

Pre-service teachers demonstrating compassion through expressions of care

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study examines the perspectives of pre-service teachers (PSTs) in the US and South Africa as they learned about the *pedagogy of compassion* as a generative approach for supporting students in navigating issues of social justice in the context of English teaching and learning. We examine PSTs' work generated in a secondary English methods course in the US and interviews with 14 PSTs: 10 in the US and 4 in South Africa. Findings highlight PSTs' considerations of the opportunities and challenges involved in enacting the pedagogy of compassion in their future work with students. For example, PSTs sought to demonstrate compassion through expressions of care as they envisioned teaching and learning in their future classrooms. Implications of this work are provided for English teachers, English teacher educators, and educational researchers.

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A few weeks before stepping into a secondary school English Language Arts classroom to begin a year-long student-teaching role, Michelle, in an individual interview, envisioned the kind of teacher she hoped to become:

I know if I was a student and my teacher was utilizing a pedagogy of compassion, I would feel like the teacher really cared for me, wanted to know like anything that was going on in my life, and using those sorts of experiences to help me learn as opposed to having me learn from something that might not be as accessible. So I think it definitely generates more student interest and then it just continues with my own disposition of centering empathy and fostering student growth.

Michelle recalled that her desire to embody the role of a “teacher [who] really cared for me” was informed by her experiences as a student attending public schools in the United States and the coursework she completed as a pre-service teacher (PST) in a university teacher-preparation programme in the US Midwest. Michelle was one of 19 undergraduate PSTs who participated in a semester-long English education methods course taught by Brewer and Watson in which our teaching was informed by the *pedagogy of*

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compassion theoretical framework (Vandeyar and Swart 2019) and the framework's grounding in affirming approaches to teaching English and English education (i.e. Cantrell, Walker-Dalhouse, and Lazar 2022; Duncan-Andrade 2009; Freire 2018; B. L. Love 2019; Paris 2012).

In this paper, we examine experiences and perspectives of Michelle and PSTs across two contexts, the US and South Africa, as they encountered opportunities and challenges in considering whether, how, and why they could enact a pedagogy of compassion in their future work with students. We situate our teaching and learning with PSTs amidst contested times of English teachers globally navigating educational contexts shaping and shaped by a bevy of neoliberal discourse and policies (i.e. Brass and Webb 2014; Dunn 2021; Sorensen and Ladd 2020; Sulzer and Dunn 2019). For example, English language arts teachers and teacher educators grapple daily with work impacted by standardisation mandates such as the government-regulated national curriculum in the UK and Common Core State Standards in the US; curriculum, teaching, and teacher education approaches informed by privatisation, educational entrepreneurship, and teacher accountability models; contours of teacher wellbeing and teacher turnover; and local policies delimiting language and literacy instruction (i.e. Herrera, Martínez-Alba, and Trinh 2022; Jerrim et al. 2021; Mathebula 2018; Stanford 2023).

Furthermore, student-led “Rhodes Must Fall” and “Fees Must Fall” protest movements on university campuses in South Africa sparked a broad conversation in 2016 on curriculum reform and policy, galvanised by students’ hopes to decolonise educational contexts including curriculum, texts and sites of schooling. English teachers facilitate increasingly politicised teaching, learning, texts, and topics with youth – including climate change, teaching in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, increased attention to anti-Black and anti-immigrant violence (i.e. Baker-Bell, Butler, and Johnson 2017; Brutt-Griffler and Makoni 2005; Ladson-Billings 2021) and rampant book bannings.

