

Intentional Kindness as Dispositional Formation: A Thematic Analysis of Pre-Service Teachers' Reflective Journals

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Abstract: Despite broad consensus on the importance of care and empathy in teaching, teacher preparation programs struggle to translate caring values into deliberate, observable behaviors. This qualitative study examines how participation in a structured kindness activity embedded in a Teacher Education course shapes pre-service teachers' understandings of care and relational teaching as professional dispositions. Reflexive thematic analysis of 37 reflective journals yielded five themes to suggest structured kindness practice supported participants' movement from caring as abstract value toward consciously enacted professional orientation. Implications for teacher preparation are discussed.

Keywords: Teacher Dispositions, Care Ethics, Teacher Preparation, Professional Identity, Reflective Practice.

Introduction

In contemporary teacher education, the development of professional dispositions, the deeply held values, beliefs, and habitual orientations shaping how educators relate to students and colleagues, has emerged as a central concern for preparation programs and accrediting bodies (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Care and empathy occupy a foundational position among these dispositions. A growing body of scholarship identifies teacher-student relationships and teachers' social-emotional competence as potentially important to student learning and well-being (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Yet despite broad consensus on the importance of care, teacher preparation programs have struggled to develop instructional models that translate caring values into deliberate, observable, and sustained caring behaviors (Warren, 2018). Nel Noddings' (1984, 1992, 2013) ethics of care reframed the teacher-student relationship as fundamentally relational and ethical: the caring teacher practices engrossment (receptive attentiveness to the reality of the student) and motivational displacement (setting aside one's own preoccupations to act in the interest of the other), and this orientation must be deliberately cultivated. More recent scholarship extends Noddings' framework into teacher preparation, establishing that empathy is a key feature of professional identity and a predictor of positive classroom climate (Aldrup et al., 2022; Warren, 2018).

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Purpose

The present study addresses a gap in this literature by examining how participation in the 5 Cent Kindness Project, a five-day structured reflection activity embedded in a Professional Teacher Education course, shapes pre-service teachers' understandings of care, compassion, and relational teaching as core professional dispositions. Participants were given five pennies to move from one pocket to another with each deliberate act of kindness over five consecutive days, after which they submitted reflective journals responding to six structured questions. This study presents a retrospective inductive thematic analysis of 37 such reflective journals submitted across two academic semesters, using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis framework.

Review of Literature

Ethics of Care as a Framework for Relational Teaching

The conceptual foundation of this study rests on Nel Noddings' (1984, 1992, 2013) ethics of care, which frames caring through concrete relational practices: engrossment (receptive attentiveness to the student as a unique individual) and motivational displacement (temporarily taking up the interests of the other). Noddings (1992) argued that care must be practiced and cultivated through habituated relational engagement, not transmitted through didactic instruction alone. Researchers found that the relational demands of caring teaching are not automatically activated by goodwill argued that care must be understood as a form of relational labor requiring deliberate cultivation (Goldstein & Freedman, 2003; Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006). Scholars at the intersection of care theory and equity-oriented pedagogy have demonstrated that caring relationships are academically enabling students who experience their teachers as genuinely caring demonstrate higher levels of engagement, motivation, and achievement, particularly among historically marginalized populations (Howard, 2001; Nieto, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999).

Teacher Empathy as a Professional Disposition

The teacher empathy literature conceptualizes empathy not as an innate trait but as a multidimensional professional disposition that can be developed, practiced, and assessed, encompassing cognitive empathy (understanding and taking the perspective of another) and affective empathy (sharing and responding appropriately to another's emotional experience) (Davis, 1983; Decety & Jackson, 2004). Warren (2018) argues that empathy is a dynamic and learnable professional competency, identifying perspective-taking, emotional attunement, and culturally responsive relational sensitivity as key components. Aldrup et al. (2022) found that teachers with higher levels of empathic accuracy were associated with more positive classroom climates and higher student engagement demonstrated that empathy training interventions produced measurable gains in perspective-taking and relational sensitivity. Thornton (2006) describes such dispositions as "the connective tissue between knowledge and practice" (p. 61). The challenge for teacher educators lies not in convincing pre-service teachers that care and empathy matter, but in designing learning

experiences that support the internalization of these values as enacted professional practices rather than abstract commitments. Aldrup et al. (2022) found evidence that teachers who reported greater empathy toward hypothetical bullying situations were more likely to report an intention to intervene. The study called for further research; however, the scarcity of this type of empirical research in the field of education encompassing empathy or prosocial behavior, may further limit implementation of these practices within teacher preparation.

