The Role of Empathy-Based Learning Experience in Students' Helping Attitudes and Empathic Tendencies

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Abstract

Empathy is a fundamental competence across all disciplines that involve human services, and prior research has demonstrated that it can be enhanced through structured educational interventions. This study aimed to examine the effects of an empathy-based learning experience, delivered through a Communication Skills course, on the helping attitudes, empathy skills, and empathic tendencies of undergraduate students. The research was conducted using a pretest–posttest control group experimental design. The sample consisted of 74 first-year students enrolled in the Department of Social Work at the University of Health Sciences. To minimize interaction between groups, students who selected the course as an elective (n = 34) formed the experimental group, while those who took it as a compulsory departmental course (n = 40) served as the control group. The course content was developed and delivered by the researcher, integrating both theoretical knowledge and practical exercises designed to foster empathic engagement. Data were collected through a short demographic questionnaire, the Empathy Skills Scale–Form B (Dökmen, 1988), the Empathic Tendency Scale (Dökmen, 1988), and the Helping Attitudes Scale (Nickell, 1998; adapted to Turkish by Serpen & Hasgül, 2018). The Shapiro–Wilk test was used to assess normality, and paired-sample t-tests were applied to analyze changes between pre- and post-test scores. Findings revealed a statistically significant improvement in both empathy skills and empathic tendencies among students in the experimental group compared to their baseline scores (p < .05). Although post-test helping attitudes showed an upward trend, the change was not statistically significant (p > .05). Overall, the results suggest that empathy-based learning experiences can play a crucial role in enhancing empathy-related competencies among social work students, thereby strengthening their preparedness for professional practice in human service contexts.

Keywords: Empathy-Based Learning, Communication Skills, Helping Attitudes, Empathic Tendencies, Social Work Education

1. Introduction

Empathy, defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, is a central competency in professions that involve direct human interaction, including social work, healthcare, and education. It enables practitioners to recognize the emotions, needs, and perspectives of individuals they serve, thereby fostering effective communication, trust, and supportive relationships. Empathy is considered both an inherent trait and a skill that can be developed through structured educational programs and experiential learning (Dökmen, 1988; Nickell, 1998). Empirical evidence suggests that higher levels of empathy among professionals are associated with improved interpersonal relationships, increased engagement in prosocial behaviors, and enhanced professional effectiveness (Batson, 2011; Davis, 1996).

In social work education, empathy serves as a critical foundation for effective practice, influencing students' capacity to understand clients' experiences and respond appropriately. Helping behaviors, a core component of social work practice, are closely linked to empathic ability. Students who demonstrate higher levels of empathy are more likely to exhibit positive helping attitudes and to engage in ethical, client-centered practice (Riess, 2017). Despite its recognized importance, however, traditional curricula in social work and related fields often emphasize theoretical knowledge over practical skill development. As a result, students may acquire conceptual understanding of social work principles without fully developing the applied empathic skills required in real-world professional contexts. This limitation is particularly significant in contexts such as home-based care for elderly, disabled, or

bed-bound patients, where empathic communication directly affects the quality of care, client satisfaction, and overall well-being (Hojat et al., 2001).

Empathy in education is not limited to cognitive understanding; it involves emotional engagement and behavioral responsiveness. Studies suggest that empathy can be cultivated through targeted pedagogical interventions, such as role-playing, reflective exercises, and structured communication skills training (Decety & Cowell, 2014). By integrating empathy-based learning experiences into the curriculum, educators can provide students with opportunities to practice both cognitive and emotional components of empathy in controlled settings, promoting the development of skills that are transferable to professional practice (Gerdes & Segal, 2011).

Although previous research has examined empathy development in healthcare and counseling students, there remains a gap in understanding how structured, empathy-focused courses influence both helping attitudes and empathic tendencies among social work undergraduates. Moreover, the relationship between theoretical instruction and practical application of empathy skills requires further investigation to determine effective curriculum strategies that promote both empathy and prosocial behaviors.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the effects of an empathy-based Communication Skills course on undergraduate social work students' helping attitudes, empathy skills, and empathic tendencies. Using a pretest–posttest control group experimental design, the study examines whether structured, empathy-focused learning experiences enhance students' capacities to respond effectively and compassionately in professional settings. The findings aim to provide evidence-based guidance for integrating empathy-centered pedagogical approaches into social work curricula, ensuring that students are adequately prepared for professional practice with vulnerable populations.