We understand and highlight the distinct heterogeneous lived schooling experiences of pre-service teachers in the US and South Africa. Yet we situate our inquiry as urgent and necessary given contexts of systemic racism, historical inequities, and state-sanctioned prohibitive language policies and the policing of heritage languages in South Africa and the US; the potential tamping down of youth and teacher voice given standardised curricula in teaching contexts; and global movements towards justice rendered visible within and across the US and South Africa. While teachers and teacher educators across multiple content areas grapple with (re)new(ed) contexts and lived schooling realities of what curriculum and teaching may be (B. Love 2020), scholars have historically and contemporarily identified teaching English and English education as a robust, if complicated, context for addressing challenges and possibilities in texts, topics, and teaching approaches. Authors tracing histories of US schooling have discussed the role of writing and reading in English in promoting views of ethics and morality centred in white, male, Eurocentric perspectives (i.e. Gere 1992). As Gere (1992) explained, iterations and implementations of English teaching and teacher education further emerged in the US context in the formation of the school subject English in the 1894 Committee of Ten report; college entrance-exam committees in turn emphasised writing that demonstrated familiarity with canonical literary texts. The formation in 1911 of the National Council of Teachers of English, talking back to the Committee of Ten, envisioned a more active, cooperative engagement of English curriculum and teaching (Gere 1992).

Situating the socio, historical, cultural, and political contexts of English teaching and English education prompts broadened meanings of (re)designing and enacting teaching, teacher education, and research approaches in current times (Morrell and Scherff 2015). de los Ríos and colleagues (2019), for example, historicised English education in colonialist framings and practices that “perpetuate harm” in the schooling lives of K-12 students of colour (p. 359). Scholars have thus proposed a range of affirming, ongoing, and fluid approaches to English teaching – such necessary work as affirming ethnic studies (De Los Ríos, López, and Morrell 2015); hip-hop-based education (Kelly 2023); Black immigrant literacies (Smith 2023); and digital geographies and racial literacies (Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz 2021).

In their reflective practice course with pre-service English teachers, Beymer et al. (2020) discussed the pedagogical activity of concluding each class with a poem. The instructors shared their poetic responses to a question posed by Brayden, a teaching intern, as he contemplated teaching in these times; Brayden asked: “How do I teach with hope?” (p. 2). Watson et al. examined English teaching and learning through Duncan-Andrade’s (2009) theorising of multiple forms of hope, asserting possibilities for educators working with youth to “painfully examine our lives and our actions within an unjust society and to share the sensibility that pain may pave the path to justice” (p. 187–188).

Conceptualizing a pedagogy of compassion in English teaching and Teacher education

Vandeyar and Swart (2019) conceptualised a *pedagogy of compassion* as comprised of three tenets. The first tenet involves “dismantling polarised thinking and questioning one’s ingrained belief system” (Vandeyar 2023, 2163) through dialogue, in which “opposing parties” engage in conversation (Jansen, 2009). The second tenet calls for “changing mind-sets/compassionately engaging with diversity in educational spaces” (Vandeyar 2023, 2163), including generating opportunities in the classroom to centre varied student voices and perspectives. The third tenet positions teachers as responsible for “instilling hope and sustainable peace” (Vandeyar 2023, 2163), considering how power impacts students across contexts of school and the broader society (Jansen, 2009). These tenets are enacted in an ethic of care (Noddings 1984) in educational spaces that provide opportunities for student voices to be centred in teaching and learning (see Vandeyar 2023). English teaching and teacher education has long supported and extended nuanced meanings of care across US (i.e. Carrol 2017). and South African contexts (i.e. Kennemer and Knaus 2019; Pillay 2017). For example, critical pedagogies including culturally relevant education (Ladson-Billings 1995, 2014) and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris and Alim 2014, 2017) emphasise the importance of teachers who demonstrate care for their students. Such care involves honouring the dynamic cultural practices of students, families, and communities (Paris and Alim 2014). These approaches acknowledge the social, political, racial, and economic context in which teachers and students live and work, seeking to develop students’ sociopolitical consciousness to support action-taking towards social change (Ladson-Billings 2002). The pedagogy of compassion similarly foregrounds educational equity, action taking, and empathy in pursuit of a more just world (Vandeyar 2023).

