

# **Does service-learning increase student empathy? Practical insights from a meta-analysis and meta- synthesis**

**Presenters: Dr Chloe Gordon and Dr Matthew Pink  
Co-authors: Dr Howard Rosing and Ms Simone Mizzi**

## Why focus on empathy?

**Empathy:** The act of perceiving, understanding, experiencing, and responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person (Barker, 2003)

- Why do you think empathy is worth developing?
- Why do you think empathy is worth developing through service learning?

***Please contribute your thoughts in the comments***



## Our rationale for the focus on empathy

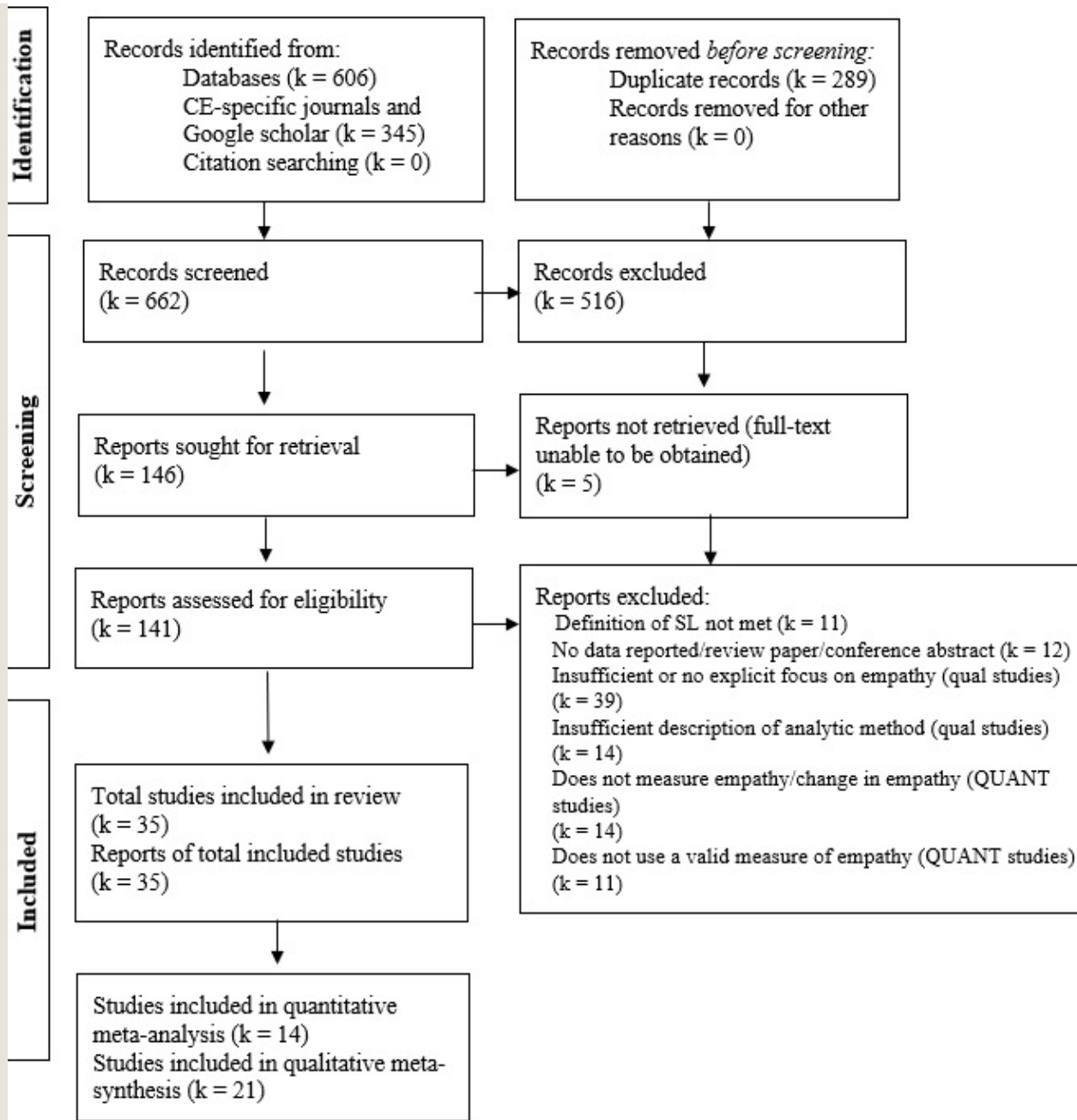
- Expectation that higher education will produce professionals who can effectively work with people from diverse backgrounds
- Importance of empathy for patient-centred care
- Linked to students developing feelings of civic responsibility



## Research aims

1. Does participation in SL lead to increases in empathy and what quantitative and qualitative data supports this?
2. What features within a SL program appear to contribute to the development of empathy among HE students?

# Methodology



## What did we find from the meta-analysis?

- Participation in SL = improved empathy
  - Significant yet small effect pre-post (Hedges'  $g = 0.176$ ) and in intervention group vs control (Hedges'  $g = 0.261$ )
  - Strongest effect pre-post was for the *empathic concern* subscale of the IRI
    - Finding connects to the qualitative 'evidence markers' of:
      - 1) *Responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person*
      - 2) *Expressing understanding and perceiving experiences from another's perspective*
  - Strongest effect intervention vs control was for the Jefferson Scale of Empathy

## How we conducted the meta-synthesis

- Studies classified as either 'high', 'medium' or 'low' quality (Long, French & Brooks)
- 'Deciding criteria' for study quality was the rigour of the data analysis



# What did we find from the meta-synthesis?

## 1. Expressing understanding and perceiving experiences from another's perspective

*My assumptions about homeless people have changed now. I learned what these people have gone through and the challenges that they may always face. I have changed my attitude towards homeless people (Hunt, 2007).*

## 2. Identifying with another person and recognising their common humanity

*Most people should know that these girls are people and should be treated as though they have made mistakes just like we all have. They still have blood that runs through their veins and a heart that is capable of more than you can imagine until you have interacted with them (Brewster, 2020; participant interacting with at-risk adolescents).*

## 3. Responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person

*I seriously almost started crying when his Grandma and Grandpa walked up to the arena to watch him. (Jefferson et al., 2018).*

*Have you noticed these empathy 'evidence markers' in your own CE students?*





## What factors in service-learning appeared to enhance empathy?

*Please contribute your predictions in the comments or ‘shout out’ your answer*



## What factors in service-learning appeared to enhance empathy?

- Direct interactions with community members
- Length of time, although the optimal amount of time remains unclear

*I was waiting to meet a bunch of freeloaders with a tonne of kids collecting welfare...what I experienced and witnessed was completely different. These people were friendly, hard-working and gracious. The families were struggling and needed a “hand up” (not a hand out)...I was able to step into these people’s lives for a few days and really see what it was like from their perspectives. (Wilson, 2011).*

## Discussion points

- SL programs have some influence on the development of student empathy
- Program heterogeneity made it difficult to determine quantitatively the specific factors within the SL experience that contributed to the development of empathy
- The field needs to address issues with the rigour of the quantitative studies
- Everhart (2016)\* may provide a useful framework for the further exploration of common antecedents to the development of empathy

\*Everhart, R. S. (2016). Teaching tools to improve the development of empathy in service-learning students. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 20(2), 129-154. Retrieved from <https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/index>

## Questions, comments or reflections?

We'd love to keep connecting with  
you:

[E: chloe.gordon@acu.edu.au](mailto:chloe.gordon@acu.edu.au)

[E: matthew.pink@acu.edu.au](mailto:matthew.pink@acu.edu.au)



@chloesgordon