By focusing on both cognitive and emotional components of empathy, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on empathy development in social service education. It highlights the potential for educational interventions to foster prosocial attitudes and skills that are essential for ethical and effective practice, thereby addressing a critical need in the preparation of future social work professionals.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

Data were collected within a pretest–posttest control group experimental design. In this design, two randomly selected groups are assigned, one serving as the experimental group and the other as the control group. Data are collected from both groups before and after the educational intervention (Karasar, 2005). Table 1 presents the experimental design of the study.

Table 1. Design of the study

Groups	Pre-test	Process	Post-test
Intervention Group	HAS	E-OCSC	HAS
	ESS-B		ESS-B
	ETS		ETS
Control Group	HAS	CSC	HAS
	ESS-B		ESS-B
	ETS		ETS

* HAS: Helping Attitudes Scale, ESS-B: Empathy Skill Scale B-Form, ETS: Empathy Tendency Scale, E-OCSC: Empathy-Oriented Communication Skills Course, CSC: Communication Skills Course

2.2 Study Group

The study group consisted of 74 first-year students enrolled in the Department of Social Work at the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Health Sciences, Gülhane. To minimize possible interactions between groups, students who selected the Communication Skills course as an elective (n = 34) were assigned to the experimental group, while those who took the course as a compulsory departmental requirement (n = 40) were assigned to the control group.

During the 2021–2022 fall semester, the experimental group received a Communication Skills course structured with empathy-based content, whereas the control group attended the standard Communication Skills in Social Work course, which did not include empathy-based content, for an equal duration and within the same academic

term. Since the groups participated in the courses at different time slots, it was assumed that no interaction occurred between them. Designing the control group in this way aimed to reduce the potential for methodological bias, such as the Hawthorne effect.

2.3 Data Collection Instruments

To evaluate the outcomes of the intervention, the study employed the Empathy Skills Scale–Form B (ESS-B) and the Empathic Tendency Scale (ETS), both developed and validated in Turkish by Dökmen (1988), along with the Helping Attitudes Scale (HAS) originally developed by Nickell (1998) and adapted to Turkish by Serpen and Hasgül (2018). In addition, a Personal Information Form prepared by the researchers was used to collect demographic data.

2.3.1 **Personal Information Form**

This form included socio-demographic variables such as age and gender, which were considered potential factors influencing empathy skills, empathic tendencies, and helping attitudes.

2.3.2 **Empathy Skills Scale–Form B (ESS-B)**

Developed by Dökmen (1988), this Likert-type scale measures empathic responses with an emphasis on cognitive components, comprising two sub-dimensions: emotions and thoughts. It consists of six short scenarios reflecting everyday life situations. For each scenario, participants select four out of 12 possible empathic responses, yielding a total of 24 responses scored according to a predefined key. Higher scores indicate stronger empathy skills, with possible scores ranging from 66 to 219. The Turkish adaptation, reliability, and validity of the instrument were established by Dökmen.

2.3.3 **Empathic Tendency Scale (ETS)**

Also developed by Dökmen (1988), the ETS measures the emotional component of empathy and individuals' potential to empathize in daily life. This 20-item Likert-type scale includes both positively and negatively worded items, with some requiring reverse scoring (items 3, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 15). Scores range from 20 to 100, with higher scores indicating stronger empathic tendencies. Reliability and validity studies in Turkish were conducted by Dökmen.

2.3.4 H**elping Attitudes Scale (HAS)**

Originally developed by Nickell (1998) to assess positive and negative attitudes toward helping others, the scale consists of 14 items grouped into three sub-dimensions: "Altruism" (5 items), "Self-Sufficiency/Reciprocity" (4 items), and "Selfishness" (5 items). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with several items reverse-scored (items 1, 5, 8, 11, and 18). Scores range from 14 to 70, with higher scores reflecting more positive helping attitudes. The original study reported Cronbach's alpha = .86 and test–retest reliability = .85. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was .83

2.4 Data Analysis

Data obtained through the Personal Information Form, HAS, ESS-B, and ETS were analyzed using descriptive statistics and percentage calculations. All analyses were performed using IBM SPSS 22.0. To determine whether there were significant differences between pretest and posttest scores of the experimental and control groups, paired-sample t-tests were conducted, as the data met normality assumptions based on the Shapiro–Wilk test. Additionally, correlation analyses and t-tests were applied to examine the relationships and differences between selected socio-demographic variables and the pretest and posttest scores of the empathy and helping attitude measures.