Critical reflective practice is central to the work of teachers who engage in the pedagogy of compassion, as teachers must engage in reflection to learn about, understand, empathise with, and build with students' experiences as assets in teaching and learning. As Marciano and colleagues (2021) note in their call for teacher education programmes to "decenter Whiteness in teacher education" (p. 134.), this work requires "honoring and affirming the multiple perspectives and lived experiences of students and families from marginalized communities" (p. 134). Centring students in this way is an essential aspect of a pedagogy of compassion, and reflects an extension of long-standing educational approaches that foreground critical perspectives and action taking.

Our study of PSTs' considerations of the pedagogy of compassion in their work with future students is guided by an understanding that English language arts teachers across global contexts are well positioned to support students in navigating the increasingly tumultuous and uncertain times in which we find ourselves. Across local, nation-state, and global contexts, teaching and teacher education is buffeted by systemic racism, including racial-capitalist economies of schooling and anti-immigrant sentiment; war; gun violence, particularly in the US; the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; environmental concerns and additional injustices (i.e. Barnum and Belsha 2020; Ladson-Billings 2021; B. Love 2020). Moreover, PSTs engage their work of teaching and learning amid contemporary youth movements and envisionings of educational justice globally (i.e. Beymer et al. 2020; Hauser 2016; Heleta 2023).

We find the theoretical approach of a *pedagogy of compassion in teacher education* (Watson et al., [under review](#)), particularly apt for supporting PSTs in preparing to teach in an increasingly racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse world. For example, in the US (where this study took place), the majority of PSTs are white, female, and middle class (Lindsay and Blom 2017) – at a time when, in 78 of the largest public US school districts, 44% of students are Latino, and 26% African American (Council of the Great City Schools 2023). In South Africa, while students identifying as white attend schools with a student body that includes approximately 20% of students who identify as Black, Black students typically attended schools that were just "0.9% white [...] and 96.4% Black" (Gruijters, Elbers, and Reddy 2022, 18).

Moreover, teacher preparation programmes (TPPs) are often centred in ways of knowing, being, and doing that privilege whiteness, contributing to educational inequities too often experienced by students of Color. As Carter Andrews et al. (2021) suggest, TPPs need to "decenter whiteness" to address educational inequities in contexts of teaching, teaching education, and research. We take up this work as ongoing and necessary, examining what happened – challenges and opportunities – when we introduced PSTs in a predominantly white TPP to the tenets of a pedagogy of compassion and asked students to connect their understandings of such theorising to their own teaching and learning – what we think of as a *pedagogy of compassion in teacher education*. Specifically, we ask the following research questions:

- (1) How do PSTs in the US and South Africa seek to enact the pedagogy of compassion in their future work as practicing teachers?
- (2) What opportunities and challenges do PSTs in the US and South Africa encounter as they seek to enact the pedagogy of compassion in their future work as practicing teachers?; and

- (3) What role, if any, does experiencing the pedagogy of compassion in their own schooling experiences influence the attempts of PSTs in the US and South Africa to enact such an approach in their own future teaching?

Methods

This study¹ shares findings of teaching and teacher-education practices within and across a partnership between Brewer, Marciano, Watson, and Vandeyar. We grew in collaboration through a university-based funding initiative seeking to establish and sustain reciprocal partnerships between university faculty in the US and research partners in African countries. For example, Joanne Marciano and Vaughn Watson are faculty at a university in the US Saloshna Vandeyar is a faculty member at a university in South Africa. Brittany Brewer is a graduate student research assistant at the US university where Marciano and Watson work.

Students enrolled in the TPP programme at the US university where Marciano and Watson work are required to take a two-semester course sequence in secondary English methods – prior to participating in a year-long student-teaching placement. Student teaching takes place in the fifth year of the TPP. Students enrolled in teacher-preparation coursework at the university in South Africa where Vandeyar teaches participate in student teaching in a range of grade-level or content areas alongside university coursework.

In 2021, Marciano and Brewer co-taught the first of two semester-long secondary English methods courses for 19 PSTs at their US university. In 2022, Watson and Brewer co-taught the next semester-long secondary English methods course in the sequence to the same group of 19 PSTs. During the course, Watson and Brewer introduced PSTs to several texts written by Vandeyar and colleagues detailing a pedagogy of compassion (Vandeyar and Swart 2016, 2019).

