Fiction and Empathy: Exploring the Impact of Reading Fiction in the Development of Empathy

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Abstract

Humans spend a large amount of their free time engaged with fiction, whether it is reading a novel before bed, watching a television show, or skimming over the comic strips in the newspaper. Despite the abundance of these familiarities, there is very little research examining the effect of these experiences and the role they play in developing empathy, particularly in school age children. There is significant evidence that supports the relationship between reading fiction and empathy in adults (Johnson, 2012; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar et. al., 2006; Mar et. al., 2009). Based on this research and additional findings, this paper provides implications for building empathy in students through teaching practices. It also suggests the potential impacts these practices can have on not only the classroom level, but the societal level in terms of developing more empathetic children.

Introduction

In the book, *Empathy and Moral Development,* Hoffman (2001) defines empathy as "the spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible" (p. 63). This definition shows the importance of teaching empathy to the social fabric of society because without empathy humans are unable to understand others. Starting at a very young age, children spend a significant amount of time with teachers. Teachers have the ability to cultivate empathy within the malleable brains of children through rich literature paired alongside meaningful discussion. These practices can then be lived out in the classroom where children can use lessons learned from characters in their own daily interactions.

For many children the development of empathy comes naturally; however, this is not the case for all. Most children will be able to understand the feelings of others and respond appropriately. Unfortunately, some children may have difficulty recognizing the feelings of others as well as managing their own emotions. These difficulties can lead to potentially poor social experiences and reduced confidence levels, (Goodman, Joshi & Tyler, 2015) which shows how important it is that empathy is taught. There is a plethora of research that shows the negative consequences that can come out of poor social development in the younger years. According to Goodman et al (2015) poor social skills in childhood can lead to a number of issues in adulthood, such as relationship and mental health problems to low income and substance abuse. Therefore it is important to prioritize the development of pro-social skills. Without these skills, children are at a far greater risk for not reaching their potentials, forming social connections, and just generally becoming happy people.

While it may come as a surprise that we must define the importance of teaching literature, in some ways it is being taught less and less. Mosle (2012) states that students who attend public schools that have adopted the common core state standards spend half of their reading time in class on informational texts. This percentage increases to seventy by the time students reach 12th grade. While literature is being used to teach empathy to many groups, even doctors and prisoners, it is being emphasized less as a result of the common core. The common core focuses more on non-fiction at the expense of teaching fiction (Kidd & Castano, 2013). It is important to examine the potential implications of this shift as it takes away from students becoming immersed in rich novels where strong themes can be taught.

Luckily, we now know through an emerging body of research that the power of fiction stories to help children handle their own and other peoples' emotions. A Cambridge University study by Nikolajeva (2013) found that "reading fiction provides an excellent training for young people in developing and practicing empathy and theory of mind, that is, understanding of how other people feel and think" (p. 107). When thinking about the role that fiction plays in promoting empathy there are several studies that propose positive effects on various empathetic measures. These measures include increases in prosocial behavior, reduction in social anxiety, increased theory of mind, and the benefits of emotional attachment. Yet, the field is lacking in empirical data that has been replicated. Brain research is beginning to provide hope for more concrete evidence that shows how different areas of the brain are activated when students are reading fiction.

This paper will review research that shows why teaching empathy through literature is essential and that a positive correlation exists between reading fiction and empathy. Additionally,

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a solution will be proposed that supports the educational community in prioritizing reading

fiction and teaching empathy through this avenue.

Literature Review

Empathy is a broad, highly researched topic that has led to many empirical studies around

how it can be developed. Recently, there have been several studies and findings that have

explained the potential of fiction playing a role in the development of empathy. While these

studies have not proven any landmark findings, this literature review shows the potential for

proving a significant connection between reading fiction and the positive effects on empathetic

growth. I begin with the potential that brain research can bring to this field by revealing

neuroimages that show the effects of reading fiction on empathy. Next, I connect empathy and

fiction through a number of studies that show positive correlations. Based on the promising

results of these studies, I narrow into an examination of the potential for developing empathy in

school-age children.

Brain Research

The potential for further research in understanding the connection between fiction and

empathy is extremely promising given the possibility of brain research through functional MRIs.

Several studies dive deep into the field of neuroscience and how it can help deepen our

understanding of how reading fiction can trigger certain areas of the brain aligned with emotions

and emotional development. Brain research is crucial to proving that reading fiction can have

positive effects on empathy because the findings are concrete and show researchers the specific

parts of the brain that are being effected.

Paul (2012) investigated the major research around neuroscience and reading fiction. In her article she stated that scientists have come to realize that reading narratives can activate certain parts of our brains. She noted that with advancements in technology we are now able to use brain scans or functional MRIs (fMRI) to reveal what happens in our heads when we read different descriptions. This research is showing that narrative stories can stimulate the brain and even change how one acts. This is powerful evidence in showing the direct connection that reading narratives can have in influencing positive behavior.

