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A Childhood Perspective: The Expressed Understanding of Empathy through Artistic Forms of Meaning Making

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Abstract

This dissertation identifies what children understand about empathy. Utilizing an arts-informed research methodology, the children and I engaged as equal partners in one-on-one semi-structured interviews, focus group sessions and art-making to explore empathy. Evidence in the form of spoken word and artistic representations show that children understand empathy as something inherent, actionable, and learned. Through an examination of literature, arts-based education and theories that define how we engage in relationship, a new and more thorough understanding of empathy and its benefits are learned. The value and relationship art can play in the development of children’s empathy are shared also. Implications for how we understand empathy, arts-informed research methodology and educational practice are included herein.
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Eric L. Dustman
They say that once you enter a doctoral program, you should forgo enduring life-changing events. While my wife and I are not having another baby, we have managed to sell our house, sell a business and begin preparations for a move halfway around the world to Qingdao, China. Clearly, I haven’t excelled at taking the advice of past doctoral students but I am fortunate to have surrounded myself with other wise people throughout this process, and I have used their advice wisely.

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# Table of Contents

## Chapter I
- Introduction 7
- Statement of the Problem 7
- Definitions
  - Empathy and relationship 10
  - The decline of empathy 11
  - Art as a catalyst for empathy 12
- Personal Interest 13

## Chapter II
- Literature Review 15
  - Defining Empathy 15
  - How Has Empathy Been Studied?
    - Empathy in relationship 17
    - Empathy in nature 18
    - Empathy and the human condition 21
    - The neuroscience of empathy 23
  - Theoretical Context 26
    - Social constructionism 27
    - Relational-cultural theory 29
- Conclusion 34

## Chapter III
- Methodology 36
  - Arts-related research 36
  - Arts-informed research 38
- Art and Empathy 40
- Art and Participant Engagement 42
- Research Question 44
- Data Collection Techniques 44
  - Participants 45
  - Location 45
  - Timeline 46
  - Research activities 46
- Ethical Considerations 51
- Table 1: Structured Ethical Reflection 53
- Meaning Making Processes 54
  - Participatory analysis 54
  - The value of art-making 56
  - Interpretive analysis and compositional interpretation 57
  - Art-making as analysis 58
- Trustworthiness 63
- Conclusion 64
Chapter IV
Findings 65
Emergent Categories and Themes 66
Table 2: Emergent Categories and Themes 67
Category 1: Inherent Empathy 68
  Empathy is simply understood 68
  Empathy is involuntarily sensed 71
  Empathy is like sympathy 75
Category 2: Actionable Empathy 80
  Physical empathy 81
  Experiential empathy 85
  Circumstantial empathy 88
Category 3: Learned Empathy 93
  Empathy is learned by activity and influence 93
Conclusion 97
Diagram 1: Empathy is Multi-Dimensional 99

Chapter V
Conclusion 100
Implications 101
  For theoretical understandings of empathy 101
  For arts-related research 102
  For educational practice and empathy-based instruction 104
Reflection 108
  Work with children 108
  How art became data 111
  How data shaped the dissertation 113
Meaning Making 113
  Why I created art 113

Appendix
  Empathy in art: Semi-structured interview questions 117

References 118
Chapter I

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Growing volumes of literature present arguments about empathy and ideas that are fundamental to its growth and development. They provide strong reason for growing our understanding of empathy’s value and the importance it plays in our lives (de Waal, 2009; Brown, 2012; Dodson-Lavelle & Simon-Thomas, 2014; Rifkin, 2009). Current scholars also warn us of the consequences of not heeding the warnings of empathy’s declining presence in our lives (Keltner, 2009; Konrath, O’Brien, & Hsing, 2011; Rifkin, 2009; Turkle, 2012). The need then, for us to collectively develop our empathic mindset and to cultivate it in our lives, is seemingly now more necessary than ever.

According to Keltner (2009), children in the US rank twentieth out of twenty-one industrialized nations when reviewing statistics of social well-being. He adds that on the whole, the importance placed on morality of individual persons in the United States has continued to fall dramatically when compared to similar rankings less than a decade ago. These figures, among many others, are cause for great concern. They demand our attention to reverse the current trend that appears to be lessening our empathic abilities.

By learning what children perceive about empathy and their own practices of it, we can begin to impart newfound knowledge and understanding that will better enable our children to grow in a more empathic society. We can create a society that is free of limitation and pending consequence and instead, one that is
supportive of the individual and more aware of the commonalities we share. As co-researchers, children can be empowered to guide new views on empathy and how we as adults should go about supporting its growth and development among them. Children are capable people and we should capitalize on “their knowledge and interests” to involve them in determining goals (Levin, 1994, as cited in Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 361). With children, we have an unprecedented opportunity to change the direction we are headed.

The voice of the child is a powerful tool. As Fullan (2007) asked when speaking about the emergence and value of “student voice” in educational research and reform, “What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered?” (p. 170). Research shows that we could gain a great deal (Duckworth, 1995; Fielding, 2004).

Children deserve our respect as their perspective is worthy of our attention. Speaking to the benefit of hearing student opinions, Danaher (1994, as cited in Cook-Sather, 2006) suggested, “we would be far better served if we asked the voices’ owners what they think and listened actively to the answers” (p. 362). Children, if given the opportunity, have the potential to reveal ideas about empathy that are realistic and truthful.

**Definitions**

Empathy is a complex emotion evident through verbal and non-verbal action (Dodson-Lavelle & Simon-Thomas, 2014). It has been described as an emotion that is possessed innately and thus automatic (de Waal, 2009; Simon-Thomas, 2014). It is also considered by some to be a learned behavior, resulting from our observation
of one another (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2006; de Waal, 2009; Gordon, 2009; Luvmour, 2010). Dodson-Lavelle and Simon-Thomas (2014) asserted that empathy and our ability to express it are learned through process, one manifested over a lifetime along a developmental trajectory. The care and nurturing we experience in early childhood affects our capacity to share appropriate empathic responses and our ability to understand our own emotions. As Gordon (2009) argued, “children develop empathy [and] become more adept at finding the humanity in one another,” underscoring our need to more fully and frequently engage in activities that better meet our individual and collective developmental needs (p. xviii).

Research findings support the notion that relationships play a significant role in our development of empathic expression (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2006; Brown, 2012; Gordon, 2009; Hanson, 2014; Harlow, 1958; Jordan, 1997; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Luvmour, 2010; Rifkin, 2009; Simon-Thomas, 2014; Winnicot, 1998). Empathy and the act of expressing it are based on our ability to secure, maintain, and grow from relationships with others and ourselves. According to Rifkin (2009), the child, relationship, and empathic development go hand-in-hand. He identified that at the onset of life, children are driven to seek affection, companionship, intimacy, and a sense of belonging. The search to belong is the most primary of all drives and remains the most essential need of human beings (p. 20). He encouraged us to believe that “a sense of selfhood and self-awareness depends on and feeds off of deepening relationships to other people” (p. 20). Like others, Rifkin’s work showed that “empathy is the means by which companionate bonds are forged” (Gordon, 2009; Luvmour, 2010; Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 20).
Empathy and relationship. Relationships are key to our ability to expressing emotions and empathic tendencies. Decades ago, Harlow (1958) implored that humans are hardwired by the basic need of connection, seeking healthy attachment and attunement. He formed his opinion from work that showed, “the initial love responses of the human being are those made by the infant to the mother or some mother surrogate. From this intimate attachment of the child to the mother, multiple learned and generalized affectional responses are formed” (p. 1). Brown (2012) agreed, sharing that her research confirmed much of what she assumed, that “connection is why we’re here. We are hardwired to connect with others; it’s what gives purpose and meaning to our lives” (p. 8). And unlike other species in the animal kingdom, the human baby is born prematurely, largely dependent on caretakers, and unable to do anything for itself until months after much care and nurturing. Our dependency on others, or co-regulation, is never-ending. Winnicot (1998, as cited in Rifkin 2009) surmised that while “the baby is formed in the womb, the individual is formed in relationship” (p. 62). Relationship then, creates the necessary context for the development of the individual. Jordan et al. (1991) contended that early relationships help build a basic capacity and motivation for human relatedness that leads everyone, girls and boys alike, to perceive another’s affective verbal and non-verbal cues (p. 29). This ability, and the relational development that occurs within the early stages of life, create endless opportunities for connection and they further stimulate the development of the concern we learn to share with one another (p. 82).
The decline of empathy. We have been a face-to-face species since the start of human existence (Keltner, 2009, p. xi). In this regard, our close proximity to one another has lent to our development verbal and non-verbal communication (de Waal, 2009). These have both supported our desire and need for strong personal relationships (Gordon, 2009; Luvmour, 2010). This draws attention to the ramifications of our growing infatuation with technology. Advances in technology may be widening the gap between our ability to grow in relationship and our levels of empathic awareness (Konrath et al., 2011; Turkle, 2012). Recent research is beginning to show the significance that technology plays in lessening our continued growth toward being truly, empathic selves. Turkle (2012) warned about the consequence of empathy's non-existence. She proposed that our increased use of technology is deteriorating our need and subsequent abilities to communicate effectively one-on-one. She suggested further that while it may provide us many things, it is diminishing our ability to manage our relationships and ourselves at many levels. Konrath et al. (2011) offered that expressions of empathy do decline over time as a result of our growing dependence on technology, as determined by a cross-temporal meta-analysis on 72 samples of college students who completed at least one portion of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, an instrument that helps to measure dispositional empathy. Technology has begun to provide each of us with less need for one-on-one engagement and interpersonal relations (Turkle, 2012). It is reasonable to believe that our ability to grow empathically is being jeopardized by our technological advances. While many are designed to make our lives more efficient, they each present new issues and challenges if they are not managed
properly. This point is made more poignant by Rifkin’s (2009) notation of the idea of the novel versus the telephone. He presented that “while the novel provided a tool for self-reflection, the telephone provided a tool for gossip” (p. 54). Further, he identified that while our ability to grow in our empathic consciousness has been forever present, we are supporting our growth in it at a rate that is not proportionate to our technological advances and as such, are facing an our own demise.

**Art as a catalyst for empathy.** Growing evidence shows that art may lend support to teaching, expressing, and re-starting the conversation about the importance of empathy in our lives (Diamond, 2008; Eisner, 1997; Halen-Faber & Jones, 2006; Knowles & Promislow, 2008; Leavy, 2009; Pinar, 1994; Proust, 2013). As Gordon (2009) suggested, “Art is the vehicle that allows children the expression of a depth and complexity of emotion beyond what their words can convey” (p. xix). Moreover, art may present the greatest opportunity for enhancing and enriching the lives of young children through free expression and the opening of discourse to new ideas.

Using art with children to create meaningful expressions of empathy can help further our present understanding. While relationships, technology and other factors define where we are and where we are headed, none so far have yet to offer evidence that describes children’s expressed understanding of empathy or how to go about finding it. Using the voices of children and their art as a catalyst, we can heighten our awareness and begin defining the means by which empathic growth and development can be supported most fully.
Personal interest

As an educator for more than twenty years, I have grown to realize the absence of and lack of attention to empathy in the conversations we share and the schools where we hope to educate our children. Empathy seems so integral to the social and emotional well-being of children and if we regard it as unimportant and unnecessary to the overall development of children, we limit their and ultimately our own empathic capacities to grow.

I entered the doctoral program at UC almost three years ago. At the time, I was looking to be challenged about my personal beliefs and understanding of education. Having formulated my opinions over a great length of time in various positions from assistant, to teacher, to school head, I was interested in having others question me, make me consider other viewpoints and even rethink the ideas I believe. Deciding to pursue an inquiry about empathy occurred rather unexpectedly. Fortunately, it has challenged me in every way that I had hoped such an undertaking would. Upon learning of the opportunities that arts-based research methodologies could also provide me, I became even more intrigued about what I could uncover about myself, and the impact my work could have on others.

Past experiences have helped to shape my understanding and thoughts about children, their development and the opportunities they are presented. I believe children should be empowered to engage and exercise their independence, expand their understanding, and grow their own self-concept. They should be encouraged to appreciate their interdependence, the necessity of relationship, and the value that having empathic regard holds. Each of these is fundamental in order for all of us to
truly realize our potential and our promise for the future. To this end, I have spent much time reflecting and my heart and mind tells me that this work is now more important than ever. It is my hope that taking this opportunity will lend itself to enriching and enhancing our present state, where current initiatives fail to embrace the potential that we each have yet to realize.
Chapter II

Literature Review

Research encourages us to look critically at relationships, nature, the human condition, and neuroscience in order to expand our knowledge of empathy. Being mindful of how and where we generate our knowledge also offers ideas about what empathy means. Through an exploration of the literature generated from past research and the foundations of social constructionism and relational-cultural theories, the benefits of our working to define and support the growth and development of empathy will be identified.

Defining Empathy

Many scholars and social scientists have attempted to define empathy. Gordon (2009) asserted that empathy is our ability “to identify commonalities through our shared feelings” (p. xx). Rifkin (2009) provided his definition in the context of empathic consciousness, whereby empathy is “embodied, is filled with a sense of awe, and relies on both feelings and reason” (p. 176). He added further clarification by stating that “empathic extension is the only human expression that creates true equality between people” and helps the distinctions that separate us to fade away (p. 160). De Waal (2009) preferred to derive his definition from the German noun Einfühlung, meaning that one person actively projects “him- or herself into another” (p. 65). Jordan et al. (1991) explained empathy as an “affective-cognitive experience of understanding another person” (p. 83). Finally, McLaren (2013) contended that empathy can help us to feel and to understand the emotions, circumstances, intentions, thoughts, and needs of others. She defined it as a “social
and emotional skill” that gives us the ability to be sensitive, perceptive, and appropriate in our communication and support of one another (p. 4). Important, this definition of empathy by McLaren adds to the significance of this research. While each perspective of empathy offers a strong basis for considering empathy, none does so well as to include the role it plays in relation to social and emotional development, a skill vitally important to children’s well being.

**How Has Empathy Been Studied?**

Many arguments provide information that promotes the value of forming good, healthy relationships to encourage strong empathic growth. They suggest a need for each of us to more thoroughly understand and grow our empathic competencies. They relate directly to the interdependence we have developed as a species over our time on earth (Brown, 2012; Luvmour, 2010; Rifkin, 2009). Our need to comfort and support one another is stronger than ever (Keltner, 2009). As Rifkin (2009) suggested, “comfort and compassion between people creates goodwill, establishes the bonds of sociality, and gives joy to people’s lives,” providing further evidence for the need to more fully understand the growth and development of empathy (p. 10). Discovering what and how we have come to understand empathy and ourselves through various social and scientific means stands to ensure us all more fulfilling relations and enduring companionship.