PSTs read and discussed the texts, and considered whether, how, and why they could incorporate tenets of the pedagogy of compassion in their own future teaching. To support PSTs in this work, Watson and Brewer encouraged them to reflect in course discussions and in writing for course assignments on their own experiences as students, including times when they may have experienced previous classroom teachers enacting practices that PSTs understood as reflective of tenets of the pedagogy of compassion. Watson and Brewer also asked PSTs to design instructional units that incorporated tenets of the pedagogy of compassion.

At the end of the semester, Marciano invited all PSTs enrolled in the two-course sequence to participate in a research study examining the opportunities and challenges they encountered in considering whether, how, and why they might incorporate the pedagogy of compassion into their own future teaching with students. A total of 10 PSTs agreed to participate in the study and provided informed consent to do so. Marciano interviewed each participating PST via Zoom, asking them to reflect on their experiences and perspectives as they learned about and sought to implement the pedagogy of compassion in their own curriculum design. All interviews were transcribed using the online transcription service Temi.

Brewer, Marciano, and Watson then conducted an initial analysis of each transcript using line-by-line coding (Saldaña 2021) to identify phrases exemplifying PSTs'

understandings of a pedagogy of compassion, and clustered phrases into illustrative categories – themes underscoring how PSTs named challenges and opportunities as they considered enacting a pedagogy of compassion in their future teaching. These included: centring the experiences and identities of students; naming and contextualising joy as key to learning and community; and demonstrating compassion through expressions of care. In addition, we examined the course assignments generated by participating PSTs. In doing so, we recognise the necessity of such an approach as a pedagogy of compassion in considering the texts and topics that are discussed in English classes, and the robust discussions such texts and topics provoke across student and teacher classroom communities. That is, we recognise that curriculum and teaching in the English classroom provides an important, familiar context for teacher educators, teachers, and students to grapple with urgent topics of the day. Specifically, we discussed explanatory examples of course assignments in which PSTs explicitly noted the pedagogy of compassion; included tenets of the pedagogy of compassion in their curriculum design; or reflected on their own experiences with the tenets of the pedagogy of compassion as either a student or as a future teacher.

During this process, Marciano and Watson travelled to South Africa to meet with Vandeyar to engage in two additional rounds of data analysis. In the first subsequent round of analysis, Marciano, Watson, and Vandeyar examined excerpts of the interview transcripts in which PSTs discussed their understanding of and attempts to enact the tenets of the pedagogy of compassion in PSTs own teaching and learning. Vandeyar extended the research team's initial analysis by drawing from their deep understanding of the pedagogy of compassion resulting from their ongoing work developing this theoretical approach. During the visit, Marciano, Watson, and Vandeyar also met with PSTs from the university in South Africa who were enrolled in a parallel teaching methods course. In that course, the instructor also introduced students to the pedagogy of compassion and supported them in considering whether, how, and why they might incorporate the pedagogy in their own teaching in South Africa. Four students agreed and provided informed consent to participate in our study. Marciano and Watson subsequently interviewed students via Zoom, asking about their experiences and perspectives related to the pedagogy of compassion, teaching, and learning.

The subsequent second round of data analysis then involved the research team examining transcripts of interviews conducted with the students in the South African context and coursework generated by PSTs in the US context as they sought to design curricular units of study that reflected the tenets of the pedagogy of compassion. In addition, Marciano and Watson travelled again to South Africa, and Vandeyar drew from her extensive knowledge and theorising of the pedagogy of compassion to support the research team's collective understandings of whether and how PSTs' coursework reflected such tenets.

In Watson et al. ([under review](#)) we detail how PSTs seeking to enact a pedagogy of compassion in their future work envision a *pedagogy of compassion in teacher education* through centring experiences and identities of students, and naming and contextualising joy as key to learning and community. In this article, we detail as an enactment of a *pedagogy of compassion in teacher education* how PSTs named the urgency of demonstrating compassion through expressions of care.

