselves. After long discussions in the class about their reactions when pupils made them angry, those in-service students who were in the field for many years could differentiate between their pupils' reactions and their role as a teacher. They learned not to take it personally, making it easier to deal directly with the problem and with the pupils. Yael commented:

> *I learned that it's not the end of the world if a pupil misbehaves, and that it doesn't mean I'm not a good teacher, because first of all, it happens to the veteran teachers also, (and not as I used to think, that it happens only to me…)*

3.4 Course's features which enable students' growth

Three sub-themes were discussed. These included: an informal class atmosphere, the group as a safe haven where they could feel open, and the content of the class discussions and the individual reflections.

3.4.1 Informal class atmosphere

The first condition in the course which the students referred to was the informal class atmosphere as it contributed to their participation in the course, encouraging their professional and personal development. Furthermore, the students perceived the positive classroom atmosphere as the foremost feature to enable growth. The normal pressure of regular classes was reduced since judgment was not allowed. Furthermore, less emphasis was placed on the grades than in the other courses at the college, allowing the students to feel comfortable and unstressed. Referring to the openness of the course and the feeling that they could express themselves, Sara commented

> *…..was the opportunity for everyone to speak up, open up and share personal things.*

Another point that many of the students referred to in contributing to the informal class atmosphere was the physical condition of the classroom. All of the students brought food and the classroom setting was informal, with the students all sitting around a big table. Notably, this course was their last course which started at 17:15, a difficult hour to teach, and students were tired after a long day of studies. Anat described the atmosphere:

> *I think the atmosphere throughout the course had a big influence on the participants; the table was full of sweets and nutritious foods that gave a calm and relaxing feeling at the end of a long day.*

3.4.2 Group as a safe haven

The second distinctive instrumental course feature that the students referred to was the group as a safe haven where they could feel free to express themselves and feel that they belong. From the first lesson, which was introduced with an icebreaker, the students commented on the positive atmosphere, which they connected to the icebreaker. Students sat in groups of threes and found things that they had in common and things that were different among them. They were also asked to find positive comments to make to the members of the group. Each individual then reported to the class what they discovered in their group. Although they found this difficult and were embarrassed initially, they gradually opened up and they empathy toward their group members.

The students did not feel that they were being judged at any time, they felt comfortable in their surroundings. They felt that they could share their feelings, and felt the mutual respect and empathy toward their group members. Many students expressed similar feelings.

> *The special thing about it was that we discussed issues and we discussed it honestly, openly and with caring, although we barely knew each other!*

Slowly the students felt that the members of the group were getting closer and as this happened, the trust grew among the members. Ora described her feelings:

> *I learned about the characteristics of the students in the group and I looked into myself as well. When you feel that you belong to a group, trust the friends of the group, and get to know them from inside and outside, it builds the foundation of the success in any field in life"*

As the semester continued, the comfort level increased and the students knew that they could bring up their own subjects and make any comment and not be judged, and that the group accepted them and tried to understand their comments. Ruth commented:

> *I got to know that I am not the only one who has problems in my family relationships, and there is something very comfortable about the knowledge that we are in "good company". I was also surprised to see that the other people in the room weren't shocked with the sincerity, they weren't judgmental, they (other students) just listened, understood, expressed support and tried to help by giving advice.*

Karen felt it necessary to thank everyone for allowing her to bring up a subject that was important to her. The group was very open and encouraging even though Karen spoke for the larger part of a session.

> *I would like to say thank you for letting me express my feelings and frustration in the last lesson. After class I felt a lot better and was able to think clearly about the whole situation.*

3.4.3 Class discussions and individual reflections

The third distinctive instrumental feature of the course that the students referred to was the content of the class discussions and the individual reflections which were completed at home after every session and at the end of the course. Through the discussions and the reflections we saw the influence students had on each other, their analysis of the various situations, and their self-awareness.

Referring to the content of the discussions, students commented on the fact that personal feelings could be discussed in the course. Also noticeable was the relevance of the subjects brought up in the course to daily situations in the teaching environment. Students felt that by bringing up the situations and dilemmas in the class, they had an opportunity to initially deal with their feelings. Furthermore, they felt that when these situations actually arise in the classroom, they will be more prepared. Sara was especially impressed by a lesson regarding stress control which was difficult for her in the class. She felt that after the class she could say:

> *I have learned how to deal with stress and how to channel the stress in a positive way in the classroom.*

Anat perceived the lessons as an opportunity to be exposed to new situations and felt that it gave her a chance to evaluate the situations that will arise in her classroom and gave her tools to react to different options which she never thought of. It also forced her to deal with her own feelings.

> *The fact that we had many conversations exposed me to a wide range of topics and opinions which widened my horizons and helped me start to look out of my box. By raising the different incidents in the lesson I heard and felt the difficulties that are involved and am thinking to myself of the different ways of how to apply discipline in my own classroom in the right way and hope it will be possible and achievable.*

She continues in reference to the lesson:

> *Angry? Upset? The meanings of these words became new to me after the lesson. I actually thought about it a lot and started to find many different situations I had during my life that could be called-"Anger" and I didn't call them anger but other different words that maybe gave less of a feeling that I lost control. I really think that there aren't many people that can stay calm all the time. Even the calmest person can get angry or frustrated. The question is how angry do you get? And what can you do when you get angry?!*

The students felt that they became more aware of the consequences of their actions and that they learned to examine and analyze things they do and share their experiences while learning from others.