**Empathy in relationship.** Research shows that it is necessary for children to experience “sensitive, nurturing care” in order to build an empathic competence (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2006, p. 14). Unfortunately, little is known about the capacity that children have for expressing empathy and more specifically, the perspectives that they hold about it. The work of Gordon (2009) continues to substantiate the argument that expanding our understanding of empathy and children’s views of it is crucial. Evidence found in Gordon’s research shows that “children who develop social and emotional competence are happier, have more rewarding relationships with their peers, are more reliant in the face of stress, and even perform better academically” (p. xiv).

Empathy is a learned behavior (Dodson-Lavelle & Simon-Thomas, 2014). Brazelton and Greenspan (2006) conducted careful research to reveal how learning and developing empathy affects children. Citing Erikson, Freud, and Burlington, they put forward common beliefs, basic assumptions, and generalized intuition that revealed that children require sensitive, nurturing care, in order to pass successfully through the stages of early childhood. Evidence showed that:

- Nurturing emotional relationships are the most crucial primary foundation for both intellectual and social growth. When there are secure, empathetic, nurturing relationships, children learn to be intimate and empathetic, and eventually to communicate their feelings, reflect on their own wishes, and develop their own relationships. (p. 15)

Luvmour (2010) looked to identify and to better understand the reciprocal nature of relationships that exist between the parent and child. She contended that
within shared relationships between parents and children, mutuality exists to the point where parents are affected to a degree equal to that of their children when the impact of an adult’s nurturing behavior on children is measured. Luvmour found that young children learn to regulate and shift their attention from themselves to others when surrounded and under the care of adults who model and teach moderation of attention. As this happens, children increase their aptitude for successfully growing their own relationships. For us, these relationships and our social connections allow us to share consideration for one another, and to routinely engage in empathic perspective-taking. We become capable of providing others and ourselves with a level of sensitivity and care that supports our continued growth (p. 166). According to Tronick and Beeghly (2011), “typical” relationships are fundamental to the development process and when they are shared between infants and their caregivers, meaning-making is co-created (p. 108). Their work showed that in part, as infants develop in relationship systems with caregivers, they build sufficient resources that “enable them to increase their coherence and complexity” for creating and understanding new forms of meaning (p. 108). These new abilities and emergent inner strengths that we develop in infancy help us to enjoy the experiences our parental relationships bring to our lives (Hanson, 2014; Jordan, 1997).

**Empathy in nature.** De Waal’s (2009) research suggested that as social beings, we have an instinctual yearning for interpersonal connection and attachment. His work showed that like chimpanzees, we possess natural tendencies for empathic behavior, “we’re programmed to reach out. No one is emotionally
immune to another’s situation” (p. 43). He identified relationship as a “two-way street where through its movements, the body produces internal sensations and communicates with others so that we may mentally construct social connections and an appreciation of [others] in the surrounding reality” (p. 59).

In doing so, de Waal (2009) contemplated the development of the self carefully. He believed that as we grow in our ability to truly understand who we are as individuals and to physically identify with ourselves, we become greater empathic selves, to the point of developing broader emotional and empathic proficiencies. This is perhaps one of the single most important factors supporting our need to grow empathic relationships and understanding among children. “By unconsciously merging self and other, the other’s experiences echo within us. We feel them as if they’re our own” (p. 65). De Waal called this process, where we begin to take the perspective of another, social connectedness because it permits us to share consideration with someone else. This other then, is our “foreign self,” seen only through empathic perspective-taking and as a result of our becoming truly empathic selves (p. 65). With this newfound realization of empathic perspective-taking, we can routinely share positive relationships with others.

Given humankind’s close developmental relationship with chimpanzees, de Waal (2009) argued that we could learn much about empathy from observing its existence in nature. He suggested that we completely overhaul of assumptions about human nature. Too many economists and politicians model human society on the perpetual struggle they believe exists in nature, but which is a mere projection (p. 7). De Waal contended that competition is part of what drives human behavior
but it is not the only way that most of us function in relationship. He added that it can limit our ability to express appropriate and timely behaviors that ensure our care for one another. Humans, like many animals, “survive not by eliminating each other or keeping everything for themselves, but by cooperating and sharing” (pp. 6-7). De Waal asserted that cooperation and sharing can set the stage for each of us to provide for “the common good” and kinder society (p. 3).

De Waal (2009) gave lengthy consideration to his view of our social evolution. He argued that as small statured hunters and gatherers, our ancestors had little more to do than to manage themselves amidst the danger presented by the other animals roaming the grounds. Those who did so most successfully, lessened their degrees of anonymity, gathered together and began social lives. Social life provided the greatest opportunity for safety and security and thus, the giving up of voluntary anonymity lessened the strife everyone experienced (de Waal, 2009). This evidence shows that our early ancestors had a real need for social interaction.

To this day, our long-standing effort to assist one another has helped to shape our social life. De Waal (2009) showed that our dependence on others can ensure our growth and survival. In one study, cooperative groups of animals (were observed to outperform less cooperative ones (Kropotkin, 1972). De Waal’s (2009) research confirmed that those individuals who possessed the ability to function in a group and who built a caring network achieved greater levels of success.

Success and operation within cooperative groups offers insight into the value of what de Waal (2009) referred to as “group-oriented behavior.” His work showed that handling oneself in a manner befitting the whole not only served the individual
but the group as well. Appropriately managing group-oriented behavior can ensure that every society strikes a balance between selfish and social motives so that its economy serves the society rather than just the individual (de Waal, 2009). This undoubtedly improves the quality of the social environment and can support our development in being empathic beings.

De Waal’s (2009) research suggested too that social beings do possess tendencies for empathic behavior. He offered that like primates, “we’re programmed to reach out. Empathy is an automated response over which we have limited control. No one is emotionally immune to another’s situation” (p. 43). He believed that there is “no obligatory connection between empathy and kindness” (p. 45). Competition is present in our society, and it too can inhibit our ability to be most compassionate. “Every animal faces competition over food, mates, and territory. A society based on empathy is no more free of conflict than a marriage based on love” (p. 45). Fortunately for us, our social connections tend to constrain and limit the competition we share, making the aggression that results as a matter of competition no more necessary than empathy. It is then, whether discussing success or competition, a matter of balance that we all must achieve in order to function most appropriately within our community and society.

**Empathy and the human condition.** Rifkin (2009) viewed our development of empathy as an evolutionary process. He encouraged that we view empathic extension as “the only human expression that creates true equality between people” and melts away distinctions that create differences in status (p. 160). He asserted that expanding our view of empathy to include “broader and
more inclusive domains of reality and human consciousness” can deepen our sense of personal selfhood and transform our abilities to connect with others in more meaningful ways (p. 40).

Simon-Thomas (2014) referenced the work of Keltner (2009) when she suggested that people are born to be sympathetic and cooperative. These abilities permit each of us to cultivate aspects of ourselves in others as we form connections over a lifetime. Two decades prior, Jordan et al. (1991) produced work that spoke to such cultivations when they looked at innate and learned empathy. They contended that the act of empathizing was a “regressive merging” of the self with another. Moreover, they suggested as did Schafer (1959, as cited in Jordan et al., 1991), that the “empathizing individual undergoes a widespread loss of distinctiveness of self” (p. 72).

Our “surrender” elicits new, personal forms of self-representation that are distinguishable through cognitive and affective means of empathy (Jordan et al., 1991, p. 72). This self-representation, viewed as a schemata that forms through processes of accommodation and assimilation that take place during times of empathy, can be characterized by the clear boundaries and the appreciation of difference that exists between ourselves and others (p. 72). Simply put, as we assimilate with others, we assume a different perspective and sense things differently, as though we are someone else. We enjoy gaining familiarity with others and showing that we get great pleasure from helping out, when given the choice. It is reasonable to suggest then that empathy is not only about caring for others
(innate and affective) but also very much about making sense of a social situation (learned and cognitive).

Rifkin (2009) described our transformation of self as being no more complete than when we play. He stated that play is an equalizer and important to understanding the evolution of empathy’s growth. “We stretch our empathic consciousness and learn to become truly human” when we play (p. 96). He asserted that “play is the means for creating attachment, mindfulness, trust, affection, and social bonds when growing up and a way to maintain sociability in adulthood” (p. 93). Play offers freedom to be who we are with few opportunities to judge or to be judged. When we play, we are each given countless chances to grow in our ability to be empathically responsive.

The neuroscience of empathy. Understanding the brain science behind empathy is important because it identifies a distinction between what facilitates our growth of empathic awareness and our willingness to express empathic action. It also enables us to more thoroughly understand the impact proper development can have on our ability to grow and express empathy appropriately.

Indentifying regions within the brain that correspond to empathic thoughts “confirms that humans are hardwired for empathy” (Iacoboni, 2008, p. 269, as cited in Segal, 2011). Within the brain’s cortex, care-giving circuits exist. They strengthen parenting behaviors; the impact of which we have seen is instrumental in the creation of life-long connections and meaning. Furthermore, these circuits support nesting, caring and protecting behavior development as children and adults grow. Snowdon, Peiper, Boe, Cronin, Kurian, and Ziegler (2010) asserted and found
that as oxytocin, a chemical that supports our interest and need for affiliative behavior, is released into the temporal lobe or limbic system of the brain, empathic emotions are expressed in behaviors like close contact, grooming, and care. Ross and Young (2009) discovered similar findings by observing a direct relationship between oxytocin release and mother-infant bonding. They contended “released oxytocin coordinates the onset to maternal nurturing behavior at parturition and plays a role in mother-infant bonding” (p. 534). Subsequent other findings show that while oxytocin can be associated with the expression of empathy in the limbic system, it also lowers our reaction to threatening stimuli that is regulated within the amygdala. While the amygdala manages our tendency for fight-or-flight behaviors, its ability becomes limited once oxytocin is released, thus providing for greater attention to be placed on pro-relation-forming actions. Additionally, and though not directly related to fight-or-flight tendencies, the cranial vagal nerve controls heart rate. Existing from the mid brain to the heart, the vagus nerve also modulates vocalization and hand movement, two of the most important factors found to support strong relationship development (Simon-Thomas, 2014). Research also shows that the higher the vagal tone, the more people are perceived as caring and socially competent and the more they are liked (Holmgren, Eisenberg, & Fabes, 1998; Simon-Thomas, 2014). Siegel (2009, as cited in Gordon, 2009) suggested, Neuroscience tells us that the flow of sensations upward from the regions below our thinking cortex—from the body-proper with its heart and intestines, from our deep flight-fright-freeze mediating brainstem, and our motivating emotion-powered, attachment-generating limbic area—create the
basis for empathy. We literally feel in our lower neural circuits what we see in someone else. (p. xiv).

In a sense, these nurturing circuitries discovered in brain science ultimately influence our genetic expression to the point that our life experiences and capacity to form caring relationships is impacted.

When balance is maintained among these circuitries, mood and emotion contagion ensures the growth of interpersonal connection and attachment between people. Mood contagion serves to coordinate activities between members of the group. Hence, if the group is feeding or sleeping, all members must do the same because once other activities begin; the former activity may not be possible (de Waal, 2009). When animals act similarly and do like things, the body exercises the brain. De Waal (2009) identified this as a means for developing emotional contagion, where a “direct channel between the other’s and our own emotions” exist (p. 82). This allows us to feel as though we are the other, experiencing everything in the same manner and to the same degree.

Recent developments in affective neuroscience show that mirror neurons exist in many regions that process emotion and mood (Dalgleish, Dunn, & Mobbs, 2009, p. 363). “Mirror neurons let us grasp the minds of others not through conceptual reasoning but through direct simulation” (Rizzolatti, Fogassi, & Gallese, 2001, as cited in Rifkin, 2009, p. 83). “The discovery of mirror neurons ... [provide] a neural mechanism for shared representations in the domain of action understanding” (Gallese, Keysers & Rizzolatti, 2004; Keysers & Gazzola 2007;
Rizzolatti et al., 2001, p. 3). They represent our ability to observe the facial expressions as well as motor movements in others.

The above research helps us to expand our knowledge about empathy because it presents a range of natural, biological, relational and anthropological perspectives. The findings presented even help us to identify the benefit empathy plays within our lives. Unfortunately though, the work of these scholars lends little to confirm our need to assist children in growing or understanding its importance. Understanding the perspectives that children have for empathy or the role it plays in their lives are absent from the conversations that de Waal’s, Rifkin’s, or others’ work generates. Hence, the need to know how children engage in relationships, how they feel about them, and what they get from engaging in them is important (Raider-Roth, 2005). Exploring how we have come to understand relationships and the value they hold for assuring ourselves connectedness and attunement may lend insight into what children know about empathy, and their understanding of this human capacity.

**Theoretical Context**

All individuals desire to connect with others in authentic and mutually empathic ways (Comstock, Hammer, Strentzsch, Cannon, Parsons, & Salazar, 2008). Social constructionist and relational-cultural theorists present valuable perspectives that support our understanding of how such connections grow and thrive. With its understanding of knowledge based in the construction of ideas through social means, social constructionism encourages that value be seen in personal interaction and the lived experience. Relational-cultural theory provides for value within
relationship and promotes the development of knowledge through similar means. More over, relational-cultural theory aids in the attainment of knowledge through self- and mutual-exploration by way of connection, disconnection and reparation. Each encourages openness to viewing the on-going development among people as important and supports the growth of empathy and a more just and kind society.

Social constructionism. Social constructionism approaches the creation of meaning and knowledge by reflecting upon our lived experiences. As Gergen (1985) suggested, we describe, explain, or otherwise account for our interactions in the world by negotiating our understanding of it. We negotiate or create this understanding by “deconstructing” what we do and experience (p. 266). For example, we can more fully define and appreciate (construct) the connections and relationships we share with others by considering (deconstructing) our past and present time together, ultimately enlightening ourselves for what our future engagement may hold.

By collecting stories and highlighting the events of our lives through conversation, we live our experiences, to understand them and to construct meaning from them. Engagement and conversation about our lived experiences informs what we know. According to Foucault (1971), the language we use in discourse helps us think and creates our knowledge. Thinking takes place in the communication we share and when done in an environment where children are honored and feel safe, they can engage in a manner where they can freely examine their perspectives and moral commitments (Banks, 1993).
Gergen (1985) also found in his work that challenging the objectivity of our understanding may stand to fully inform or even change what we come to agree upon as common knowledge. In other words, constructing our ideas based solely on what we observe and a “criteria of veracity” or simple facts, can limit our ability to fully understand our experiences (p. 272). He urged incorporating different criteria that take into account factors like aesthetics, opinion and thought-criteria that art-making and conversation promote. By actively and cooperatively utilizing such criteria, the “artifacts” of social interaction and relationship will help to more fully frame how children understand the world, and the part empathy plays in their lives (pp. 267-268).