Prosocial Behavior, Intentional Kindness, and Reflective Practice

A substantial body of psychological research provides empirical grounding for the use of structured kindness activity as a dispositional intervention. Hui et al. (2020) found that deliberate other-directed kindness generated a small positive association in social connection and subjective well-being. Others found that engaging in helping behavior can strengthen prosocial self-understanding, while college experiences such as service-learning are associated with growth in self-concept (Brandenberger & Bowman, 2015; Hu et al., 2022). Eisenberg et al. (2006) identified bidirectional relationships between empathic concern and prosocial behavior, noting that acting prosocially can strengthen empathic responsiveness by directing attention toward the needs of others. Structured written reflection has been identified as a powerful vehicle for dispositional development: Researchers found that sustained reflection created opportunities for participants to interrogate assumptions and examine the gap between stated values and enacted behaviors; and argued that reflective writing supports the externalization of implicit belief systems (Farrell, 2013; LaBelle & Belknap, 2016). By requiring participants first to engage in deliberate kindness behavior and then to reflect through focused prompts, the 5 Cent Kindness Project creates a structured cycle of experience and meaning-making, a laboratory, in Noddings' (1992) terms, for the cultivation of caring as an enacted and reflected-upon professional practice.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in constructivist epistemological assumptions (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) as the analytic framework. The data source comprised 37 reflective journals submitted by pre-service teacher education students enrolled in a Professional Teacher Education course at a public regional university over two academic semesters. Participants were given five pennies and instructed to move one penny from one pocket to another with each deliberate act of kindness performed over five consecutive school days, interpreting kindness broadly as any intentional, other-directed act of care, assistance, attentiveness, or emotional support. After completing the activity, participants submitted journals responding to six structured prompts covering specific acts performed, reactions of recipients, the emotional and cognitive experience of the actor, challenges and surprises encountered, and the implications of the activity for their understanding of teaching. Data analysis followed the six-phase process described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019): familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Initial codes

were generated inductively at both the semantic level (explicit content and apparent meaning) and the latent level (underlying assumptions, values, and orientations). Because the reflective journals were originally submitted as course assignments, a determination of IRB exemption was sought and obtained prior to analysis. All identifying information was removed, and participants are identified throughout by pseudonym. The researcher's positionality as the instructor of record is acknowledged as a relevant ethical consideration, and a stance of reflexive awareness was maintained throughout the analytic process.

Findings

Inductive thematic analysis of 37 reflective journals yielded five overarching themes: (1) Kindness as Learned Intentionality, (2) Relational Awareness and Empathic Attunement, (3) The Reciprocal Nature of Care, (4) Dispositional Shift Toward an Other-Centered Orientation, and (5) Kindness as Professional Identity and Pedagogical Practice. Each theme is presented below with representative participant quotations attributed by pseudonym.

Theme 1: Kindness as Learned Intentionality

A dominant theme was the recognition that kindness, even when held as a personal value, requires deliberate and conscious effort to enact consistently. Many participants entered the project confident in their existing kindness practices, only to discover gaps in ways everyday routine had obscured. Avery reflected: "I have always thought of myself as a kind person, but I have declined in my efforts to be kind throughout the last couple of years. This project has been excellent at recentering my focus on being a kind person first and foremost. It has forced me to see the ways in which I am lacking and it has taught me that sometimes kindness is an effort, and that is a good thing." Blaine illustrated how habitual kindness can become invisible without intentional framing: "The first day I did not move any pennies. This was not because I did not do anything kind. It was because I did not think about doing anything kind and did not think I did anything kind." The physical coin-moving mechanism proved particularly effective as a metacognitive device: "The actual physical act of switching a coin from right to left really humbles you. I thought I showed kindness way more until I was physically able to count how many times I attempted to be kind" (Lennox). These accounts suggest the project operated as a dispositional mirror, a structured opportunity to see one's caring behaviors with new clarity and choose more deliberately.