Comparative inquiry commonalities and distinctions

Our inquiry explores data drawn from two distinct contexts: the US context, with PSTs in an English methods course, and the South African context, with PSTs enrolled in an English and social studies methods course. Our comparative work identified both continuities and differences between the two settings, illuminating challenges, opportunities, and connections as pre-service teachers designed curriculum and teaching utilising a pedagogy of compassion. In both contexts, pre-service teachers worked towards roles as future educators informed by pressing youth-led movements towards justice. This reflected the recent work of teacher education programmes in the US and South Africa in familiarising pre-service teachers with pedagogies that counter anti-Black and anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy. Moreover, in both contexts we intentionally engaged a demographic of participants who identified as pre-service teachers enrolled in a teacher-preparation programme, which allowed for comparison of pre-service teachers' consideration of enacting a pedagogy of compassion. Yet the two distinct contexts illuminated pointed differences. For instance, participants' lived schooling experiences shaped and were shaped by distinct colonial histories of racial categorisation in the US and South Africa. Additionally, pre-service teachers were enrolled in distinct teacher preparation programmes situated in differing colonial histories of curriculum design and teaching practice, prompting participants to narrate a range of differing experiences as they navigated teacher-preparation coursework. In summary, while both the US and South African contexts shared continuities of pre-service teacher communities enrolled in university-based coursework towards future educator careers, the distinctions between differing contexts must be considered when naming conclusions and implications about the urgency of a pedagogy of compassion in teacher education to support curriculum and teaching towards more just futures.

Demonstrating compassion through expressions of care

Vandeyar and Swart (2019) argue that a pedagogy of compassion requires teachers to demonstrate warmth and care alongside feelings of empathy and agency. This argument resonated with PSTs in both the US and South Africa who envisioned future classrooms as spaces where students felt teachers and fellow students cared for them, teachers empathised with students' experiences, and classmates demonstrated care, warmth, and empathy. PSTs shared multiple stances of care as they planned to create such classrooms, including developing lesson plans requiring PSTs to reflect on their own perspectives before asking their students to share their broader reflections with peers. The latter is important; practicing reflection as individuals is one step towards investigating and questioning our personal beliefs and compassionately engaging with beliefs shared that are different from ours, both integral components of a pedagogy of compassion.

Samantha, a PST in the US, noted such conversations could support students' learning with one another. In a summative assessment she designed during coursework, Samantha explained that she sought to encourage her future students to engage in individual reflection and group discussion:

... students can have those reflective periods for themselves, but then also have this time to kind of bounce ideas off of each other and learn in that way and show again that same compassion for their classmates that they're already trying to show to themselves. And in the way that you want to hear them and actually listen to what they're saying and not just take their thoughts in and then regurgitate your own to someone else. But really try to show them that you're listening and that you care about what they're saying and not just that it's another thought that someone else had.

Through her reflection, Samantha aims to create a classroom space that supports her students in engaging with diverse ideas, multiple voices and lived realities with and from their classmates. In South Africa, Nathalie similarly discussed the importance of facilitating a classroom culture where students felt supported and understood their contributions were welcomed:

I think a lot of them are shy. [Students] are too scared to voice themselves ... I did my teaching pracs in schools with large classrooms and there's also, they're worried if they get something wrong or like if they answer a question wrong, that they feel stupid or like they're gonna get in trouble. I think [...] they are a bit scared to come forward and just express themselves.