For Kessler and McKenna (1978), both conversation and empirical evidence aided their social construction of gender. In their study, an attempt was made to break down the seemingly undeniable fact that there are two genders. By examining the variations in the way differing cultures and sub cultural groups understand gender, the terms “man” and “woman” were obscured. Possibilities were opened for alternative means of understanding gender differences and to some extent, even abandoning such distinctions altogether (p. 267).

Just as genders were nearly deemed obsolete in one instance, varying circumstances and time may also change meanings for commonly held beliefs in others. Knowledge can be “context and time dependent” (Coll & Chapman, 2000; Cousins, 2002, as cited in Krauss, 2005, p. 759). As Gergen (1985) found, the degree to which a given form of understanding prevails or is sustained across time is not fundamentally dependent on the empirical validity of the
perspective in question, but on the vicissitudes of social processes (e.g.,
communication, negotiation, conflict, rhetoric). (p. 268)

What empathy means to children historically may be different than what it
means to us today. It is likely that a new understanding of empathy will be
understood through observation, conversation, and art-making. The idea of helping
children in the construction of their own meaning and understanding about
everatasy is affirmed by Kutz and Roskelly (1991) in their description of a learning
community grounded in constructionism. They state that, “the role of language in a
constructivist environment is that of mediator between the learner and the world,
shaping and extending thought. The child actively constructs a world, and language
helps shape the construction” (p. 39). The value in the experience for both the
children and me is best exemplified when Krauss (2005) who quoted Al Zeera
(2001), suggested, “the inquirer, and the inquired, are interlocked in such a way that
the findings of the investigation are the literal creation of the inquiry process” (p.
761).

**Relational-cultural theory.** Relational-cultural theory illuminates human
development by offering insight into the complexities of connection, disconnection
and growth in relationships (Comstock et al., 2008). It confirms the need to
examine and identify how contextual and socio-cultural circumstances affect our
ability to “create, sustain, and participate in growth-fostering relationships” (p.
279). As Miller and Stiver (1997) found, active engagement in relationship and
experience can improve our ability to understand each other. Maintaining
awareness of the differences between simply engaging with others and truly
growing in our understanding of them can further the benefits we realize from shared relationships. This awareness can even increase the possibility that we develop greater empathic capacities. As we have seen and is substantiated by Surrey (1991), early relationships are crucial as they support an individual’s ability to develop relatedness, an aptitude for emotional closeness and the flexibility necessary to exercise appropriate personal boundaries.

Foundational to relational-cultural theory is the idea that all individuals have an on-going interest for connection, belonging, and inclusion socially (Comstock et al., 2008). Similar to de Waal’s and the work of others reviewed earlier, Jordan et al. (1991) approached relational-cultural theory and the growth of the individual from a standpoint where “autonomy, separation and independence” are not the desired outcomes. Instead, they positioned relational-cultural theory as “growth through and toward relationship.” This is in stark contrast to other more commonly held psychological theories where the development and improvement of our sense of individuality is primary (p. 81). In relational-cultural theory, mutuality is key and our ability and willingness to grow, learn and change in relationship is necessary for our short- and long-term survival. “Acknowledging the importance of relationship, context, the quality of the interaction and the deeply intersubjective nature of human lives greatly expands our understanding of people” (pp. 81-82). According to Frey (2013) attaining a full sense of self is only achievable when meaningful connection is shared between two individuals. It is believed that the subsequent interdependence and mutuality necessitated by the connection and the reliance on one another strengthens the development of each most fully. Jordan et al. (1991)
attributed the search for mutuality as being of the utmost importance, where exploring the reasons for its existence in some but not other relationships can provide on-going opportunities for growth and renewed purpose in our lives.

The need to create and develop meaningful and growth-fostering relationships is basic to our personal development. Our ability to appreciate our experiences and ourselves over the course of time engenders self-empathy. We also begin to develop mutual empathy as our awareness of others becomes more full, truthful, and compassionate. Through our relationships, we learn to appreciate someone else being empathic toward our experiences and our own selves (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Jordan (1989, as cited in Miller & Stiver, 1997) suggested:

This empathy for our experience or for our past evolves out of engagement with another person(s) who is empathic about our experience—initially more empathic than we ourselves can be. She can “feel with it” for what it has been and what has brought it about rather than in the critical and self-disparaging ways that she may have learned to feel about it. (p. 134)

While experience and engagement can increase the likelihood that we are able to develop healthy connections, mutuality makes openness and flexibility possible to that we can appreciate the different contributions each person brings to the relationship. Being mutually empathic then, is not a matter of reciprocity but it is instead a quality of relationality, a movement, and a dynamic of the relationship (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 43). As Comstock et al. (2008) outlined, true and meaningful connection and relationship are only achieved when mutual engagement and empathy, authenticity, empowerment, and conflict are present.
The process for supporting and teaching within a mutually empathic setting can be seen in relational-cultural theory (Raider-Roth, 2005). Doing so successfully, even at times from within a vulnerable state, better ensures the co-creation of a mutually empathic relationship where personal transformation can take place (Coy & Kovacs-Long, 2005). “In a mutually empathic encounter, everyone’s experience is broadened and deepened because people are empathically attuned, emotionally responsive, authentically present, and open to change” (Miller, Jordan, Kaplan, Stiver & Surrey, 1991, as cited in Comstock, et al., p. 281). Mutually empathic, growth-fostering relationships are the basis from which relational-cultural theorists teach an understanding of connection (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 279). Mutual engagement and empathy exist in relationships where mutual involvement, commitment, and sensitivity are reciprocated. There is willingness to impact and to be impacted by another person when mutual engagement and empathy are present in the relationships. Being actively open and honest in our engagement with others ensures that our experiences together most healthy.

When the capacity for equal-action and a sense of personal strength emerges from the relationship, those in connection are empowered. They permit themselves to engage equally in the relationship, and to share control of its evolution as it moves between connection and conflict. Authenticity is present within relationships when each individual maintains the freedom and capacity to represent one’s feelings, experiences, and thoughts. Understanding the impact that authenticity can have on the other person in the relationship is important as it permits forthright engagement, equal ownership and responsibility.
Conflicts and times of disconnection are inevitable in any relationship. As Walker (2002) proposed, our back-and-forth movement between connection and disconnection is made in “relational contexts” and carries significance for what we think, feel and know (p. 2). Movement in and out of meaningful relationships depends on the extent to which we are participating and willfully sharing our feelings and experiences. When the ability to express, receive, and effectively process the conflicts that inevitably occur within relationships, mutual engagement and empowerment are reinforced, meaningful connection is made, and beneficial relationships grow (Jordan, 2010; Liang et al., 2002; Miller & Stiver, 1997, as cited in Frey, 2013, p. 178). Developing an awareness of our relational connections can create and engender our ability to navigate early relationships with ease and with a greater capacity for empathic caring (Jordan, 2000, p. 3). Suggesting “all people start off with the ability to build mutually empowering relationships,” will best ensure that opportunities are taken to explore their connections and their empathic abilities (Jordan et al., 1991, p. 56). Helping children understand the importance of connection and what disconnection can mean for their growth as they engage, discuss and navigate their relationships is important and will support their future empathic abilities.

Evidence shows that the oppression and fragmentation of human relations that occur within society are only repaired through “new and healing” connections (Birrell & Freyd, 2006, p. 57). Our ability to appreciate our experiences is “felt most deeply when in the flow of connection with other people” (Jordan et al., 1991, p. 35). The appreciation we feel aids us in our development of empathy. It is basic to all
relationships and the pleasure of the experience grows out of our ability to share it with others (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Our relationships can directly affect the formation of our ability to interpersonally relate to others and our willingness to enhance the awareness we have for others (pp. 34, 87).

Life and relationships encourage the growth of personal and cultural competence, as well as the shared exploration of the similarities and differences that exist between people. They offer the opportunity for deeper understanding of and compassion for all people, which the Dalai Lama has suggested leads individuals to be more “genuinely ethical” in all the work that they do and the life they choose to lead (Birrell & Freyd, 2006, p. 59).

**Conclusion**

Adler (1959, as cited in Comstock et al., 2008, p. 280) contended that love and belonging are central to a person’s mental health (Ivey, D’Andrea, Ivey, & Simeck-Morgan, 2007). According to Erickson (1963, as cited in Coy & Kovacs-Long, 2005), presumably when the former sense is present, children are better able to rearrange and expand their relational circles based on their individual and developmental needs (p. 139). Ensuring that an atmosphere allows for this to be the case should be our collective, societal goal. It will allow for countless opportunities to be self-aware, to gain knowledge about our self and others, to willfully form connections that are mutually beneficial, and to engage more empathically within our relationships. As shared by Miller and Stiver (1997), “five good things” will result from relationships that foster this growth: 1) a feeling of zest, 2) sense of oneself, the other, and relationship, 3) a feeling of personal worth, 4) creativity and
productivity, and 5) the wishing for more connection (p. 2). Undoubtedly, these five good things can be constructed socially and shared relationally. And each can assuredly grow and strengthen our aptitude for empathy.

Culture and societal norms affect what we know and our potential for empathic growth and development. Education could start to change these norms and the expectations that reinforce them. Jordan (2002, as cited in Comstock et al., 2008) wrote,

the best way to strategically confront and challenge crippling stereotypes, various forms of internalized dominance and oppression, negative relational and controlling images, and other disempowering forces in society is to unite with allies in building diverse communities of resistance in different environmental settings (e.g., in schools, universities, workplaces, communities). (p. 286)

Education then, is one place that is key and offers an appropriate place to start. It is important if we want to promote new knowledge, greater awareness, and a more intelligent society capable of supporting on-going, empathic relationships.
Chapter III

Methodology

Sharing what we know defines our practices and ourselves and it enables us to connect. As we have seen, we have a natural desire to do so and in instances where our intellect is challenged, we must look for new means of connection and to other forms of meaning making to describe what we learn. This chapter will explore novel ways for gaining new understanding. Using arts-related research methodologies like arts-informed research and art making to expand what we gain through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, we can shape our newfound knowledge. Doing so can help us gain a richer and more complete understanding of many things, including empathy.

**Arts-related research.** As Eisner (1997) alluded, we prefer our knowledge to be formed on such solid ground that we have “concretized” our view of what it means to know (p. 7). In asserting his belief for arts-related research and exploration, he encouraged us to not limit ourselves to normal processes of gaining knowledge. Eisner insisted that such narrowing will only continue to lessen ourselves and our ability to grow in mind and heart.

Fortunately art and arts-related research methodologies are gaining favor as much as they are currently being utilized to explore what we know and understand. Art enriches our lives by providing opportunities to think, dialogue and engage with one another. It helps to build connections and relationships, especially those of children (Driessnack & Furukawa, 2011; Gordon, 2009). Likewise, arts-related research methodologies stand to provide new and expansive ways of
knowing where children and others can engage in experiences that push conventional notions to the sidelines. Arts-related research methodologies like arts-informed research offer opportunities to “communicate understanding through diverse genres” when words cannot (Knowles & Promislow, 2008, p. 514). When engaged in art-making, everyone can engage as a participant to create his/her own individual knowledge or share in developing a more common one. According to Leavy (2009), “arts-based research practices allow researchers to share their relationship with the audiences who consume their work” (p. 2). As Pinar (1994) suggested, “artful inquiry” offers the opportunity to ultimately understand that “who we are is invariably related to who others are, as well as to who we have been and want to become” (pp. 243-244).

While arts-related research methodologies exist to the point of evoking inspiration in some, they create pause in others. Idealistic perhaps, “arts-based researchers are not ‘discovering’ new research tools, they are carving them. And with the tools they sculpt, so too a space opens within the research community where passion and rigor boldly intersect out in the open” (Leavy, 2009, p. 1). Our embracing of arts-related research methodologies can present unique opportunities that have never been envisioned before. “The arts simply provide qualitative researchers with new instruments and a broader palette of investigative and communication tools with which to garner and relay a range of social meanings” (pp. 2, 11-12). Clearly outside what has long been identified as traditional or ‘real’ research, Jones (2006) noted “novelty is always uncomfortable” (p. 12). And despite concerns like this and others that say arts-related methodologies lack validity and
trustworthiness, arts-related research implores exploration, revelation, and representation to the point that art and science can work in concert for the advancement of human understanding (Leavy, 2009). In arts-related research, theory merges with practice and art with science. This, as we will see, is important when considering the growth and development of empathy.

Cole and Knowles (2008) suggested that arts-informed research is a “form of qualitative research” conceived through broad, artistic means that proposes to influence and to “enhance understanding of the human condition” (p. 59). The methodology infuses language, process, forms of literacy, visual, and performing arts to give expansive possibilities to the acquisition of knowledge (Cole, 2001, 2004; Cole & Knowles, 2001; Knowles & Cole, 2002).

**Arts-informed research.** Little is known about the relationship art can play in helping to develop an understanding of empathy. As people can only build on what they know, encouraging and enabling children to explore their thoughts and feelings about empathy through discussion and arts-related activities, it is reasonable to believe that new meaning can be made (Dewey, 1934).

Encouraging discourse and appreciation instead of critique, this study will connect children in an exploration of empathy utilizing an arts-informed research methodology. Presenting support to this idea in arts-related exploration, Barone and Eisner (2012b) suggested that one purpose is to “raise significant questions and engender conversations rather than to proffer final meanings” (p. 166). As Leavy (2009) asserted, arts-related methodologies can communicate in such a way that stereotypes are challenged, empathy is built, awareness is promoted, and dialogue is
stimulated. With no right or wrong way to express themselves, children are free to share their thoughts and feelings in whatever manner they choose when employing arts-related methods to research. The outcomes and interpretations rest with the “artist” and the observer individually. There is little constraint to interpret, to analyze and to judge when using arts-related methodologies, thus, the potential for reflecting upon experience is enhanced (Finley, 2008).

According to Latham (2013), arts-informed research fosters “meaning-making” and generates possibilities for making understanding from experience (pp. 123, 125). For children, this form of research can present the opportunity for relationships to grow as social interaction and engagement will take place over time. For Cole and Knowles (2008), arts-informed research redefines research form and representation in order to create “new understandings of process, spirit, purpose, subjectivities, emotion, responsiveness, and the ethical dimensions of inquiry” that affect us all, most notably children (p. 59). In terms of what we have learned through process of exploring the idea of empathy and its relation to social constructionism and relational-cultural theory, arts-informed research provides unique opportunities. Reasonably conceived and easily lent to participatory research methodologies, it encourages the appreciation of all commonalities and differences shared among the participants.