Paul (2012) supported her conclusions with evidence from researchers Mar and Oatley (2006, 2009) who are cited for their positive research in this area. They proposed that the brain does not make much of a distinction between reading about an experience and encountering it in real life because the neurological regions are activated in both situations. As such, novels go beyond stimulating reality and are able to give readers an experience unavailable off the page. Mar and Oatley (2006, 2009) determined that readers are able to enter fully into other people's thoughts and feelings. This proves the power of teaching fiction books and the long-term positive consequences that occur due to this act.

Mar (2011) focused on the significant overlap in the brain networks used to understand stories and the networks used to navigate interactions with other individuals. Particularly, his studies emphasized the connections between interactions in which people are trying to figure out the thoughts and feelings of others. Mar explained that narratives offer the possibility for the reader to participate in this capacity. He expounded on this idea in that as humans we can identify with characters' emotions, predict their motives, and follow closely along with their interactions. Collaboration between Oatley and Mar along with several other scientists (Mar et al., 2009) reported in two studies that individuals who frequently read fiction seem to be able to

better understand people, have a stronger sense of empathy, and see perspectives of others. This study held up even after taking into account the possibility that more empathetic readers might prefer reading more novels. These significant findings emphasize the importance of reading comprehension in order to be able to fully understand characters, make predictions, and follow along with the plot of the story. Students must first be able to understand the text before they can become fully immersed and experience the characters feelings.

Keen (2006) elaborated on how authors and writers of narratives put their own human empathy to work when creating characters and thinking about readers' responses. She pointed out that now more than ever there is a significant role for neuroscience to determine the effects of narrative. Neuroscientists have come to the conclusion that people who score higher on empathy tests have especially busy mirror neuron systems in their brains. Keen defines empathy as, "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading" (2006, p. 211). It is important to note that she included reading in her definition.

Singer, Seymour, O'doherty, Kaube, Dolan and Frith (2004) found that when a participant was watching a loved one in another room experience pain, they too showed matching brain activation in emotional areas, though not sensory areas. Singer et al. concluded that empathy is connected to the pain network associated with pain's affective qualities, but not sensory qualities. An empathetic reaction is observable through fMRI and participants were able to mentally feel the same pain as the loved one in the other room. This can transfer to students reading books and experiencing affective empathy when connecting with a character who they care about in a book.

Brain research is the most promising piece of evidence to support the idea of using fiction to teach empathy. I say this because in order for there to be a national shift in the way we rethink how reading and emotional development should be taught, there needs to be empirical evidence in the form of brain scans to prove the importance of reading fiction. There is potential for more studies to compare emotional reactions sparked in reality to emotional reactions derived from reading fiction books.

Connecting Empathy and Fiction

Numerous studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between fiction reading and increased empathy. Mar et al.'s (2006) study examined exposure to fiction and non-fiction and its effect on social ability. By studying lifetime exposure to fiction vs. non-fiction texts and how one performed on tests of empathy/social intelligence, Mar et al. found that in general, fiction print-exposure positively predicted measures of social ability. On the other hand, non-fiction print-exposure was a negative predictor. Another factor that affected empathy scores was the tendency to become absorbed in a story. Readers who became more involved in the story tended to demonstrate higher levels of empathy. The research team proposed three separate arguments that could be made for why a positive relationship exists between reading narratives and social abilities. Foremost, frequent fiction readers have more exposure to social knowledge in stories that they then apply to real world interactions. Secondly, frequent readers of narrative have stronger social inferencing and monitoring skills, which they utilize in the real world. Finally, individuals who are empathetic and strong at making social inferences, may just enjoy reading fiction more and are more likely to engage in reading narrative fiction (Mar et al., 2006). These findings prove that people who spend more time reading fiction over their lifetime are more likely to have higher social abilities, especially those who became immersed in the stories they were reading. Given that social ability is a skill that is often overlooked in traditional

schools, educators can use fiction stories starting at a young age. From this, students can benefit by learning how to better interact and understand others emotions, in turn supporting positive peer relationships.

Mar et al. (2009) designed a study as a follow-up to previous research to confirm findings that readers of fiction have better empathetic abilities. In this follow up study Mar et al. (2009) were careful to rule out other possible influences on increased empathy. The most important trait to rule out was personality and this was accounted for through the Big Five Model, which is a theory of personality that identifies five distinct factors as central to personality including openness, neuroticism, agreeableness, extroversion, and conscientiousness. The personality trait showing the most correlation was Openness, which is indicative of a person who is open-minded and willing to try new things. Openness is linked with imaginative tendencies allowing readers to fully immerse themselves in the surroundings and situations being presented to them in literary fiction. It is easy to see how someone who exhibits high levels of openness could naturally also be very empathetic.