All the students learned from each other through sharing and listening to each other. They also commented on how they learned from how the other students perceived their role as a teacher

under different situations. As the course consisted of students of different ages and both pre- and in-service teachers, the younger students commented on the fact that they learned a lot from the older students. Further, these encounters encouraged them to consider how they handle situations. The students linked their experiences in the class and their feelings to what they would like to have in their classes in school and how they would like their classes to support their pupils and form a caring environment. For example, Yael commented:

> *The part that we all had to listen to the girls in class talking about their experiences in class was very important to me, because it showed me that these characteristics actually influence the class and make the environment a caring environment.*

To sum it up, Anat wrote:

> *I feel that it is very important to be aware of our pupils' feelings in the class. And I believe that by going through the process on our own we could learn how to run the same process in our class.*

The individual reflections written at the end of each lesson and the final reflection at the end of the semester were not easy for many of the students. It served as a time to reflect on what happened in the class. Many commented that only when they sat on their reflections did they finish working out their feelings. Others commented that sometimes in class they did not feel that a subject was that important, but when they wrote up their reflections they understood the importance of the discussions. Many stated that they wrote up their reflections immediately, while others needed to wait a few days before they did their reflections. The final reflection at the end of the semester helped the students see the process they underwent and reevaluate their feelings. Many were appreciative of the fact that they had to go over their reflections again and many were thankful that they had undergone the process. As Sara commented in her final reflection:

> *This course helped me to be more self-aware. All through the semester we were asked to reflect on each lesson, which is a valuable teaching tool in my opinion. It taught me so much because I've discovered, as I've written above, so many good and less good things about myself. Going over my reflections it was very interesting to recall my feelings and thoughts through the course.*

4. Discussion

There are indicators in this study that a learning process conducted through openness and mutual respect, which was both authentic and relevant to the learners, inspired personal growth. Further, through an informal atmosphere in the class and a high comfort level, the student teachers benefited from the discussions as they all listened to each other and learned from each other's experiences. By conducting the lesson similar to a support group and not as a regular class lecture/discussion, the students were at ease and shared their feelings.

More specifically, drawing upon the reflections and discussions, a pattern emerged in the process of the course where the students became aware of their emotions. Through the non-threatening informal atmosphere, the student teachers were open to encountering emotional experiences that affected their lives, as similarly noted by Zembylas (2011).

4.1. Personal growth

As teaching is an all-encompassing profession, when the school day ends, the thoughts and feelings carry over into the remainder of the day. Examined specifically were the personal changes that the student teachers encountered. The results of this research indicated changes in how the student teachers developed their ability to expose themselves, involved others in their feelings and thoughts, accepted others as they are, managed their personal lives, balanced their career and their home life. They developed a positive attitude towards life and perceived its difficulties as a challenge. They improved their self-image and self-respect. The students arrived at these conclusions through reflections and discussions within the context of the lessons. They identified their emotions, cognitively working through them and arriving at self-understanding which promoted growth. This supports the studies of Haberman (2009) and Kelchtermans (2005) that claim that when teachers understand their emotions they will arrive at self-understanding. Additionally, when teachers are able to identify their emotions and describe them they will be able to regulate their emotions (Cross & Hong, 2012). Being able to make changes in the personal spectrum through understanding and identifying emotions boosted the teachers' awareness and sensitivity.

4.2. Changes in perception of teaching

Results of this study indicate the changes that the student teachers underwent in their perception of teaching which led them to empathy towards pupils. Initially, many student teachers felt that the teacher's job was limited to teaching the course material. Through the course the students were able to reassess how they perceived themselves as teachers and were open to professional changes. Hand in hand, they reexamined the way teachers treated pupils. As they became more aware of their emotions, they became more aware of the pupils' emotions. They saw things not only from their frame of reference as teachers, but from the learner's point of view similar to Patterson (1985). The teachers better understood the pupils and felt a need to help them form values and deal with their feelings and their conflicts, as supported by Noddings (2010). The teachers clearly hoped to develop healthy and effective teaching practices concurring with studies by Cross& Hong (2012). These teaching factors stimulated a change in their personality, which inspired the teachers. Similar to Noddings (2012), teachers maintained that through their understanding and feelings they felt they could better empathize with the pupils. With this understanding, the teachers could become caring teachers, as empathy is the essential factor in cultivating caring teachers and leaders in a caring classroom.

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5. Conclusions

This research examined the emotional process of student teachers. Through the college course, *The Caring Classroom*, students learned to understand themselves better through analyzing critical incidents, through group discussions, and inner reflections. By better understanding themselves, student teachers became more understanding of learners and more empathetic with them in promoting better learning. The aim of this course was to develop the emotional process of student teachers, while the research examined the process that led to a change in the teachers' attitudes and empathy towards the pupils. The type of learning in this course was different from other conventional theoretical courses offered in teacher training colleges, where the main goal is theoretical and/or practical application of material.

One of the goals of the Israeli Ministry of Education is to integrate, promote, and cater to the needs of all pupils studying in the Israeli school system. This goal is based upon the assumption that teachers have the ability to include all pupils in the class, to care about them, and to believe in their abilities. The teachers' behavior will encourage pupils to strive to learn, to fulfill their potential and become successful in their studies. The teachers' ability to recognize the various feelings among the pupils is dependent upon their ability to recognize their own feelings. Further, the ability to be empathetic towards pupils is dependent upon the teachers' training, which should encourage the development of empathy. The result of this research of the caring classroom directly corresponds with the goals of the Israeli Ministry of Education. The student teachers who participated in the course described the tools they developed during the course and their new insights and understandings of themselves. This helped them develop empathy and a better understanding of others, and they recognized the need of incorporating these traits in the classroom. Therefore, we recommend that courses similar to *The Caring Classroom*, taught by educational psychologists, be included in teacher training programs. This course may support the development of the emotional self-awareness which encourages teachers to create a supportive environment that promotes learning, social, and emotional development.

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