Engaging children in these processes can help them to reflect upon their own individual experiences in the world and to share in the exploration of the group’s understanding they develop together. The children may be empowered and active in constructing new knowledge about what it means to be empathic selves. They
had the chance to create various pieces of art that will support conversation, new meaning and a new sense of appreciation for one another. Research conducted by Eisner (1993) supports these ideas by suggesting, these “multiple displays . . . [will] inform us in special ways that only artistically rendered forms make possible” (p. 58).

Arts-informed research and the production of art-making can capture meanings that are challenging to explain in words. Barone and Eisner (2012a; 2012b) suggested that using abstract forms of data like art-making can stand to broaden the experience and feelings elicited and shared by research participants. According to Anderson, Herr and Nihlen (2007), the pieces of data gathered in this instance should not be done just once, but should instead lead to many opportunities where understanding is deepened and the pursuit of information is on-going (p. 149).

**Art and Empathy**

Efforts to gain a better understanding of empathy, its origins, and its growth in people seem to be ever increasing among educators, scholars, and researchers alike. Current scholars have explained that educators’ heightened interest is rooted in new understandings of empathy, how it informs relationships between parents and children, and how the diminishing frequency of shared empathy among children and adults is affecting each of us. The latter, becoming ever more present within society, begs the question, why the decrease in empathy if so much attention is being paid to understand it? Further, what is the value of empathy in the lives of people and what do we each stand to lose if its existence continues to wane? Finally,
if new insights for empathy can be gained through answers to these questions, what are the tangible benefits that we can realize by employing art-based research methodologies to better support the growth and development of empathy?

Fortunately for parents, teachers and scholars, literature exists that explores the many facets and benefits of empathy’s shared presence between the human species when art is the catalyst for discourse.

Young children are offered countless possibilities for empathic growth within schools and in environments where art is encouraged and supported. As Gordon (2009) suggested, “music, art, and drama are portals to emotional literacy, a skill we all need to form strong relationships throughout our lives” (p. xix). Like arts-informed research, arts-related methodologies have received criticism for its alleged lack of validity and generalizability. Even so, it is gaining popularity within the qualitative arena and critics are beginning to take notice, realizing the potential that art and arts-informed research can offer children and others as the findings of various studies are more widely disseminated.

Understanding the value of art and art education is important as they stand to support child development and empathic growth. According to Driessnack and Furukawa (2011), “We now know that young children are capable, accurate, and valuable communicators of their experiences, especially when the approach is developmentally appropriate and adjusted to the child’s cognitive capabilities, psychomotor abilities, and attention span” (p. 3). Hence, art making creates opportunities for children to express themselves when words and the ability to explain intricate and abstract ideas are not yet developed fully.
According to Cook (2009, as cited in Maginess, 2010), meaning is found in the medium and the process of making art demands a mess. She implored,

I must humbly contend that ‘mess’ is a valuable part of the process. And ‘mess’ involves a transformative knowledge that is the product of being open to ‘destablishing ways of thinking’ that can ‘offer ways into creativity and erudition, affording a space for participatory knowing. (p. 501)

This idea of “destablishing ways of thinking” is an important one in this study. Being able to access children’s thinking outside of traditionally called upon ways of knowing in school has tremendous power for children encouraged to describe their understanding of empathy. It warrants exploration by the children in ways that are new and free of preconceived notions so that they can define what they know and think.

Art and Participant Engagement

This study was qualitative in nature as findings were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Situated in a practitioner action research stance, I developed the research questions in the context of my own practice as an educator. In addition, I sought to engage with children and seek their assistance for improving my own practice. The benefit of such an approach is supported by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) when they suggested that the practitioner researcher who “emphasizes equity, engagement, and agency,” ensures the “co-construct[i]on” of knowledge (p. 16). Speaking further to the value of practitioner action research, they shared that it can provide opportunities to be
“exquisitely attentive to children’s thoughts and meanings and to the thoughts and meanings of adults who have responsibility for the education of children” (p. 17).

An administrator and teacher, my concern for what I believe is a declining presence of empathy among children led me to this work. Beginning first with a pilot study at my own school to determine what empathy looked like among 3-6 year old children, and then another study elsewhere to explore what part empathy played in the day-to-day actions of 9–12 year olds, I was able to begin forming an understanding of empathy’s relevance in children’s lives. Determining how best to proceed in this study, I engaged once again with children outside of my own school. By doing so as a practitioner action researcher using both qualitative and artistic means of data gathering, all participants were free to express their ideas and acknowledge that they were “knowledge makers engaged in the act of knowledge advancement” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 60).

Arts-informed research supported our ability to develop and express knowledge that results from our engagement together. A process that helps us reflect upon our experiences, arts-informed research gave us the opportunity to capture what our words sometimes do not. For Weber & Mitchell (2004, as cited in Latham, 2013), becoming involved in the process of arts-informed research develops “one’s own interpretation and representation processes” that impart the ability “to convey the essential meaning while projecting a path to the viewer’s experience” (p. 128). This idea represents the importance of engaging with children to formulate an understanding of empathy.
Research Question

Building on the effort to ensure full participant engagement, my research inquiry focused on the empathic life of children. I wondered how empathically responsive children can be. By utilizing art-making as one component of study, I am interested first and foremost in “What are children’s expressed understandings of empathy?” Answering this question will provide insight into what children know and consider about empathy. Understanding what their empathic life looks like and what factors may best support the future growth and development of empathy in children is also an essential part of the inquiry. It is important that we give children equal support of their intellectual, social and emotional development, and the findings from this study will do exactly that.

Data Collection Techniques

Driessnack & Furukawa (2011) indicate in their research that there has been a serious lack of arts-related techniques used with children in the United States. Hence, I intended to seek information from children directly instead of merely observing or learning information from their parents or guardians. Utilizing arts-informed research ensured that the children participated in activities that were developmentally appropriate and adjusted to their abilities. Suggesting the value of using art to explore empathy in arts-informed research, Proust (1982, as cited in Lim 2013) offered that “we [are] able to emerge from ourselves, to know what another person sees of the universe which is not the same as our own” (p. 37). To do this, I implemented semi-structured interviews, arts-related extension
activities, group discussions and reviewed audio recordings and transcripts to complete this study.

**Participants.** The twelve children who participated in the study’s entirety, represented fourth grade (3 students), fifth grade (4 students) and sixth grade (5 students). They were all within the range of 9-12 years of age and mixed socially, ethnically and by gender type.

As the children and I gathered to begin each session, I saw them sharing wonder and excitement with a seemingly unabashed intensity about the purpose of their work that was to unfold. I observed a familiarity among them and saw kindness and an appreciation toward one another. Their idle conversation and the manner in which they positioned themselves reinforced the connection and relationships that I expected, given the school community in which they were recruited to participate.

**Location.** This research study was conducted at Daylight Montessori School (DMS) located in a suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio. DMS boasts a school and community environment where every individual child is respected and valued as a member of the community. Mission-driven and operating from tenets of Montessori philosophy and methodology, DMS works to create a space where children can be independent, self-motivated and responsible individuals. Classroom environments are described as home-like, warm and nurturing where rich and dynamic materials provide opportunities for hands-on exploration. The school supports the development of its students by encouraging critical thinking and student-led discovery.
Each session took place within a large, open classroom available at the school. With ample table and floor space, I established specific areas for each part of the study. At one end, a large carpeted area with benches around the perimeter allowed for whole group discussion, a preview of the day’s events and an opportunity to share art, insights and new discoveries about our thinking and ourselves. Beyond the outer edge of this “community” space, four large rectangular tables were arranged with twelve chairs, each one facing inward so that all of the children could face and observe one another through the art making process. To the side of this space, art-making materials were organized on a table so that it was easy for the children to access them throughout the time allotted for creating their displays. Nearby, two chairs were set facing one another and I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with each child during the time allotted for each session.

**Timeline.** This research study was conducted over four, two-and-a-half hour sessions.

**Research activities.** To collect data most effectively, I took the following steps:

1. Each session, lasting approximately two-and-a-half hours was audio recorded. From the onset and each meeting thereafter, the children were engaged collectively at the start of each session. An agenda and ideas were shared to support the creativity of the children and to eliminate unforeseen inhibitions so that they could begin constructing their art freely and with the materials provided. Specific children were identified
as interviewees for the day so that they could plan accordingly during the time allotted for art making. Each child was solicited for input and questions related to the agenda and the activities planned.

2. A discussion to formulate ground rules for conversation and art-making took place at the onset of the first session. They recurred at the start of each session thereafter in order to create and maintain a safe and respectful environment where children were free to express themselves verbally and visually at all times.

3. Each session began with a discussion about empathy and art in order for children to share reflections or thoughts that may have resulted from previous discussions or activities.

4. All children were engaged as a group at the start. I shared a brief description of the materials available and little more than prompting with the focus question was given prior to the start of each creative session. This allowed the children freedom to begin exploring their own ideas of empathy as they related to each question.

   Materials available throughout this study included paper, cardboard/cardstock, pencils (graphite, colored), paint (watercolor, acrylic), fabrics, scissors, tape and glue. As reported by Bushell (2004), these materials were arguably simple and “forgiving,” allowing the children “to just be creative without having to have an art degree” (p. 8). Moreover, what was created was of much less importance than the individuality expressed and the originality possessed within the art
produced (Crowther, 2007, p. 4). Afterward, the children were permitted to find a space to begin their exploration of empathy. It was important to also watch how the children went about creating and organizing their own individual representations. The materials and manner in which the children chose to begin defining their understanding of empathy varied.

5. While the children created art, I invited individual participants to join me for one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. The use of semi-structured interviews, as described by DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006, as cited in Whiting, 2008), enabled "personal and intimate encounters . . . ‘that elicit detailed narratives and stories’" (p. 2). Using this method of interviewing, I was able to follow a set of semi-structured questions and more thoroughly understand the answer provided when diving deeper was permissible (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). “Interviewing gives access to the observations of others” so we can learn about the places we have not been and could not go and about the settings in which we have not lived” (Weiss, 1994, as cited in Maxwell, 2013).

Each one-on-one, semi-structured interview began with the question, “What do you think empathy is?” Answers and subsequent follow-up questions presented opportunities for an in-depth exploration of the ideas offered by the children. Recordings, transcripts and field notes provided the best description of what each child thought and created. (See Appendix 1 for a copy of the semi-structured interview protocol.)
6. Prior to the conclusion of each session, the children were encouraged to re-group so that we could engage in a focus group to share thoughts that may have come to mind as conversations took place and art was made. While twelve children participated in each session, each child did not complete his or her artistic representation during every session. In some cases, a child may have created more than one representation to describe their understanding. Listening to how the children responded to the artifacts they created provided significant data. Having done more than simply asking what was made, I approached the times designated for the focus group as opportunities to investigate and to gain a fuller understanding of what each child was thinking. As Malchiodi (1998) offered, “Taking a stance of ‘not knowing’ is effective in generating a productive conversation” (p. 51). Moreover, one does not really know what an image means to the child, and by conveying one’s interest in learning about the drawing in an open-ended way, the child is given the opportunity to explain elements the in the drawing from his her perspective. (p. 51)

The children were encouraged to share their art and explain what it represented. The value of doing this type of focus group activity gave each child an opportunity to think about their work with others, as well as their understanding of empathy and the understanding expressed by others. According to Eliot and Associates (2005), focus groups create an accepting environment that puts participants at ease and can reveal a
wealth of detailed information and deep insight (p. 1).

Focus group discussions also enabled the children to participate in the analysis and interpretation of the data collected. The children were my partners and helped to identify the saliency between the interpretations made and conclusions drawn during our focus group sessions. As found in the pilot studies, children shared statements such as, “I understand empathy more because I know more ways to think of it because I see how others think of it” (Interview Transcript, May 2014).

Culminating each session, the focus group discussions presented children with an opportunity to vocally share their experiences and to share in self- and mutual-empathy.

7. I also made observation notes, taken during the one-on-one interviews and when circulating around the classroom during the art activity.

According to Lull (1990, as cited in Rose, 2012), observation is an “interpretive enterprise whereby the investigator uses [what he sees] . . . to grasp the meaning of communication by analyzing the perceptions, shared assumptions, and activities of the social actors under scrutiny” (p. 280). Utilizing the observation technique as described by Anderson et al. (2007), I assured myself the greatest potential for records that were systematic, unbiased and accurately depicted the events as clearly as possible. Noting what the children saw and shared about empathy in their work was important when analysis began.

8. I personally secured the data I gathered. The observations and notes that
I took throughout the sessions of side conversations or actions were kept in a notebook to which the participants did not have access. The children were not identifiable by the information contained within the notebook.

**Ethical Considerations**

In making ethical considerations, it was important that I remained aware of my experience working with children to ensure that I held no preconceived notions of what I expected. Cognizant that my position to the children and the environment was one of authority, my positionality to each demanded that I recognized my personal boundaries. It was necessary that I established and maintained an awareness of this to the location, the children and my research.

In speaking of the process of Structured Ethical Reflection (SER), Brydon-Miller (2012) spoke specifically to the goal that I, in part, hoped to achieve through my own research. She stated that it was imperative “that we take more seriously the stipulation that researchers act as responsible members of society who must take into account the social and environmental impact of their work” (p. 161). This point was instructive as I completed my own SER, “an on-going process of assessing and re-assessing ethical values and concerns” throughout a research process (A. Rector-Aranda, personal communication, February 24, 2015). To create my SER, I explored three values that I believe are important—respect, open-mindedness and trust. By considering these values in the process of SER, (see Table 1), I was able to identify questions that I returned to through each phase of the research process. Answering each of these questions systematically ensured my accordance with these values and related ethical considerations I made for the children and me.
(Brydon-Miller, Rector-Aranda, & Stevens, 2015). Table 1 shows the questions I developed in preparing my structured ethical reflection. They relate to each value and each phase of the research project, e.g., developing partnerships, constructing research questions, planning/action, etc.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do I need to do in order to ensure that I can best contribute to my research?</td>
<td>Answer 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What steps are necessary in project beginning?</td>
<td>Answer 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What should I do in order to maintain a sense of mission and perspective?</td>
<td>Answer 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do I ensure that my research is a success?</td>
<td>Answer 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there things I can open-mindedly embrace in order to stay open to new ideas?</td>
<td>Answer 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the point of the research?</td>
<td>Answer 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the question that I should be asking in order to ensure that I can best participate in the research?</td>
<td>Answer 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What should be my approach in order to maintain an open-minded perspective?</td>
<td>Answer 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the part of the research that I should be open-minded about?</td>
<td>Answer 9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Structured Ethical Reflection**
**Meaning-Making Processes**

Participatory action research and arts-informed research methodologies provide opportunities for developing knowledge about feelings, perceptions and what children understand. While approaching my effort to make meaning for the children from an arts-informed research standpoint, I encouraged imagination to play a role in defining the experiences and knowledge of the children. My own attempts at meaning-making proved useful as they helped me form an understanding of what the children think about empathy based on my own interpretations of their words and art.