Establishing classroom contexts where students may "express themselves" aligns with the pedagogy of compassion's emphasis on teachers' demonstrating warmth, care, empathy, and agency. If students do not feel that they can express themselves without instantaneous judgement or dismissal, they will be unable to enter into conversations with varied and, at times, polarising ideas. Being able to participate in difficult conversations, share ideas, and critically reflect – engaging the stance of an empathetic listener – are skills that our pre-service teachers identified as being necessary to practice. Amalia, a PST in South Africa, similarly explained cultural and heritage contexts of learning:

I know some learners find it hard to work in groups not because they're introverted ... they just find it hard to work in groups, especially if it's not the people they're familiar with like their friends. But I also think that it's important for them to do this, 'cause one day, when they get to their jobs, they're not always gonna be with their friends. They're gonna ask, interact with people that's from different cultures and different backgrounds and they, you can't choose who your coworkers are... I think it's good for them to get out of the comfort zone and actually do this and for us as teachers to actually incorporate that so that you can motivate them to talk with different people and interact [with] them.

Melody, a PST in South Africa, further noted the importance of considering students' experiences when designing curriculum and instruction: "So the way how I thought of it [...] is looking at not just, you know, the textbooks and that, but also how things affect students and such [...] So I think of it as expanding on not just the work, but also how the students interact with it". Melody engages in a pedagogy of compassion by prioritising expanding on textbooks and a range of learning materials, affirming possibilities of engaging heritage learning and knowledges to focus on her students' voices, diverse lifeworlds, and perspectives.

Building on this idea, PSTs further sought to serve as models for students of demonstrating compassion through expressions of care that included listening. In the US context, Fiona discussed the importance of developing relationships with students:

I think one of the biggest things that appeals to me with [a pedagogy of compassion] is its focus on student relationships and on honoring students' cultures and their identities. I think that's something that at least here in America, isn't always done, especially in places that don't have as much diversity. And so even if there is a classroom that doesn't have much diversity, being able to still have students know that there are other perspectives, other cultures, other identities out there, I think is huge.

In this way, Fiona underscored what Vandeyar (2022) discusses as “the metaphors of mirrors and windows” (p. 5).

The metaphor of the mirror is about validating the identity of every student in the class. All students should see themselves reflected in the classroom. In this way, their identity is affirmed. The metaphor of the window relates to the fact that even if a particular cultural group is not represented in the classroom, teachers still need to “open the window” to allow their students to “look outside” to learn about other cultures. (p. 5)

Moreover, for Fiona, a pedagogy of compassion encapsulated these values and provided a solid framework for her to approach designing her unit plan and, more specifically, selecting primary texts like the movie *Dumplin'* (Fletcher 2018). During her interview, Fiona emphasised the importance of engaging students in discussions not only surrounding racial and ethnic identities but also embodied identities – making space to talk about able-bodiedness and fatphobia while evaluating Western beauty standards with a critical lens (Foos 2024). In addition to theorising a pedagogy of compassion in her classroom, Fiona noted she experienced a pedagogy of compassion in her experiences as a university student, particularly from course instructors who demonstrated care when she was experiencing multiple challenges in her personal life. She explained:

This past semester was very challenging for me, dealing with a death in the family that was very close to me and a major surgery within a week of each other. So the pedagogy of compassion was something that I experienced firsthand through my instructors . . . People would ask me like, oh, like, how are your teachers with [my absences from class]? . . . And I was like, they're great . . . This sounds bad, but it was so it was so nice for my schooling to be the last thing that I felt like I had to worry about [as] I was going through all of that stuff. I was still trying to participate as much as I could just because that's who I wanted to be as a student. But it was just nice to know that I could step away for a second because I needed to physically, and also I needed to for my family. It was nice to know that I could step away for a second and not be thought of as a bad student or I could come back to my schooling in a timely way and still be welcomed into the classroom.

Fiona noted that being treated with dignity and care when she was experiencing personal challenges that impacted her schooling experiences demonstrated the importance of enacting those same approaches with her future students. “It's something I experienced very firsthand”. She expressed how impactful it was that her teachers offered compassion to her, as well as other students in her class who were experiencing a variety of challenges.