Theme 2: Relational Awareness and Empathic Attunement

A second theme was the development of heightened attentiveness to the emotional states and needs of others. Pellen articulated the ethical imperative: "We never can know what a stranger is going through so it is important to keep everyone's emotions in mind. Saying or doing one thing for someone can change the course of their day." Alton described tailoring kindness to individual affective states: "if they seemed in a positive mood I would compliment them and if in a negative mood I would tell them to have a great day and they'll get through it." Wren described a breakthrough in social confidence with direct implications for classroom practice: "I built up courage to compliment people I hadn't ever

spoken to before. I always had a tiny voice in the back of my mind saying someone may be offended or react negatively to something I said, but that did not happen." A notable sub-pattern involved participants discovering the relational value of deep listening. Kieran reflected: "I would also try and lend an ear to someone that might not have looked like they were having the best day. Sometimes people just want to be heard." This framing of attentive listening as care is consonant with relational pedagogy's understanding of the teacher as a responsive, witnessing presence.

Theme 3: The Reciprocal Nature of Care

A third theme was participants' recognition of the bidirectional quality of kindness: acts of care simultaneously benefit the giver and the receiver. Avery articulated this dynamic: "I noticed that the people I shared kindness with were so quick to give it right back. It was amazing how much love I could feel radiating from another person from the shortest interaction." Lena reflected on a ripple effect: "I think kindness has a ripple effect. Kindness gives others confidence, and with confidence, you develop the 'want to' to try and infect others with the same kindness that showed you confidence. If giving just five compliments a day affects those five to want also to give out five compliments, one penny can change the world." Sable, working as a special education teacher's assistant, articulated the professional sustaining quality of reciprocal care most directly: "I noticed a stronger connection between the students and myself after instigating an act of kindness. I feel more fulfilled about my job when I instigate acts of kindness." Here, care is not merely a moral good but a professional vitalizer, a renewable source of meaning in the daily work of teaching.

Theme 4: Dispositional Shift Toward an Other-Centered Orientation

A fourth and integrating theme was evidence of a dispositional shift, a reorientation of the self away from self-absorption and toward sustained attentiveness to the needs and experiences of others. Kieran named selfishness as the primary structural barrier to consistent care: "I started to ponder to myself about all the times I decided not to be kind and the reasoning for it. The real reasons I didn't spread kindness in those very moments was because of selfishness. I realized that I didn't want to do that because I was being lazy and only thinking about myself." Remy described a productive dissonance between self-perception and observable disposition: "I think I am a jerk and think like a jerk a lot of the time, but somehow I manage to still be kind towards others. I do not think I am kind, and yet I do kind-hearted things without thinking." This dissonance suggests that dispositional development is not always fully visible to the individual in process, a finding with implications for how teacher educators might support and assess the internalization of professional dispositions.

Theme 5: Kindness as Professional Identity and Pedagogical Practice

A fifth theme emerged with salience: participants already engaged in teaching or coaching roles articulated an explicit connection between kindness practices cultivated through this project and their developing professional identities as educators. Valor offered

a detailed account of kindness as both pedagogical strategy and climate-builder: "Most of the acts of kindness revolved around my teaching. I believe positive reinforcement can go a long way towards the attitude of the 'team', and I think it really paid off this year. I noticed that when I was more kind to people, they were more likely to reach out to me about things, and they were having more fun in their playing." Avery extended this support: "This project should be essential for all professions that deal directly with people! I think every person could benefit from making a conscious effort to spread kindness, particularly those in the education and medical fields."