**Participatory analysis.** Our engagement in one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions encouraged everyone’s engagement and participation in sharing dialogue about what the children understand about empathy and how they represented it in their artistic representations. Through our participatory process too, the children experienced and learned to appreciate other points of view that were different than their own. We also saw through our analysis together that “drawings provide children with the potential to tell stories, convey metaphors [and] present world views” (Duckworth, 1996, p. 43).

Engaged as equal participants in sharing our thoughts, opinions and artistic representations, we made meaning together. To do so, we did the following:

1. We created a list of recurring themes that developed through our one-on-one conversations in the focus group discussions.
2. We restated the list of common themes at the start and end of each session to clarify and to ensure that points the children made were understood as intended.

3. We engaged in conversations about our individual artistic representations. We identified recurring themes that developed through these conversations too.

4. Lastly, we organized the themes into separate categories to make a finite list of common understandings about empathy at the end of the project.

Like my analysis with the children, I subsequently reviewed the audio recordings, transcribed interviews and focus group exchanges as an additional opportunity to analyze data. Clustering data from notes and transcripts, as described by Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014), gave me the ability to specify our ideas and to categorize them into common themes. As part of ensuring trustworthiness, I member checked during the steps described above and at the completion of the dissertation, clarifying what I understood from our one-on-one interviews and focus groups. This member checking ensured that what I learned through collaboration with the group was accurate.
**The value of art-making.** As described in the process of structured ethical reflection, keeping in mind trust, open-mindedness and respect was important in helping us understand empathy using the children's art. To aid the process and to create an atmosphere where it was possible for children to openly share their thoughts and to ask questions, I also used the following guidelines to support the children in analyzing their art and that of their peers:

1. Take the images seriously.
2. Consider the effects our social conditions have on what we visually display.
3. Appreciate the manner in which we all look at and view the images created by our peers (Rose, 2012, pp. 16-17).

Explained in the context of our focus group discussions, the children showed careful consideration of each other's thoughts and took in the richness of what was shared together as evidenced by their patience, attentiveness and inquiry with one other. Further, these ideas supported the children in making statements like this one, from Peter who responded to a work by Felicia,

> We did rainbows for empathy and I think I remember Fiona saying something about the colors. It's just like these lines and it makes a shape of a rainbow though, and the colors. I just thought it was really interesting.

(Focus Group, 2.4.15, lines 278-281, 290-292)

Additionally, statements like “I see...” and “I liked how...” supported our work together and showed that the children left their attitudes and pre-existing beliefs behind before entering each session. Such statements also proved useful in
ensuring that the children were able to offer both objective and subjective interpretations of what was presented to them by their peers.

**Interpretive analysis and compositional interpretation.** I used two additional forms of analysis to reveal thoughts and feelings I had about the children’s visual representations. First, interpretive analysis allowed me to use the children’s descriptions of their artwork in conjunction with the artwork itself to tap into the thoughts and feelings hidden within them. By making interpretive judgments about the details of the work and considering how a particular artistic representation fit into a category or theme, I drew inferences by looking “closely and deeply at the way” the children’s artistic representations enhanced and extended the idea of empathy (Platzner & Vandergrift, 1997, p. 1). I tried to take the perspective of each artist, in a sense trying to understand where he/she was drawing inspiration from as he/she created art (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Finally, I tried to describe each piece of work I analyzed by answering four questions:

1. What do I see?
2. What is suggested by the features and does it convey something?
3. “Why did the artist create it and what does it mean?”
4. Is the artistic representation original? (Barrett, 1994, pp. 1-2).

Secondly, I used compositional interpretation to understand what was included in the children’s art more fully. To do so, I asked questions of the children about their use of color and material or content to ensure that they discussed, described and expressed “the appearance of an image” they created (Rose, 2012, p. 51). This enabled us to explore and define the terms of the composition of the
Artistic representation, specifically its content (what the image showed), its color, its special organization (organization of the space and the perspective taken to view the art), its light and its expressive content (the mood or atmosphere it evoked) (Rose, 2012). By making such interpretations, we were able to notice and identify the intricacies present within the collection and we celebrated them to even to the smallest degree. For example, please see my description of Sydney’s artistic representation on page 70.

**Art-making as analysis.** I found that discerning the ideas, themes and elements that appeared within the samples of child-created images evoked emotion in me (Bagnoli, 2009). Hence, I engaged in art-making myself in order to explore the ideas and thoughts presented by the children. I discovered that I was able capture meaning through expressions of art much more easily than with words. This new art, much like art-making that I did over the last few years while preparing for this dissertation, generated valuable ideas and questions about empathy. I began to ask myself “what if?” questions. What if empathy reached its full potential? What if empathy didn’t reach its full potential? I also asked, what would answers to either of these questions mean for my connections and relationships with people I love? I wondered too if gaining some understanding of empathy’s implications for my relationships could stand to help me support the children in this study?

In analyzing the dissertation data, I was drawn to consider two pieces of artwork that I had created in the past. By revisiting the thoughts and ideas I had in contemplating the empathy myself, I was hopeful that they would provide some insight for me and help me understand how my own art-making could be a valuable
tool in the analytic process. I wrote this monologue to describe the meaning of this artwork that represents my connection to my family:

The visual representation on page 60 depicts a familial relationship. An interpretation of human development over particular life-spans, it was envisioned and created to symbolize the emotional connection shared among members of my family and me. Five individuals can be identified when viewed apart but when observed together, my family is supported by our attachment, our growth, and our love for one another.
Wood, glue. 10" x 7.5" x 78"
This artwork was created using five wood types - oak, walnut, maple, rosewood, and purpleheart. There is significance to the use and organization of the materials as each represents a particular period of each of our lives, spanning from 9 to 45 years. The most commonly shared wood type is purpleheart. Each individual's fractional, purple heart portion connects to the center piece, or my own, and was arranged in such a way to give the representation of depth and the complexities that are associated with attuning to others in the relationships we share.

The viewer is encouraged to consider and imagine the many configurations our connections take and the benefits they provide us. Within the lifelong process of human development, opportunities to connect and to disconnect occur frequently, with time providing the greatest advantage to learn, appreciate, and grow in relationship. As we have seen, such ideas are difficult to explain in words at times, and art and visual representation can provide a medium through which meaning can be gained and better appreciated. This is to suggest that even though our connections with others do not always feel or look the same, navigating them successfully is important to our continued growth in relationships.
In another work that I completed during my doctoral studies, I looked to capture the meaning of empathy, the role it plays within our lives, and the likelihood of its continued existence. In an attempt to join both woodwork and poetry, I completed the following artistic representation that reads:

Empathic
Understand, Care
Give, Assure, Secure
Calmed, Comforted, Empowered, Loved
Compassionate

Repeated throughout, words that are synonymous with empathy are randomly bordered, each with a letter inscribed in red. When read together, heart is spelled. The wearing of the paper represents the fading away of empathy from the human psyche, which is of great concern to me and drives this work.

Capturing meaning in the words and art created by the children was best achieved through creating my own art, viewable in Chapter 4, pages 79, 91, and 98.
Hellmann (2011), whose work inspires my thinking, shared that, “art is a universal language, an intimate voice of expression; a language we all can speak and understand” (p. 49). Therefore, I chose to contemplate the ideas and expressions created by the children with thoughts of what “Beginning Empathy’s Potential Growth” would look like. I chose to start contemplating my art with this phrase because I wonder what empathy could look like over time if we attended to supporting its growth and development in children to a larger degree. Representative of what I believe empathy could truly become for all of us, I completed three acrylic paintings, each on 12” x 12” canvases. Collectively, they create a serious piece of work that has very real and symbolic meaning for me. I believe it offers a representation of the fragility of empathy’s inherence, the messy reality that experience and circumstance play in our growing it and the glowing possibility of seeing its potential to the limits. See Chapter 5, page 116 to view my artistic representations in totality.

**Trustworthiness**

The impact that my positionality could have on the entire research process was taken very seriously (Anderson, et al., 2007). To address these and my own concerns, I made certain that I remained mindful of ideas presented through approaches of democratic and process validity and trustworthiness. To meet the demands of democratic validity, I encouraged the engagement of the children in the process of knowing. My actions provided assurances to everyone that the research remained collaborative in nature, and took into account the multiple perspectives and interests of all involved (p. 41). In assuring my project process validity and trustworthiness, I made certain that I repeatedly asked “to what extent problems
are framed and solved in a manner that permits ongoing learning of the individual or system” (p. 41). Mindful of these, I entered each period for collecting data with an open mind. I took the opportunity to member check by presenting back to the children my thinking, processing and findings while also promoting transformative learning where I reoriented and refocused the participants and my own understanding within the context of our relationship constantly. The children’s engagement in the process of knowing was successful as they participated fully and grew in their understanding of what it means to act with empathic responsiveness.

**Conclusion**

Our approach to learning about empathy has been limited to studies that define its presence in our relationships, in nature, in the human condition and in neuroscience. To date, we do not yet have an in-depth study of children’s understanding of empathy. As a practitioner action researcher, I sought to engage children as equal participants in order to learn the perspective that they share about empathy. Through the use of qualitative research approaches like semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, in addition to arts-related methodologies to support art-making and analysis, the children and I grew in relationship and appreciation of one another. Finally, engaging in my own art-making aided my ability to make sense of the children’s thoughts which resulted in a new understanding of empathy that will encourage us all to re-think how we approach teaching and supporting it.
Chapter IV

Findings

Exploring with children what they understand about empathy generated a depth of information that I had not expected. Almost immediately, Lina, a petite fourth grader with big eyes, said, “Empathy came naturally to me because the slightest things make me upset” (Interview, 1.14.15, lines 263-264). Rich and exciting, this statement and each thereafter brought new and insightful knowledge to the forefront. This allowed us all to engage more fully each day we spent together. The artwork that was created added to the joy that each of us felt as we discussed and analyzed the many ideas it presented. To help enrich the immediacy of the data, pseudonyms have been included to help identify the thoughts, words and art of particular children.

I discovered that the children were insightful and enthusiastic about empathy by reflecting on our work together. Important to recognize, Duckworth (1996) suggested, “the biggest thing is understanding how someone else is understanding something- like exercising my understanding of understanding” (p. 85). They each worked to create artistic representations that explained specific ideas about empathy and what they need for empathy to grow.

The children shared a wealth of knowledge. Words spoken and artistic representations created by the children provide evidence that supports a new understanding of empathy. This new understanding was explored by looking at several categories and themes that emerged as the most salient points of our conversations and their artist representations were considered.
Emergent Categories and Themes

Our collective work generated an abundance of ideas about the children’s understanding of empathy. The descriptions and artistic representations that the children provided were categorized under the following terms:

- Inherent
- Actionable
- Learned

Within each category, I identified minor themes that helped to clarify the meaning of each category and gave further explanation to the experiences shared by the children. Categorized as something *inherent*, the children identified empathy as something simply understood, felt or involuntarily sensed, and likened to sympathy.

In other instances, empathy was categorized as something *actionable* whereby it can be shared physically but is dependent on lived experience and circumstance.

Finally, the children viewed empathy as something *learned*, where they had previously seen or been engaged in activities related to the idea, or had been influenced to act similarly by others around them. Table 2 below graphically displays the relationship shared between each major category and each minor theme.
Table 2: Emergent Categories and Themes of Empathy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empathy is:</th>
<th>Inherent</th>
<th>Actionable</th>
<th>Learned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understood</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involuntarily sensed</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like sympathy</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiential</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circumstantial</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity &amp; Influence-based</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Category 1: Inherent Empathy

Something is inherent if it is innate, built-in or ingrained. As has been discussed, this is true of empathy (Brown, 2012; de Waal, 2009; Rifkin, 2009). The children identified this fact readily and shared experiences that showed their natural tendency for levels of responsiveness that were indicative of empathic care-kindness, love and support. They also offered specific ideas about empathy’s inherence, describing relationships between it and understanding, involuntary sensing, and similarities to sympathy. Each of these sub-themes will be discussed throughout Category 1.

The children enjoyed making art and sharing ideas about empathy. Their representations became symbols of who they are, how they want to be and the world that they want to live in. My interpretations of their artifacts developed from a review of the recordings and transcripts made during the focus groups, which occurred during the latter half of each art making session. My interpretations were also informed by what I saw in each piece of work, the ideas expressed and the materials used.

Empathy is simply understood. The children defined empathy most broadly as something they easily understand. In the words of June, a confident and energetic sixth grader with glasses and buns of dark hair spun and pinned to the side of her head, “Empathy is a feeling. You can just think it and then it’s like your brain knows that it’s empathy and then it sends this feeling down to your heart and stomach” (Focus Group, 1.27.15, lines 79-83). Sydney, a sixth grade male with disheveled blond hair and a favorite red sweatshirt, expressed that, “Empathy
randomly pops into your life” (Interview, 1.21.15, line 316). Things happen and they make “you feel trapped because you could just walk away but you feel like you-you feel like you don’t want to” (Interview, 1.21.15, line 300).

I was intrigued when viewing and contemplating the meaning of Sydney’s artwork. Identified as representative of the feeling that empathy creates in us, he used it to explain his thoughts of being “trapped if you felt [empathy], like you needed to help someone or you wanted to help someone” (Focus Group, 1.21.15, lines 822-834).

![Paper, acrylic paint, wood, colored pencil, tape. 11" x 8.5" x 7"

This work was powerful. As one of the few 3-dimensional pieces created, the stature of the figure, the sticks helping to maintain its form and the monochromatic color drew me in and helped me engage fully. The arms outstretched made it appear welcoming and ready to share whatever feeling was necessary.
Similar to Sydney's conception of empathy as internal, Peter shared his thought about internal empathy through the use of spaceship fabrics. He offered an eloquent explanation of his work with sixth grade confidence while clearing his hair from his face and rocking on his knees. He stated,

I thought of it in a really strange way. This is inside a person; this spaceship is inside of a person. And it - someone’s getting made fun of and then it pokes you in the stomach and makes you feel really bad for the other person, makes you really mad at the other people. Then you - maybe it’s like your [thinking], this is not right, they shouldn’t be doing it to this person. And then I used this open space, you’re going through this open space. So, I kind of feel calm, or when you do a happy empathy, when you do something good for somebody, you feel calm and relaxed, it’s over and you did right thing. And then I used the UFO. This one’s the strangest. I kind of felt like if you were an alien, and that’s where this black line comes in, it’s separating him from the humans because humans don’t want him. So there’s a barricade
between him and the humans. And so, he's all alone and he just feels sad and lonely. (Focus Group, 1.27.15, lines 260-277, 280-285).