Michelle, a PST in the US, similarly put herself in the position of a student experiencing empathy and care associated with a pedagogy of compassion as she envisioned enacting the pedagogical stance in future teaching. As noted in the quotation at the beginning of this paper, Michelle . . . explained that a teacher who demonstrated a pedagogy of compassion would have students who know the teacher “really cared” for them and “wanted to know like anything that was going on” in their lives. Michelle noted that teachers could use that awareness of students' lives to make connections to classroom curriculum in

support of student learning. In envisioning her classroom curriculum through this lens, Michelle curated lesson plans that featured texts like *Wonder* (Palacio 2012), the movie *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki 2001), Olivia Rodrigo's hit song "Rodrigo" (2021), as well as students' social media posts. It was her hope that each of these texts would support students in critically and compassionately investigating identity. Such work provides students with different entrance points to practice empathy, identifying similar experiences across different cultures, and reflecting on how environment/setting influences who we are as people – each important aspects of the three tenets of a pedagogy of compassion, and the instantiation of action through compassion.

For Renee, a PST in the US, demonstrating compassion through enactments of care meant reflecting on language she planned to use with students in future teaching. She explained: "It's also how you talk to students, just how you address them in the classroom, the safety of your classroom". More specifically, Renee identified transparency as a key component of a pedagogy of compassion. By offering transparency, by reflecting on her language to speak to her students only with respect, Renee was making moves towards cultivating a pedagogy of compassion and, more specifically, scaffolding a classroom space where students can trust they can offer their beliefs, reflect on their beliefs, and revise their beliefs while being met with respect. Yet even as PSTs noted a desire to enact compassion through care, Renee noted challenges she anticipated encountering when seeking to enact a pedagogy of compassion in her future teaching:

Sometimes it's very hard to be compassionate in regular life, not just like, not, especially when you're in a classroom and supporting 30 other youths every single day with it. I feel like right now, especially that just the field of teaching is exhausting and it's causing burnout. And, um, it's kind of an additional obstacle to using the pedagogy of compassion and even on your best days.

Renee's comments point to the need for teacher educators to support PSTs in enacting a pedagogy of compassion while grappling with challenges in their lives. Just as students are navigating issues of social justice, such as systemic racism, violence against LGBTQ+ people, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and gun violence among other traumas, so too are PSTs. Renee reminds us of the necessity for PSTs to experience a pedagogy of compassion in their studies. For Renee, this looks like not leaning away from dense texts like *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad 1902) and its content, which features extensive racism, as well as themes of colonisation and the white saviour. During her interview, she emphasised the value in disrupting texts and facilitating students' practice of a critical lens.

Heather, a PST in the US, demonstrated her desire to show her future students she cared for them by considering action-taking both inside and outside of the classroom. For example, a written assignment invited students to consider what they understood about the pedagogy of compassion after reading two texts written by Vandeyar (Vandeyar 2021; Vandeyar and Swart 2019). Heather and classmates wrote several points, including "Making connections to your students", "Caring for your students", and "Taking interest in their lives". In a subsequent part of the written assignment, the PSTs wrote "Simple things like asking 'how was your weekend,'" and "Going to extracurriculars" as actions she and her classmates could take to address the points previously noted. As Heather learns more about each of her students, she can make space more intentionally for each of their varied perspectives and experiences. Additionally, conversing with students about their lives inside and outside of school

makes an opportunity to hear about students' interactions with power in and out of school. When it came to caring for her students inside the classroom, Heather noted her commitment to scaffolding several different forms of participation within each lesson – from individual reflection and pair-shares to small and full group discussions – in order to meet students where they are. By offering an array of participation opportunities, Heather provides spaces for her students to practice engaging in critical dialogue, to self-reflect, and to experience a diversity of thoughts. Connecting back to her understanding of a pedagogy of compassion, Heather said “not forcing [students]” to each speak during a full class discussion because “that’s not comfortable for all students”.

In the same written assignment in the US context, however, Philip questioned how to demonstrate “empathy” and “understanding” with his desire to maintain order in the classroom. He wrote that he wanted to learn “how to balance compassion and being stern”. Philip’s comment provides insight into the challenges PSTs may encounter as they seek to negotiate their previously held conceptions about the role of the teacher (e.g. managing student behaviour) and possibilities for enacting tenets of the pedagogy of compassion in classroom spaces.