Another interesting point that was made involves the idea that frequent readers or "bookworms" were being labeled as introverted, lonely, and less likely to have social networks. This study found the exact opposite and that "bookworms" tend to have higher social abilities and greater empathy (Mar et al. 2009). This information invites educators to think deeper about how they are portraying and promoting reading in their classrooms. The stigmatization of "bookworms" is something that needs to be considered when endorsing reading in classrooms. Students need to understand the lifelong benefits of this positive behavior and teachers must recognize the benefits of reinforcing this behavior in their students.

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 Mar, Oatley, Djikic, and Mullin (2011) continued to explore the body of research that examined what happens when emotions are evoked by a story and the furthering impact that this can lead to. Their 2011 study examined the interactive influences of narrative fiction before, during, and after reading. Each of the three stages has a unique effect on emotions. The first stage is the "before" reading experience in which the article claimed mood can influence what books people choose. The article gives several examples of how a person's choice is based on whether or not they want to change or maintain their current emotional state. Once a book is chosen, the reader enters the "during" stage where the narrative can evoke emotions through direct and indirect connections to events and characters. The after stage is when the reader has finished the book and possible consequences from the narrative experience can still exist. This evidence proves how there can be ongoing consequences in terms of emotional state after reading a book. It explains how novels can act as an "emotional prime" and once the emotional state has been induced, one can expect to see differences in cognitive processing as it is connected to her emotional state. This confirms earlier Mar et al findings (2006, 2009) while also substantiating Johnson's (2012) "transportation theory" wherein choosing books with strong themes and lessons can have an enormous impact on how people interact with others when the reader becomes deeply immersed in the text. Therefore, teachers need to be very sensitive when choosing books for their students as well as provide a variety of options for text. Getting students invested in books that prime the desired emotional state is extremely important in order for them to become emotionally transported into a story which will allow for the after effects of emotional transportation.

 Johnson (2012) conducted a study as a follow-up to Mar's (2006) research, which examined how individuals can relate to fictional story characters and through this understand

how it feels to put oneself in another person's shoes. This article defines the different components of empathy. Affective empathy is explained as feeling concern or compassion for another, or experiencing identical emotions (perspective taking). This is the component of empathy that Mar et al. (2006) predicted to be most affected by reading fiction. It is important to note that this does not necessarily mean the reader feels exactly how the character feels, but rather the reader feels emotion for the character and shows a response. Another component of empathy is cognitive empathy, which is the ability to accurately understand and recognize another's emotional state, which is typically developed after affective empathy. The results of this study show that individuals who were more transported into the story reported significantly higher affective empathy for the characters. The hypotheses that transportation and affective empathy would translate into real-world behavior were also supported as individuals who experienced higher transportation and affective empathy were significantly more likely to help the experimenter pick up dropped pens in a scenario. As such, fiction is a uniquely powerful way to understand others. By delving into a novel and connecting with characters and their emotions, the reader has an experience that will transcend beyond the pages of the book and support more compassionate and understanding behaviors when it comes to lending a helping hand.

Bal and Veltkamp (2013) examined whether or not fiction experiences change the empathy of the reader. It was hypothesized that when people read fiction and they experience "emotional transport" that they become more empathetic. Both experiments in this study show that there was an effect on empathy over the course of a week, but only when the reader was deemed emotionally transported into the story. When the readers experienced no transportation this led to lower empathy in both studies. Overall, the studies showed that reading fiction can impact empathy, but only when the reader experiences low or high emotional transportation into

the fiction story. It is important to note that the effects do not present themselves immediately but rather after one week after the narrative experience (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013). This is explained under the theory of an *absolute sleeper effect* which states that the process of transformation of an individual needs time to unfold. Therefore, there are longer term effects of reading fiction that are not necessarily seen immediately after the reading is completed. This is definitely something to consider when thinking about the impact that certain books can have on readers. It also needs to be considered that just the opposite can happen when the reader is not transported into the story. This can actually produce negative effects on building empathy, which again reiterates the importance of student investment in his or her reading choices.