For me, Peter's work and reflective comments not only speaks to our inherent ability to understand empathy through our conscience, but it also alludes to the feeling that being empathic can create within us. His ability to relate his understanding through the use of metaphor that reflects a creative kind of thinking, is telling of Peter's maturity. His storytelling and the linear, left-to-right design of this artifact shows a process of moving from a place of simply understanding empathy to feeling it within your body (involuntarily sensed), to ultimately applying it to an experience or circumstance, which are themes discussed later and categorized under actionable empathy.

**Empathy is involuntarily sensed.** The children repeatedly discussed the idea of empathy as a feeling. Their sense of this feeling appeared in our conversations and in their artwork. They gave me the impression that being empathic evokes an involuntary sensation inside their bodies because it is something that they feel, where their face gets red, their body heat rises, their heart sinks or the hairs on their arm stand up. With wide-eyed spunk and a push to her stomach, Susanna, a tall and slender fifth grader, shared, “when you feel empathy for someone, you can feel soft” (Focus Group, 1.21.15, lines 542-543). In the children’s minds too, the sensation they experience is independent of any action they might take, meaning that they may choose to not react physically, although they feel it.

The idea of feeling empathy as an involuntary sensation is represented in Susanna’s (5th grader) artwork below.
“So, this is what the inside would look like of empathy. This is the heart and when you're sad for someone, I put [blue] for warm. You feel kind of warm inside when you're sad for someone” (Focus Group, 1.27.15, lines 135-138).

Susanna identified that empathy moves through her. She represented this by creating movement within her work. Her use of bold, beautiful, and rich colors created a stir within my own heart. As I continued to look and consider how she organized her work and displayed her feelings, I understood the urgency she places on empathy as something real and something felt. Her paint strokes appeared to be made quickly and gave the sense of swift activity, assuredly getting to wherever empathy was needed most. Her use of tulle (faintly seen in the image) gave the impression of a membrane, protecting the empathy as moved across the page.

In another representation supportive of empathy as an involuntarily sensed phenomenon, the following artwork was presented. Lina shared,
When I got the idea, I put the [highlighter] colors on and [stuff]. [It] makes you feel happy and bright. And I put the black dark background so the colors would show better. And the tape around the heart represents the glow.

(Focus Group, 1.21.15, lines 392, 410-412)

I fully appreciated Lina’s use of the word glow and her representation of it. Only after returning to the work, I noticed that she inscribed the word “hero” on it. I imagined the empathic heart being one that resides within the one expressing empathy, and “saving the day.” While she did not speak of including this word in her explanation, her ideas gave me a sense of weightlessness in my heart as I imagined her work float from the background. The way I felt when considering her work brought a sense of joy and liveliness to the idea of empathy for me.

Here, June represented movement and feeling within the body as she drew a comparison between empathy and our next theme, sympathy.
So I have a person on the outside. There’s the inside of her body and stuff. It shows blood flowing through her veins and stuff and [it’s going up through] her brain. And then she’s - and then when she feels sympathetic about somebody, it’s kind of what empathy is. And so her brain tells her to [feel bad] for somebody. (Focus Group, 1.14.15, lines 274-281)

June’s use of fabric and paint to create her person on the inside and the outside provide a very clear representation of the change felt by the body when empathy or sympathy is experienced. Her inclusion of the strap at the top of the work makes it
seem to me that you take the feeling and the involuntary sensation with you, no matter what, and regardless of your expressing empathy or sympathy.

**Empathy is like sympathy.** The children believe that empathy and sympathy are serious and about important things. In the words of Susanna, “Making people happy is serious” (Interview, 1.14.15, line 25). Sydney believes that “sharing empathy makes people feel good and as though they are not alone. Having just one person be empathic is better than having a whole bunch of people surround you with sad faces” (Interview, 1.21.15, line 358). According to the children, the only real difference distinguishing empathy from sympathy is whether or not you have had experiences that enable you to feel the same as someone else.

Empathy and sympathy were described as synonymous by the children and easily understood, made distinct from one another through experience only. Ideas about the similarities and differences were discussed and explored in great detail throughout our interviews and focus group sessions. The children expressed a common belief that in order for empathy to be expressed or shared, it was necessary to have experienced the same situation with which someone else was dealing. To more fully expand on this point, Bryce, a slender fourth grader with shoulder length hair that covered his face, shared,

> Empathy is where you’ve had experience with what they’re going through or something. It could be your parents had a divorce a while ago and then your friend’s parents got divorced recently and you could have empathy [for] them but if yours hadn’t [you] would be sympathetic toward them.

(Interview, 1.14.15, lines 352-356).
The children believe self-empathy occurs when you have experienced something similar for yourself and it recurs again. They identified that this can make your feelings mixed up to the point that you are unable to identify exactly what emotion you are feeling, despite having experienced it before. June shared that empathy is “a purple or a red mix that kind of [flows through] the bloodstream and goes in between the DNA and stuff. And it can be all sorts of colors mixed into one” (Focus Group, 1.27.15, lines 17-21).

According to Erin, a quiet, soft-spoken sixth grader, “empathy is really all emotions. It feels happy. It feels angry. Sad” (Focus Group, 1.21.15, line 234). The children were very matter-of-fact about the mixing of feelings and emotions that empathy can present. As we continued our conversation and I proceeded to hear about the artistic representations that everyone had made, I wondered if anyone would present a work that would help me to better understand what the children were thinking as they discussed empathy’s mixed emotions. Fortunately, a fifth grader with long blonde hair and red-streaked bangs named Felicia shared a number of pieces that clarified my thinking.
“[Empathy can [be] all mixed up inside of you. You can't put your finger on [what it is] but you know” (Focus Group, 1.21.15, lines 161, 163-4).

Here, clockwise from the top left, anger, happiness, compassion and sadness are represented. Individually, each piece helped me to easily identify the emotion it characterized as they were depicted by color and in content. Together, I found them to be compelling and was amazed at how well they played off of one another. I appreciated the faintness of some and the clear definition of others. Such a technique supported the idea that some emotions are felt more strongly than others.
The rainbow-like painting, identified as compassion and a mix of emotions, created the most conversation. The juxtaposition of the clear swaths of color mixed with the near fading of each spoke to the group and to me. The children agreed with each other that the colors used were ones that they would associate with their emotions and feelings. The fading effect of various colors seemed to represent the clarity within each of us that empathy is a good thing to express often, though it is not always possible to do so as a result of our experience. Felicia expressed with certainty that when empathy is clear, “it's kind of like a warm, fuzzy feeling inside” and your “heart feels” (Focus Group, 1.21.15, lines 610, 665). This made empathy tangible, something truly discernable that was felt in my body and mind as the children spoke.

In contemplating the thoughts of the children and the ideas they expressed within their artistic representations, I could not help but reflect on my own thinking about the inherent nature of empathy. It seems to be alive within the hearts and minds of the children. Making certain that we are providing them with the means and opportunities to engage in it, talk about it and act with it are important. It seems that doing so will help us all better realize the potential benefits we stand to reap. Implications of this finding will be discussed in Chapter V.

My artwork below identifies the inheritance of our empathy. With white space to fill, it is my response to the thoughts the children shared. Like them, I too
believe that empathy is a feeling and is best shown in deep, thick color. It is born within a space that is each of us and with the right support, care and nurture, it can continue its growth. Confined only by the boundaries we set, it should be encouraged to fill every last space available.
Category 2: Actionable Empathy

Through our conversations, I learned from the children that they believed empathy is actionable, meaning it is something that you do. Not always confined by a literal definition of “doing,” empathy can be something shared physically or expressed figuratively in language. Alaina, a quiet fourth grader, identified it best by stating that empathy is “a passing of feelings,” where you know exactly what something feels like, what another person or animal is experiencing, and you respond appropriately (Interviews, 1.14.15, 1.21.15, line 340). You are able to do this because, as clarified earlier, it is a person’s situation or circumstance you understand because you have experienced the same thing yourself. As Adam, a fifth grader with a quiet, cool demeanor commented, “it’s a matter of understanding someone else’s circumstance, independent of your own experience, in the same circumstance” (Interview, 1.14.15, line 126). So dependent then on personal experience and an understanding of previous, personal circumstances, the children believed that empathy could be given.

The children verbally described and artistically represented empathy as something shared between people or people and animals. They agreed that while shared between two living beings, the level, degree or extent to which empathy would be expressed does not necessarily need to be equal when reciprocated. Lina explained this further, “I would continue showing empathy towards other people if they didn’t show me empathy” (Interview, 1.14.15, lines 282-284).
**Physical empathy.** In addition to an involuntarily sensed emotion as discussed earlier, the children easily identified empathy as a physical action. They believed that they typically act in some physical way in order to express concern or to show comfort toward someone else. For them, empathy becomes tangible when they act empathically in ways that can be seen, felt or heard. Susanna told a story where empathy was passed to one girl, and then onto another. She described it as a sort of kindness and feeling someone gives through what he/she chooses to do, saying, “she passed the empathy I gave her onto someone else” (Interview, 1.14.15, lines 93, 99).

The children’s conversation about empathy as actionable represents a conscious understanding of the power their actions can have. They explored this many times throughout our conversations but also expressed it in their artistic representations. In this work, Sydney expressed not only the idea of physically expressing empathic concern for someone else but also an appreciation of the impact observing it had on him.
In response to this artistic representation, fourth grade student John described in his raspy voice the empathic actions portrayed in Sydney’s art. John explained, “Two people in a room and they’re having a conversation. And somebody looks like they have a smile on their face and someone looks like they have a frown. I see that that guy’s offering to help that guy” (Focus Group, 1.14.15, lines 83-86, 89). Sydney responded that he recreated what he had observed at a party between two teenagers. He shared that it felt good to see that someone was having concern for someone else. He said that he had been in that same situation himself in the past.

This artistic representation of actionable empathy is informative because it shows what an act of empathic engagement can look like. The detail of the characters and their proximity to one another reinforced the positive nature of Sydney’s observation. In his work, he chose to use a number of colors to decorate the floor. This resonated with other artwork where multiple colors were used to
depict the emotions and feelings that the children associate with empathy. The artwork itself was 3-dimensional and included a ceiling. This ceiling and the space it created contained the “event” within a small space and showed the intimacy that empathic regard can stand to play in people’s lives. As Rifkin (2009) explained in discussing human consciousness and the increased role that intimacy plays in our on-going development, he stated that we begin to “exist in relationship with others [and become] aware of the pleasure of interaction” (p. 106). Thus, the theme of intimacy is one reason this artistic representation is important. The words used to explain it and my own interpretation suggest that there are implications for what the children can continue to teach about empathy. These implications, as discussed in Chapter V, impart urgency for our continued development together, an appreciation for the value of our relationships bear, and the role they play in supporting our growth.

In these artistic representations, June explained that sharing and being active in giving empathy rewards both people. This can be seen when viewing her work left to right.
This is two people and this one guy is happy but this guy is kind of sad. So, this guy is sharing his apple with him. And then the saying is what goes around comes around. And so, now the guy that was sad before is happy. (Focus Group, 1.27.15, lines 40-44).

June literally showed the “flip side” of empathic responsiveness here. While giving her explanation of the work on the left above, she flipped the work over to reveal the instance where the giving of empathy resulted in both guys being happy. To look at the two pieces side-by-side, it is interesting to consider the prominence and physicality of the art on the left, with the bold purples, oranges and red. On the right, the colors are more faded, making clear that the impression of the guys is simply the result of the paint coming through the fabric. Looked at more closely with thoughts of empathy as described in Category 1 in my mind, I envisioneded the faded impression as somewhat ethereal and representative of the physiological change felt within a person when he or she gives or receives empathy. This idea made me smile as I appreciated the representation of actionable and inherent empathy together.

The following artistic representation, depicting “someone who’s going to help someone else, [with] clasped hands,” is a straightforward look at how the giving of empathy can be physical (Focus Group, 1.21.15, lines 671-672).
Felicia kept the work simple. She showed the power that touch has for expressing empathy. There is action and excitement in the piece for me as I anticipate the two hands joining. Almost clasped in my mind, I am impressed by the idea of physical connection Felicia captured in this one instance.

**Experiential empathy.** The children believed that sharing empathy depends on previous experience. As Peter explained, “if it’s happened to you and you know it’s happened to them, you can comfort them” (Interview, 1.21.15, line 107). This idea of experience is a prerequisite for distinguishing empathy as experiential. Peter’s artistic representation below provides a graphic depiction of this dimension of empathy.
Peter explained, “I made a booklet about empathy” to show how Ben’s experience helped him understand how John felt. Even though Ben had fun poking John, he only began to feel for John once Steve began poking him. Ultimately, Ben felt for John after he experienced the same frustration (Focus Group, 1.14.15, line 16).

This artistic representation is reminiscent of many art pieces created by the children as we discussed and considered their understanding of empathy. Exploring this artifact to gain an appreciation of the information it held, I adopted what Duckworth (1996) implored of teachers as she exerted her efforts for supporting their work with children. She suggested that teachers, “acknowledge the complexity in what seems like simple things” (p. 116).

Each child was familiar with the situation shown in the artistic storyboard above. It is a situation with which many children in this study expressed having
direct experience. The figures were drawn simply and the story was systematically told across the taped pages, to the point that the message “I’m sorry” could have been understood even without the word bubbles.

In this next artistic representation, Peter once again signifies the importance of experience and empathy. While distinguishing between happy and sad empathy, he brings to the forefront an idea shared earlier, that empathy can exist and take place between people, but it can also take place between people and animals - in this case, a very kind teddy bear.

Fabric, paper, colored pencil, tape, glue. 33.5” x 18”

So, I started with a happy emotion and the guys getting a big teddy hug because he felt a little - he was in the woods and he felt a little scared so the bear is coming to greet him and give him a big teddy hug, a bear hug. But then in this scene (depicting sad empathy), he's not going to give the man a teddy hug so he starts walking all scared inside again and a man comes up
and comforts him because he's had that feeling where he's scared [in the wild]. (Focus Group, 1.21.15, lines 439-446)

Here, Peter created his “movie set” with tape along the edges and placed his characters within a jungle. His use of similar color schemes between the two pictures showed that equally good things come from various types of given empathy. Overlapping both pictures with the heart showed me its connection and involvement to either experience.