3. Results

When analyzed by gender, 48.6% of the students (n = 36) were female, and 51.4% (n = 38) were male. The mean age of the participants was 19.70 ± 2.24 years, ranging from 17 to 29. Pretest and posttest comparisons of the Empathy Skills Scale–Form B (ESS-B), the Empathic Tendency Scale (ETS), and the Helping Attitudes Scale (HAS) scores revealed significant differences between the experimental and control groups.

Specifically, students in the experimental group demonstrated a substantial increase in ESS-B scores, from 128.00 ± 16.87 before the intervention to 170.47 ± 14.99 after the course, which was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Similarly, the control group also showed a significant improvement in ESS-B scores, rising from 141.55 ± 19.19 pre-intervention to 150.85 ± 18.08 post-intervention ($p < 0.05$). However, the magnitude of the increase in the control group was notably smaller than that observed in the experimental group (Table 2).

This difference is likely attributable to the empathy-focused design of the Communication Skills course delivered to the experimental group, which provided both theoretical instruction and practical exercises aimed at enhancing empathic understanding. In contrast, the control group participated in a standard interpersonal communication course, supplemented by other behavioral sciences courses, which, although beneficial, did not emphasize empathy to the same extent. These findings suggest that structured, empathy-oriented educational interventions can more effectively enhance students' empathic skills and understanding compared to standard curricula.

Table 2. Analysis of the Groups' ESS-B, ETS, and HAS Scores

Scales		Pre-test			Post-test		P
		N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
ESS-B	Invervention	34	128,00	16,87	170,47	14,99	p<0.001
	Control	40	141,55	19,19	150.85	18,08	p<0.001
ETS	Invervention	34	66,47	5,24	68,65	6,56	,089
	Control	40	68,30	5,73	67,90	5,96	,651
HAS	Invervention	34	46,68	3,56	47,79	5,02	,174
	Control	40	47,10	3,33	47,45	4,45	,699

* HAS: Helping Attitude Scale, ESS-B: Empathy Skill Scale B-Form, ETS: Empathy Tendency Scale, p<0.001

Yaş, ESS-B, ETS ve HAS puanları arasındaki korelasyon incelendiğinde yaş ile HAS arasında negative yönde orta düzeyde anlamlı bir ilişki olduğu görülmektedir (r=-0.231; p<0.05). Yaş ile ESS-B (r=0.088; p≥0.05), yaş ile ETS (r=-0.074; p≥0.05), ESS-B ile ETS (r=0.065; p≥0.05), ESS-B ile HAS (r=0.005; p≥0.05), ETS ile HAS (r=0.157; p≥0.05) arasında istatistiksel açıdan anlamlı bir ilişki görülmemektedir (Table 3).

Table 3. Correlations Between Age and ESS-B, ETS, and HAS Scores

		1	2	3	4
1	Age	-			
2	ESS-B	,088	-		
		,455			
3	ETS	-.074	,065	-	
		,529	,580		
4	HAS	**-,231***	,005	,157	-
		,048	,967	,182	

* HAS: Helping Attitudes Scale, ESS-B: Empathy Skill Scale B-Form, ETS: Empathy Tendency Scale, p<0.05

4. Discussion

The present study examined the effects of an empathy-based communication skills course on social work students' empathic skills, empathic tendencies, and helping attitudes. The findings revealed that the intervention group demonstrated a significant improvement in empathy skills as measured by the Empathy Skills Scale–Form B (ESS-B), while also showing a slight but non-significant increase in empathic tendencies (ETS) and helping attitudes (HAS). In contrast, the control group, which participated in a standard interpersonal communication course, exhibited modest improvements in ESS-B scores and no meaningful changes in ETS or HAS scores. Furthermore, correlation analyses demonstrated a negative and moderate relationship between age and helping attitudes, while no significant associations were found between the other study variables.