Discussion

The findings offer substantive evidence that a brief, structured kindness activity embedded within a professional dispositions unit can function as a meaningful dispositional intervention. Across five inductively derived themes, participants demonstrated movement from caring as an abstract personal value toward caring as a consciously enacted and professionally oriented practice. Theme 1 resonates directly with Noddings' (1992) argument that care must be cultivated through deliberate practice: the penny-moving mechanism rendered kindness visible and countable in ways that disrupted participants' taken-for-granted self-perceptions, supporting the heightened reflective awareness that the dispositional literature identifies as prerequisite to genuine dispositional development (LaBelle & Belknap, 2016). Theme 2 aligns with Warren's (2018) conceptualization of teacher empathy as a learnable professional competency and with Batson's (2011) account of how intentional perspective-taking activates affective empathy through imaginative identification with the other. The project's requirement that participants deliberately attend to opportunities for kindness enlarged their aperture of relational awareness in ways with direct application to classroom practice, consistent with Jennings and Greenberg (2009) theoretical perspective for prosocial behavior as relevant for teacher's professional effectiveness.

Theme 3 extends the prosocial behavior literature's account of actor-recipient benefits (Hui et al., 2020) into the professional domain of teaching. Sable's description of feeling more professionally fulfilled after instigating acts of kindness illustrates a dimension of care that is rarely foregrounded in teacher preparation literature: its generative, self-sustaining quality. Theme 4 documents evidence of reorientation from self-focused to other-directed habitual awareness, consistent with Brandenberger and Bowman's (2015) account of how prosocial behavior supports the development of a prosocial self-concept. Theme 5 extends this analysis into the domain of professional identity, with Valor's account of kindness as both a relational practice and a pedagogical strategy representing a sophisticated practical-theoretical integration that teacher preparation programs seek to cultivate over years of clinical experience.

Implications for Teacher Preparation

The findings carry several implications for the design of teacher preparation programs. First, they support embedding structured kindness activities within professional dispositions coursework as a complement to didactic instruction. The 5 Cent Kindness Project is brief, low-cost, easily adaptable, and capable of generating substantive

dispositional and professional identity formation. Second, the findings underscore the importance of structured written reflection as a component of any experiential dispositional intervention. The reflective journals in this study did not merely document dispositional development; they appear to have contributed to it, by requiring participants to narrate, interpret, and make meaning of their experiences in ways that consolidated and extended the dispositional insights generated by the activity itself. Third, the findings suggest that teacher educators should attend carefully to participants' pre-existing dispositional orientations, designing differentiated pathways that challenge advanced practitioners to extend their existing commitments in new directions rather than treating all pre-service teachers as dispositional novices.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. The retrospective, single-site design constrains generalizability. The researcher's dual role as course instructor and analyst is a significant source of potential bias, and the study's reliance on self-report data means the findings document how participants narrate their experiences rather than how they behave in professional settings. The absence of demographic data limits the study's capacity to examine differential impact across characteristics such as race, gender, or prior teaching experience. Future research might address these limitations through prospective designs with pre- and post-assessments of caring dispositions, multi-institutional samples, and control or comparison conditions. Iterations in the future might also incorporate prompts inviting participants to reflect on the cultural dimensions of their kindness practices, addressing the intersection of care theory and equity-oriented pedagogy (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999).

Conclusion

This study examined how participation in the 5 Cent Kindness Project shaped pre-service teachers' understandings of care, compassion, and relational teaching as professional dispositions. The five themes generated through inductive thematic analysis provide consistent and meaningful evidence that intentional kindness practices, combined with structured written reflection, can support the development of care-oriented professional identities. The 5 Cent Kindness Project represents a low-cost, easily adaptable, and theoretically grounded pedagogical tool with the potential to contribute meaningfully to the relational formation of future educators. In a landscape where teacher preparation programs are under sustained pressure to demonstrate that they actually cultivate the relational habits of heart that effective, humane, and equitable teaching demands, five pennies, it turns out, may be worth considerably more than five cents.

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