**Circumstantial empathy.** The idea of circumstantial empathy is complex. The children identified that their empathic responsiveness was dependent on both personal and collective conditions. Their relationship to the situation and their engagement with people in it were most influential in determining whether or not they would respond. As Adam shared, “I don’t think I express empathy to other people because I’m not really with other people when something bad happen[s] to them” (Interview, 1.14.15, lines 369-373).

Learning about the idea of personal and collective circumstance proved valuable in understanding why a child would or would not offer an empathic response to others. When questioned in an interview, a fourth grader named John shared that if he was not around when the bad or unfortunate occurrence happened, he would be unable to show empathy toward anyone (Interview, 1.27.15, lines 309-311). In another interview, Sydney shared,

Who I show empathy to is specific. If I’m with my family then I’m already empathic for them and I wouldn’t be to a stranger. If they are fine however,
my level of empathy toward the stranger would be more full. (Interview, 1.21.15, lines 349-353)

Appearing as though this example was relational, I sought clarification in the focus group. Sydney corrected my misunderstanding and claimed that his effort to show empathy in his example was not relational but was in fact circumstantial. He reiterated his point by stating that if he was consumed by the events taking place in his family, he would be unable to attend to the person and/or the incident warranting an empathic response. As the focus group continued, some children anticipated that they could show some level of empathy regardless of the circumstance or their relation to it. Dependent mostly by the situation itself, the children identified that the level of empathy they shared would be best determined by their opinion of what happened. In other words, if they viewed an experience as unimportant, they would respond with less empathy. Bryce explained his inability for showing empathy in particular circumstances was the result of not having been in a similar instance, rather than being within close proximity to the event or those to whom the event was relevant.

Felicia added to the discussion by identifying a situation that illustrated her own thoughts about the complexity of empathy being circumstantially expressed. She explained the artistic representation below:

It's like a rock wall and when I do rock walls, the arrow is the one you have to get to to finish it, she's trying to get to the top and she's almost there and she doesn't want to give up, but she's tired and she kind of does want to give up. The girl at the bottom knows that she'd feel better about if she didn't come
down but she kind of feels bad for her and is thinking maybe she should
come down because she’s so tired and stuff. (Focus Group, 1.14.15, lines 238-
252)

![Drawing](image)

This cut out drawing is stirring with its curvy lines and asymmetrical orientation.

Evoking movement, the art shows more than what is immediately comprehensible.

It immediately drew me back to past instances where I felt as the character in the
picture did. And while those instances did not always end the way I liked, it was
always comforting to have a friend to lean on.

Felicia included a voice for how empathy can be shared in the lower portion
of the work. The words, “do you want to come down?” appeared in a word bubble.
More importantly, she provided insight into the ways that circumstantial empathy
was accessible to each of the children. Her use of curved lines, green paper and
detail literally put the observer on the paper, in the circumstance and made the
group’s discussion a reflection of real life. The children were able to connect with
the artwork and the circumstance depicted. Important here in furthering my own
understanding about the distinction between an experience and a circumstance, was
that the children believed a circumstance is not always enough to evoke empathic
feelings. The children were adamant that being there and attuned, when the
circumstance happened, was the largest determining factor for their ability to
express empathy.

My painting below represents the potential that we can realize if we embrace
our empathic abilities and support its development in children. Its colors are bold
and they fill the space that is available to them.

I believe it works in accordance with the piece I presented earlier on page 80 when
speaking of inherent empathy. Reminiscent of the color and pattern that was
presented then, new colors emerge from the canvas and expand to the limits
available. The piece is full of action, yet presents stability and certainty in assuring
that empathy prevails within us while also being available to others we surround. It depicts a physicality with its clear delineations and sharp lines. It identifies that experiences are for the taking and that circumstances occur around us always. It encourages us to take notice, to make connections and to draw conclusions. We have much space to fill and we need to include children in doing so, both as our teachers and as our students.
Category 3: Learned Empathy

The third category that I discovered in the data concerned the importance of learning empathy for children. While most of the children described that a pre-existing relationship is not necessary for empathy to be learned, a majority created artwork that showed that relationships are helpful. For example, in speaking with Peter about who has influenced his own knowledge of empathy, he shared that he felt his dad probably taught him. He went on to say, “I mean, he’s not really around, but he has taught me that being empathic can help other people. He always tells me that I have a great heart, so he tells me I can feel for people” (Interview, 1.21.15, lines 156, 160-162).

**Empathy is learned by activity and influence.** Like Peter, many children expressed that their parents have been very influential in their development of empathy. “My mom and dad taught me how to be empathic by what they do and how they act toward people” (Interview, 1.14.15, line 44). Lina concurred, sharing that her parents and even other people have taught her what it means to act empathically.
So, here, this guy, he fell and he's feeling sad but then this girl came and made him feel better. And this is the girl's mom and she's feeling - well, proud - I don't know how to [put that in the] picture - but she - so, empathy [is for] the guy because he's feeling sad and maybe embarrassed. (Focus Group, 1.27.15, lines 171-176)

Lina's artwork provides a clear representation of the value that she has for her parents’ influence and support of empathic behavior. Created by adding vivid, green colors and using brightly colored figures, she developed an artifact that portrays happiness and evokes a clear message about the positive value of empathy. The inclusion of her mother figure in the background suggests the indirect influence that parents or other care-givers may have on children when they model and exhibit similar behaviors.

Felicia shared these two pieces of artwork to visually represent how activity and influence affect her and her development of empathy.
She explained that the one on the left “represents playful[ness] because you can be playful and it can be because [of] someone else made you that way” (Focus Group, 1.27.15, lines 665-667). The other shows how your heart “feels when someone else did something good for you” (Focus Group, 1.27.15, lines 679-680).

The colors Felicia chose work well to support her ideas of activity and influence because they are bright and evoke pleasant feelings for me. The closed eyes on the faces of the hearts are soothing and offer no need for urgency or quick thinking. They offer me a peaceful moment for reflection about my own efforts to support empathic growth among children through activity and influence by the actions I choose to take.

In the artistic representation below, Erin rendered an owl imprinted on the fabric who offers influence over the behavior and responses of animals toward one another in the forest.
In describing it, Erin shared:

This is a background but it’s - these are kind of like animals in the forest but it’s abstract. And then this looks like a wise old owl. And so, somehow these animals got stuck together. These two feel sympathetic for these, but then all the other animals are like laughing and “Ha ha, you got stuck.” But then the owl is like, “You guys, you don’t have to go through this to feel sympathetic.” And so then they all feel sympathetic because they owl keeps talking about it.

(Focus Group, 1.14.15, lines 292-299)

Erin’s use of color and materials helped her to create an impressionistic piece of artwork. Bright and organized, her work tells a story and reiterates the important
part we play in supporting children. As wise old owls ourselves, we can engage with children, share our influence and provide a model of empathy.

While the artistic representations above provide examples of the children’s understanding about activity and influence, other children described their need for more engagement and connection. Some offered that they have been capable of being empathic their whole lives but have needed help expressing it. Sydney shared, “I think I had the ability to [be empathic] but I needed help letting it out (Interview, 1.21.14, line 323-325). Others contended that while they have it, they could always learn more to support its growth. June explained that while born with some degree of empathy, she expected that her aptitude for expressing it would increase with age. To this point, Adam claimed that his age has limited his empathic abilities, stating, “when you’re little you don’t have many feelings but as you grow older you gain more, that helps you become more empathic” (Interview, 1.21.15, lines 62-63). Peter alluded that “age and experience keep me from being more empathic” (Interview, 1.21.15, line 117).

**Conclusion**

The ideas and the artwork presented by the children bring to the forefront the need and value for learning empathy. I believe too, that they speak to what we could realize if our efforts to provide activity and influence become less (Keltner, 2009). As such, we will never realize how we can affect children’s empathic growth and development if our efforts as scholars, teachers and parents wane. The artwork below is representative of what our full empathic potential could look like if we attend to the inherence and action of empathy, and how children can be supported
in learning it to a larger degree. Our empathic capacities and those of our children could fill the canvass and reach limits that exceed the boundaries. Here, empathy and its deep color touch the edges of the canvass and represent our realizing and exercising of empathy to its fullest extent.

![Canvas and acrylic paint. 12” x 12”](image)

Our work and call to action is supported by Felicia who spoke, without knowing the magnitude or importance of her statement, “I don’t know what empathy is or if I’m an empathic person as I’ve never really talked about it before” (Interview, 1.21.14, lines 186-195). She teaches us that articulating our thinking is key to development. Further, Duckworth (1996) identified that

> intelligence cannot develop without matter to think about. Making new connections depends on knowing enough about something in the first place to provide a basis for thinking of other things to do—of other questions to ask—that demand more complex connections in order to make sense. The more ideas about something people already have at their disposal, the more
new ideas occur and the more they can coordinate to build up still more complicated schemes. (p. 14)

Felicia and this statement by Duckworth identify and represent what I have learned in this research project. We have an obligation to support children in their growth and development of empathy. Given the insights of the children included herein, we need to reinstate our efforts to emphasize the importance of teaching, learning and talking about empathy. Schools may very well be the best places to start. Chapter V will discuss the action that we can take to promote empathy’s value as something multi-dimensional, where its inherent, actionable and learned qualities can be explored as a result of the wisdom of the children.

**Diagram 1:** Empathy is Multi-Dimensional

Empathy is multi-dimensional with categories overlapping into the next. The center region of the diagram shows the interrelation of each dimension.
Chapter V

Conclusion

We have a great responsibility to help our children learn to fully appreciate and recognize the benefit that empathy can provide. Our chances of meeting this obligation are best if we engage children in conversations and activities that influence their understanding of each other. The manner in which we enlist our children’s participation is vitally important and cannot be overstated.

While some scholars have alluded to the risks that we stand to reap if we continue to act without regard for supporting empathic growth, others have identified possibilities and opportunities that will undoubtedly reverse the trend (Brown, 2012; de Waal, 2009; Dodson-Lavelle et al., 2014; Duckworth, 1996; Gordon, 2009; Jordan et al., 1991; Keltner, 2009; Luvmour, 2010; Raider-Roth, 2005; Rifkin, 2009). By engaging fully in our own relationships, we can be models for our children and help them learn how to be and act with care. When provided experiences and opportunities to participate, children can offer unique perspectives that help them learn and grow new abilities (Duckworth, 1996; Gordon, 2009). When engaged in nurturing and respectful relationships, our children can learn to appreciate how significant such connections are and how they can aid the growth of their empathic abilities.

The findings of this study suggest that we consider how we teach and support the development of empathy in our children. While the findings affirm that “children do not think like adults do,” they also provide for actions to take and opportunities to explore (Greig, Taylor, & MacKay, 2007, as cited in Driesnnack &
Furukawa, 2011, p. 3). This chapter will examine the implications of this study’s findings in three domains: theoretical understandings of empathy, arts-related methodologies and educational practice and empathy-based instruction.

**Implications**

**For theoretical understandings of empathy.** The words and artistic representations that the children shared trouble the binary that has been our long-time understanding of empathy. While even the literature speaks to empathy being either inherent or learned, the children provided a broader and more complex understanding of empathy than we have seen before. They identified that empathy is multi-dimensional and that there is no need to separate its inherence from its being learned. While these interrelated categories and their corresponding themes provide us with a means for organizing our thoughts, they do not fully describe empathy in its totality.

The findings indicate that empathy is truly multi-faceted, as shown in Diagram 1 on page 99. The inherent nature of empathy’s presence results from it being understood, involuntarily sensed and like sympathy. As something actionable, empathy is physical, whether in words or actions, and dependent on personal experience and circumstance. Finally, empathy can be learned through activity and is influence-based. Important to understand by category and sub-theme, each dimension is interwoven within the next and plays an equally significant role in the development of empathy overall.

No longer viewed within specific limits, our conversations about empathy need to extend well beyond the simple idea of empathy supported and developed by
one means or the other. They need to include the trilateral view of empathy that the children described. Their verbal descriptions and artistic representations provide ample evidence that empathy is not only inherent and learned, but actionable as well. By taking a broader view of children and appreciating their ability to understand, explain and make sense of complex ideas, we can offer them opportunities to be and act differently.

While maintaining on-going conversations about ideas like empathy can be challenging with so many similarly important things vying for our time, providing children with appropriate avenues for exploring their understanding can have a valuable impact on their growth and development.

**For arts-related research.** Presenting children with opportunities to express themselves through socially constructive and artistic ways using arts-informed research methodology proved significant. As the children engaged in art and with each other, they were able to clearly identify and express themselves in a manner that was appropriate and safe. Expressing the value of exploring empathy through art, Felicia stated,

I think I’d rather do art, but if - yeah, I think I’d rather do art. I think it’s easier to express it through art but I’m not necessarily - I’m pretty much just saying that because I think it’s more fun to do art. (Focus Group, 2.4.15, lines 590-593)

Responses like this one reflect the value arts-informed research can provide if we employ it to learn what children know. Children shared in an early pilot study, “I like seeing other people’s [art] so that I can sort of . . . think about empathy in a
different way,” and “Other people’s pictures [show me] what else empathy could be,” (Interview Transcript, May 2014). Such statements confirm that arts-informed research methodologies provide us with opportunities to understand where we should place our efforts in the future, certainly in terms of supporting children and their continued growth of empathy.

I used the term arts-related research throughout this dissertation. I did so to draw on all of the forms that such research can employ. Whether looking to approach research with a lens that is arts-based or arts-informed, they each provide us with a greater capacity for understanding what children know. Arts-related research is much more than qualitative research. It is a means for supporting and enhancing the relationships that people share in alternative, relevant and engaging ways. It provides unique opportunities for the researcher and the participant researcher to engage together in order to expand their connections. Arts-informed research, on the other hand, allows for those directly and indirectly related to the research to develop new knowledge through the experience of observing any expressive form of artistic representation together.

As identified by Driesnnack and Fukurawa (2011), children are best supported and engaged to participate in learning when the educational experiences are developmentally appropriate. Giving children the opportunity to talk about and to explain their art helped me to learn how they understand empathy. It also helped to identify next steps for promoting what needs to happen in the near future to support its continued growth. Together, the children and I discovered ideas about
the human experience that will influence the lives we lead and our empathic caregiving.

**For educational practice and empathy-based instruction.** While this dissertation informs what we know about children’s understanding of empathy and encourages future study, I am hopeful that it also highlights what should be included as part of our educational practice. Schools present unprecedented possibility for young children as they spend most of their formative years in them. Unfortunately however, in recent findings of a Harvard University study, “nearly 80% of youth surveyed rank personal achievement and happiness above helping others” (Walsh, 2015, para. 1). A daunting statistic, we need to acknowledge the impact and positive effect that schools and education can have on children’s growth and development. It is imperative that we do.