These findings provide important evidence regarding the role of empathy-centered learning in social work education. The substantial increase in empathy skills among students in the experimental group underscores the effectiveness of structured interventions specifically designed to enhance empathic understanding. Prior research has shown that empathy is not a static trait but a malleable skill that can be strengthened through targeted educational strategies (Stepien & Baernstein, 2006; Riess, 2017). The current study supports this perspective by demonstrating that a curriculum explicitly designed with an empathy focus yields stronger outcomes compared to traditional communication training.

Interestingly, while empathy skills improved significantly, empathic tendencies and helping attitudes did not show statistically significant growth in the intervention group. This result suggests that while short-term educational interventions can effectively increase students' cognitive and behavioral empathy skills, deeper attitudinal and dispositional changes may require more sustained practice and reinforcement. This is consistent with Eisenberg and Strayer's (1990) conceptualization of empathy, which distinguishes between the situational expression of empathic skills and the more stable trait-like dimension of empathic disposition. Similar findings have been reported in other educational contexts, where empathy training improved immediate empathic responses but did not always translate into long-term attitudinal changes (Batt-Rawden et al., 2013).

The modest improvement in the control group's ESS-B scores may reflect the indirect benefits of their participation in a standard communication skills course and other behavioral science classes. Although these courses were not explicitly designed around empathy, they likely provided opportunities for perspective-taking and interpersonal reflection, which can enhance empathic ability to some extent. However, the smaller magnitude of change compared to the experimental group highlights the added value of a deliberate empathy-based curriculum. This finding echoes the conclusions of Hojat et al. (2011), who emphasized that structured and intentional empathy training is more effective than incidental exposure within general coursework.

The correlation analysis yielded further insights. The negative relationship between age and helping attitudes suggests that younger students may hold more positive views toward helping behaviors than their older peers. This pattern has also been observed in previous studies, where younger individuals often exhibit higher levels of idealism and prosocial orientation, while older students may adopt more pragmatic or self-focused attitudes (Carlo et al., 2003). The lack of significant correlations among ESS-B, ETS, and HAS scores indicates that although related conceptually, these constructs may develop differently and require distinct pedagogical strategies to be strengthened. For example, while empathy skills can be enhanced through structured training, helping attitudes may be shaped more by personal values, lived experiences, and broader cultural influences (Davis, 1996).

Taken together, these findings highlight both the strengths and the limitations of empathy-based learning interventions. On the one hand, they provide robust evidence that structured training can significantly improve empathic skills among social work students, a crucial competency for effective practice with vulnerable populations. On the other hand, the lack of significant changes in empathic tendencies and helping attitudes underscores the need for longer-term, integrated approaches that embed empathy training throughout the curriculum and link classroom learning with field practice.

4. Limitations and Implications

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the relatively small sample size and the single-institution context may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the reliance on self-report measures may introduce bias, as students may overestimate their empathic skills or helping attitudes. Finally, the short-term nature of the intervention makes it difficult to assess whether the observed gains in empathy skills will be sustained over time.

Despite these limitations, the study makes an important contribution to the literature on social work education by empirically demonstrating the value of empathy-based learning. Future research should explore longitudinal designs, incorporate qualitative methods to capture students' lived experiences, and examine how gains in empathy translate into professional practice. Embedding empathy training as a continuous thread throughout the curriculum, rather than as a single course, may also strengthen its impact on students' empathic tendencies and prosocial attitudes.

5. Conclusion

The present study provides compelling evidence that empathy-based educational interventions can significantly enhance social work students' empathic skills, a core competency for effective professional practice. By demonstrating a substantial improvement in empathy skills among students who participated in the empathy-focused communication skills course, the study underscores the value of structured and intentional pedagogical approaches that target empathy development. However, the absence of significant changes in empathic tendencies and helping attitudes indicates that while short-term interventions may successfully improve cognitive and behavioral dimensions of empathy, deeper attitudinal and dispositional outcomes may require sustained reinforcement across the curriculum and through experiential learning opportunities. The negative correlation observed between age and helping attitudes further highlights the complexity of factors shaping prosocial

orientations, suggesting that empathy-related competencies are influenced not only by educational content but also by broader developmental and contextual variables. Overall, these findings point to the necessity of embedding empathy training as a longitudinal and integrated component of social work education. By combining classroom-based instruction with reflective practice and field-based experiences, educators can more effectively cultivate both the skills and dispositions essential for empathic, compassionate, and socially responsive professional practice.

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