Takeaways for teachers, Teacher educators, and educational researchers

As PSTs in both the South African and US contexts considered whether, how, and why they may enact the pedagogy of compassion with students in their future work as teachers, they generated new insights into the opportunities and challenges of this work for English teachers, teacher educators, and educational researchers seeking to support students in navigating the continuing uncertain times within which we find ourselves. Specifically, PSTs emphasised the need to design and facilitate classroom spaces where students were supported by teachers and classmates who demonstrated care, empathy, and warmth in their interactions.

For English teachers: Such work for teachers may involve engaging in critical reflection about whether, how, and why their own teaching practice involves opportunities for students to engage these enactments of the pedagogy of compassion. Specifically, English teachers may review their curricular resources to generate and/or extend opportunities for students to reflect on their own thinking before engaging in conversation with peers about their ideas. As noted by the PSTs in our study, such a practice may alter the dynamics of the classroom as students who may be perceived as quiet or shy are supported in talking with their classmates. We envision the intentional curation of both primary and supplemental classroom texts as well as the development of writing prompts or graphic organisers as two specific strategies. English teachers may take to supporting classroom discussion in ways that include all students’ perspectives.

For English teacher educators: English teacher educators may consider whether their own work with PSTs demonstrates stance-taking reflective of the pedagogy of compassion. We are particularly struck by Fiona’s discussion of the multiple challenges she encountered during the academic year when data for this study was collected. Specifically, Fiona noted that even though she missed class she did not want to be seen by her professors as a “bad student” and instead felt “welcomed into the classroom” when she was able to return. We wonder what

could have happened to Fiona's educational trajectory if she did not feel that her presence was "welcomed into the classroom". Demonstrating the pedagogy of compassion may also generate opportunities for English teacher educators to engage in collaborative reflection with PSTs about the impact of this pedagogical approach. Supporting PSTs to consider how they have – or have not – experienced the pedagogy of compassion in their own schooling experiences may provide valuable insight for their future teaching, and the continued work of teacher educators who support them.

For education researchers: Opportunities exist for education researchers to consider how designing and enacting research methods that reflect a pedagogy of compassion may influence their engagement with research participants. For example, Brewer, Marciano and Watson all had experience working with the US-based PSTs in this study. Several of those PSTs noted in interviews that they felt like they experienced the pedagogy of compassion in the way Brewer, Marciano, and Watson taught the secondary methods courses they were enrolled in. We wonder what might happen if educational researchers sought to reflect the tenets of the pedagogy of compassion in their work examining the experiences and perspectives of PSTs. We further argue that a need exists for future research that examines whether, how, and why the pedagogy of compassion may be taken up by PSTs as they move into their own classrooms as practicing English teachers. Researching, imagining, and engaging practices like a pedagogy of compassion in English classrooms is a highly important endeavour considering the current sociopolitical climate of education in the United States. In the 2023 report, PEN America notes a 33% increase in book bans from the year prior, with 30% of banned books featuring characters of colours and themes relating to race and racism and, separately, 30% including LGBTQ+ characters and/or themes. America (2023) states:

The range of efforts to restrict teaching or intimidate educators also continues to expand. The escalation of book bans — combined with the proliferation of legislative efforts to restrict teaching about topics like race, gender, American history, and LGBTQ+ identities, as well as the rise in "educational intimidation" mandates that require intrusive monitoring of teachers and librarians — poses a grave threat to the freedom to read and learn in schools across the country.

Because of this, our current and future English teachers deserve research that is in pursuit of compassion, both for our students with marginalised identities and for our teachers, themselves. Additionally, further examination of the nuances between PSTs experiences learning about and seeking to enact the pedagogy of compassion in the US and South African contexts – and in additional global contexts – is needed to deepen our collective understandings of possibilities and potential for the pedagogy of compassion to continue to inform the work of teaching, learning, and research.

Note

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