As Gordon (2009) suggested, “The goal of education is broader than creating job-ready youth—it involves nurturing individuals who can be publicly useful and personally fulfilled. Education has a responsibility to develop citizens” (p. xix). According to Jordan (2000), education and a model for teaching empathy to children is important in promoting knowledge and a more intelligent society. Other research findings show that children are presented unprecedented possibilities for empathic growth within schools and in environments where art is encouraged and supported (Driessnack & Furukawa, 2011; Pinar, 1994; van Halen-Faber & Diamond, 2008).

To these points, we can look at what is currently happening in school-based programs such as Gordon’s *Roots of Empathy* classroom, but we need to do more. Felicia shared in her comment found in Chapter 4 on page 98, that she believed she
had the capacity to express empathy but was uncertain because she had never really talked about it. To me, this suggests that while children understand that there is an inherence to empathy, it only becomes real when they talk and do something about it. Showing them is not enough either, we need to tune in and listen to what they say, watch what they do and attend to how they feel. Taking time to do this need to be built in to our school routine.

The three categories and seven themes that developed through my engagement with the children in this study should inform our educational practice as they have curricular implications. The inherence of empathy, being understood, involuntarily sensed and like sympathy, makes it necessary that we talk about it and that we incorporate it into our daily plans. Raising children’s awareness about what is innate within them and what they are capable of expressing is significant because it helps them develop a sense of self. Empathy’s actionable quality that is best defined by its physicality and the experiences and circumstances that surround it, supports our need for offering instruction and curricula that allows for the exploration of how empathy can be expressed. Finally, understanding that empathy can be learned by the activities and the influence that we offer presents one of the most effective means for teaching about empathy, what it is and how it feels. The findings of this study show that children need to express themselves with structured opportunities, both verbally and creatively, in order to clearly form and express their understanding.

I see this being possible in many ways within our schools. Whether on the playground or in the classroom, children can be supported by their teachers, their
peers or even older students in learning to use their words to express themselves, to solve conflict or to meet a new friend. Community-building and mentorship programs between older and younger students within the school building can be established to support the growth and development of everyone within the program. Further, older students can act as buddies of younger ones, engaging in activities that range from reading together to enjoying time outdoors to having lunch with one another. Offering opportunities to grow with one another and to support one another can ensure a relationship of strength and compassion.

Equally important in my mind for supporting the growth of empathy in children and in schools are opportunities where a mistake has been made. At times, school discipline plans leave little room for consideration of a child’s age or the circumstances surrounding an unfortunate event. Rather than quickly jumping to conclusions and evoking the punishment that is deemed necessary, I would like to see an opportunity taken more frequently where the child is respected and provided time to gather and share his/her thoughts. This can provide an opportunity to teach something to be learned and to truly support the child in being who he or she is, someone young, learning and wanting to do the right thing for him/herself and others, even when it seems beyond control.

Art can provide children with an important vehicle through which empathy can be taught and learned. Unfortunately, as reported by Walker (2014) in the National Education Association (NEA) newsletter, “arts programs for elementary students dwindled to practically zero” in Los Angeles over a four year period before 2012 (para. 5). As of 2012, Walker reported in another NEA newsletter that “nearly
four million elementary school students do not get any visual arts instruction at school” (para. 1). These daunting statistics, among other findings, are yet two more perspectives that speak to the consequences and ramifications that we may face. If we choose to not act, we stand to lessen the opportunities our children have to express themselves and to learn about important ideas that support their ability to engage and manage their relationships successfully.

Today, the opportunities for children to engage in school, relationships and life with confidence and care are limited. As Duckworth (1996) suggested of our educational system and classrooms, we need to implement a curriculum “with a difference” and where the “unexpected is valued” (p. 8). She went on to identify what she believed should be the goal of any educational system. She suggested that while there is much to do for a teacher, in a classroom or even within a curriculum when it is be developed confidently within a school,

The best one can do is to make such knowledge, such familiarity, seem interesting and accessible to the child. That is, one can familiarize children with a few phenomena in such a way as to catch their interest, to let them raise and answer their own questions, to let them realize that their ideas are significant—so that they have the interest, the ability, and the self-confidence to go on by themselves. (p. 8)

Undoubtedly, creating a love of learning should be the goal of any school. We should engage with children in a way that speaks to them, gets them talking and encourages them to share their thoughts and feelings. The children in this study participated fully, shared their feelings and identified what they needed. They were
engaged and interested in what each other had to say. The words they used and the art they created spoke to the value that conversation, connection and relationship can bear. It is clear that empathy resides within each one of them. They understand it as something inherent, something actionable and something that is influenced by their observation of others. We have the ability and the power to promote change and to make a difference in empathic lives of our children and in ourselves. The children have told us what our responsibility is and we need to act in accordance with it now.

Finally, the children proved that there is value in learning and addressing the unknowns of empathy's presence within us through art and dialogue. According to Adam, “I think that you're born with empathy but it can get - but you - you can become more [empathic by] learning it” (Focus Group, 2.4.15, lines 604-606). This statement, like others, tells us again that we must create educational opportunities for learning empathy. There is power in possibility and we are capable of achieving greater empathic capacities. We can create environments and supportive cultures that encourage such efforts. We can create a world that is much different than our own at this point in time.

Reflection

**Work with children.** As an educator in both independent and public schools for over twenty years, I know that children are insightful and oftentimes, can be better teachers than I am. Collaborating with the children from Daylight Montessori School affirmed this notion. As I encouraged them to put expressions about empathy to words and art, they helped me to understand the centrality of empathy's
meaning. The children taught me that empathy is inherent, actionable and learned. Like the associative process described by Raider-Roth (2011), our collective efforts allowed “a relational stance and understanding” (p. 81). Dewey’s (1933, as cited in Raider-Roth, 2011) theory of reflection also speaks to what we learned and were able to do as we conducted our research together.

[It] teaches that in an effort to create new knowledge, the learner must be able to make connections to what she already knows, have experiences that allow her to construct new ideas, have a venue for articulating this emerging knowledge, and have an opportunity to act on this knowledge. (p. 81)

As co-researchers who created art and knowledge together, we ensured that the processes for association and reflection were encouraged and experienced throughout the entirety of the project. Our time together made it possible for us to learn from one another, to gain an appreciation of one another’s viewpoints, to grow together and to become better selves.

Our exploration of empathy built on the idea that empathy is something learned. Articulating empathy through discourse and art-making were equally important too in helping us understand the dimensions of this human experience. Through the use of conversation and art-making to look at empathy, the children shared their understanding. They gained confidence in expressing their ideas about empathy and what they need to increase their ability to share it. The children were able to express themselves in ways that were clear and supportive of one another and supported each others’ learning.
The children discovered by talking in the focus groups that they had common ideas and beliefs about empathy. When I repeated these commonalities in focus group discussions and at other times for clarity and understanding, new and deeper connections between the children occurred as evidenced by the attentiveness and encouragement they showed one another to share their ideas and artwork. When asked about any reluctance or hesitation they felt prior to beginning our work together, the children explained:

I think that everyone is born with empathy, but it just takes them a while to learn it, like this class and make them [notice] what it is and after that, they start seeing it and everyone [unintentionally] shows empathy to other people. (Focus Group, 2.4.15, lines 557-558, 560-562)

Such statements illustrate that providing children with an opportunity to learn, explore and discuss empathy with others, their own awareness for empathy can grow.

I think that [honestly] I'm not really concerned about anyone criticizing any - what I say or anything. I think that maybe if I went to a different school, I might. But I think here, I pretty much feel safe saying almost anything because the - this classroom is probably less likely to do that [than] other schools, and also I think that even if I was going to be embarrassed or something then I think that [doing] art could be - you could get criticized almost just as much as you would if you were saying stuff. So, [honestly], I'm not worried about that. (Focus Group, 2.4.15, lines 575-576, 578-584, 586)
In this comment we hear that providing an environment where children feel comfortable to express themselves can enable them to grow and develop freely, with confidence about who they are. “In the beginning, I think I was sort of indifferent between talking and doing art, because like [someone] said, I'm not really worried about being criticized” (Focus Group, 2.4.15, lines 598-600). Like the previous comment, we hear that the same comfort level was felt as the child anticipated sharing his/her thoughts verbally or through art because the atmosphere supported a positive culture.

These statements are important and speak to the need for children to be engaged in empathy-based conversations and experiences. When children are provided a safe environment and with a process that is clearly defined for them, they feel empowered to be themselves and to look for understanding from others. They can even be inclined to explore and grow their knowledge of things that rest outside a traditional academic curriculum. As such, we need to focus our efforts on helping them discover what is inherent about empathy and to support its growth.

We cannot simply hope that they will grow empathy themselves.

**How art became data.** As described in the review of arts-informed research methodology, the art that the children produced became the data of this research study and dissertation. The conversations that developed through the focus groups sessions provided additional important information and the children's work was perceptive. It was evident from the start that the children felt comfortable together and at ease within the space and environment where we conducted our work together.
Taking the opportunity to sit with one another and to connect in the sharing of their art became a favorite among the children. Engaging in this type of participatory analysis, the children were able to confidently share what they had created and publically appreciate the work of others. While there were several instances where I raised questions in order to seek clarification once a child had presented his/her artistic representation, it was not until I had an opportunity to sit and reflect upon what I observed in the art that I was able to make deeper meaning for myself.

As I looked to interpret the information that was included in the artwork the children produced, I often became immediately aware of the feelings that seemed to move through my body. I believe this physical awareness heightened my ability to comprehend and interpret the composition of the display and the meaning that was sometimes hidden within. At times, I took the opportunity to make a connection between the artistic representation and the words spoken about it. This drew me in to consider the individual artist and to make interpretations about how he/she engaged with others, his/her connections to the group and his/her relationship to the research process. I believe this enriched my analysis as it provided me with another opportunity to discover meaning within the art and to inform myself about the individual child’s understanding of empathy.

Reviewing the artistic representations that the children created in conjunction with the recordings and transcripts of our conversations helped me to begin shaping what this dissertation would look like. Full of art and interpretation, this dissertation became more vibrant and meaningful than what I believe a
traditional dissemination tool would, offering concrete examples of what empathy is and could become. The children helped to create new knowledge with their input and it encourages thinking, reflecting and the making of new ideas.

**How data shaped the dissertation.** The information and thoughts presented in this dissertation are reflective of the children’s ideas. The art acts as a critical piece and helps to tell a story that adds complexity to what we have previously understood about empathy. The words that I have used to describe my interpretations and the way that I understand what was presented speak to the art itself and help me to “frame” its meaning.

I was methodic in organizing this dissertation. The art included herein allowed me to design a method of reporting our findings that supported the emergence of categories and themes that were representative of each piece. In offering a description of the category, theme, and corresponding art piece, I was able to offer meaning and connect value to the work.

I am hopeful that the importance I place on art is visible upon reviewing this dissertation. As such, my own art and the process for creating it are important to include. I believe my art and the creative process allowed me to understand the process that the children underwent and ultimately, enabled me to more deeply understand the categories and themes that grew from the work with children.

**Making Meaning**

**Why I created art.** Several different pieces of art that I created throughout this doctoral journey are shared in this dissertation. In general, art provides me with an opportunity to be creative by manipulating some material or object into
something entirely different. I often find great joy in developing a story about my art that informs but also elicits contemplation by those who view it.

In making considerations for practitioner action research and prior to conceptualizing this study with children about empathy, I was challenged to create an artistic representation of myself as an action researcher. In response to that challenge, I created the following artwork.

This is what I included as part of my description for the artwork. It helped me gain a clearer understanding of who I was and the manner in which I hoped to approach research as I continued with my studies.

Action Research can involve anyone, singularly or in community, who wishes to partake. It presents itself as a mover of thoughts, possibilities and boundaries. Action Research is freeing, and with effort and perseverance, it assures everyone who engages a greater sense of self. These ideas are
presented here in this artistic expression of myself as a person and as an action researcher.

To engage as an action researcher gives me an incredible opportunity to think freshly, to be the catalyst for starting a different conversation and to help make new, empowering change. To facilitate this as a collaborator and confidant, I bring with me what I know and understand from previous experience. This is solid ground for me. The wooden replica of Ohio signifies my roots and assures my footing. It is my base.

Our hands represent the diversity we share in all its forms. They offer empathetic care to ensure equality, safety, and trust while we are steadied in our common beliefs and vision.

The commonality we share is endearing and it rests amidst infinite promise and possibility. Considering our experiences and biases helps us to organize and to develop a robust and meaningful framework. Our work is then defined within an inner most boundary we set. Our efforts within it will aid us in realizing even greater possibilities that exist outside our own boundaries. Margins that were once inhibitive can be cast aside and we will rejoice in realizing what we hoped for, which is a more beautiful and compassionate place where we all can participate more fully.

As part of the research included in this dissertation, I chose to once again create art as part of my effort to analyze and understand the work of the children. Often, I viewed their artistic representations as powerful. Whether it was their use of material, the subject matter that they included or the words they spoke to identify
their intentions, their work frequently made me reflect deeply and feel within my own body.

As shown individually within the Findings section, here are the three pieces of art that I created as part of my analysis, displayed in totality.

Canvas, acrylic paint, wood, latex paint, fasteners. 41” x 15” x 2.5”

What was once only a sign of inherent empathy filling just the center of the canvas on the left, and the center canvas showing actionable empathy with experience and circumstance surrounding it, the third canvas ultimately became one nearly complete and full of empathy. It represents empathy at its fullest potential, where we realize and understand the support that we need to lend children so that they can learn to grow and develop their inherent empathy to its fullest. This is what I hope we can do as a result of this work that the children and I have shared. I hope that through our exercising of arts-related research, we have opened a door to ensure that new meaning is made for realizing greater empathic capacities among us all.
Appendix

Empathy in Art
Semi-Structured Interview Questions- Participants Grades 4 – 6

1. I am trying to learn more about empathy. Can you tell me what you think empathy is?

2. What do you think it looks like to show empathy?

3. Can you give me an example of when you think you might show empathy?

4. How do you think people feel when they receive empathy from someone else?

5. How do you feel when you give empathy to someone else?

6. Do you think you are someone who shows empathy?

7. Do you think you show empathy toward most often- friends? classmates? teachers? your family? strangers? older or younger people?

8. Did someone show you how to be a person who shows empathy?

9. Is there anything that I haven’t asked you about that you would like to say about empathy?
References


A CHILDHOOD PERSPECTIVE