Similarly, Kaufman and Libby (2012), investigated the concept of "experience-taking" which can be compared to emotional transportation in that both concepts require the reader to lose themselves and become deeply involved in the narrative. Kaufman and Libby's study examined the merger between self and others that occurs during experience-taking and the subsequent influence on self-judgment, attitudes, and behaviors that align with the narrative characters. In this study experience-taking is defined as readers losing themselves and taking on the identity of the character through the character's thoughts, emotions, goals, traits, and actions (Kaufman and Libby, 2012). It is important to note that those who engage in experience-taking must relinquish their self-concepts in order to enter the character's mindset. The findings concluded first-person narrative depicting an in-group character, which is a character who is typically accepted by their peers, elicited the highest levels of experience-taking and produced the greatest change in participants' behavior (compared to 3rd person). Further inquiry demonstrated that delaying the revelation of a characters out-group identity later in the story produced higher levels of experience-taking. The overall experience that fiction can allow for a

reader goes far beyond taking on the perspective of a character while reading the pages of a book. Kauffman and Libby as well as several others (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013, Mar et al. 2006. 2009, 2011, Johnson, 2012) show evidence that transportation in a story is a key factor in experiencing increased levels of empathy. Based on these findings, it can be inferred that the likelihood of transportation is increased when readers have choice in the material that they are reading because they will be further invested in the book.

From this research several conclusions can be drawn: lifetime and or continued exposure to fiction can increase social abilities, fiction should be utilized as a teaching tool for emotional growth, and that teachers need to reexamine how reading is being promoted in their classrooms as far as student choice and by-in. All of these recommendations lead me to believe that there needs to be a major shift in reading education as well as social emotional education. The gaps in these two areas could potentially be resolved if educators, psychologists, and other stakeholders came together to understand the power of fiction books.

Throughout this review I examined a variety of studies that connected reading fiction and empathetic development. These studies showed the potential for major shifts in educational practices around the way we teach reading and emotional skills in schools today. We know that fiction and empathy are connected through a number of studies that show positive correlations.

Implications

In the previous studies mentioned, empathy was discussed in the context of adults. These findings also prove to transfer to school age children. There are several studies that show the positive impact of fiction on children ranging from pre-school to high school age. These positive effects include: promotion of positive character traits through projects, increased theory of mind

through exposure to story books, and the positive effects of attachments to books. Because of the positive results in these studies I was enthused to create my project promoting empathy through fiction reading.

Developing Empathy in School-Age Children

Adler and Foster's study (1997) assessed the effectiveness of teaching one reading project to promote the trait of caring in 7th graders. The students were given a pre and post-test in the form of written essays. The experimental group participated in several classroom discussions and activities around the central themes and lessons presented in the chosen fiction text while the control group followed the typical discussions for books normally read in the school system. The hypothesis presented was that reading and guided discussion of books which stress the theme of caring will have an effect on the extent to which students support this value. The strongest support for the overall hypothesis was that a fiction reading project can influence values in the form of the experimental group viewing friends as important as family when it comes to fulfilling emotional and social support functions. These findings exemplify that teaching morals, values, and empathy can be a difficult task to accomplish given our world filled with screen time; however, it is possible when stories are intentionally chosen to demonstrate specific qualities. .

Mar, Tackett, and Moore (2010) examined the effect of the exposure of different forms of narrative media on preschoolers' development of theory of mind. As defined in this article theory of mind is the development of understanding the mental states of others (Mar et al., 2010). Mar et al. sought information around the effects of various forms of media including storybooks, television, and movies, all while taking into consideration age, gender, vocabulary, and family income. Findings concluded that inferred exposure to children's storybooks predicted positive

theory of mind abilities and development. Additionally, children whose parents are better at recognizing children's books tend to perform better on theory of mind tests. From this series of studies one can take away that before children are even able to read they can benefit from storybooks and that those early learning experiences can be influenced by their parents' exposure to children's books. This proves the role of the parent in bringing home books, taking their child to the library, and staying up to date on popular fiction titles.

Alexander, Miller, and Hengst (2001) worked to develop a more holistic understanding of young children's experience of stories and the long term impacts that could occur. Thirty-two families participated in interviews inquiring into their children's story attachments. Findings showed that every child experienced at least two emotional attachments to stories. Children were exposed to stories in various media formats: video stories, books, and made up stories. Attachments were expressed by requesting access repeatedly, showing strong feelings, and reenacting the story in pretend play. The extension of attaching to stories showed social connections in two ways: children created relationships with the characters in their chosen stories and story attachments emerged in relationships with caregivers whose beliefs supported these attachments. The mothers' encouragement of narrative attachments is similar to an idea found in clinical literature in that the emotional significance of particular stories to the child allows the child to use these stories to manage his or her emotions. Overall, this study brings up a great question around the idea of stories playing a unique role in emotional management and development in small children. It is also interesting to consider the implications that these attachments provide in terms of social interactions and development.

As a collective these studies develop the argument that empathy can be developed in children starting as young as pre-school, and potentially sooner when considering attachment

theories. Parents have the potential to play a large role in theory of mind development by getting to know children's books, and exposing their child to these stories. Additionally, even before children are able to read they can develop attachments to certain books that can provide comfort when regulating emotions. Indeed, fiction stories can have an incredible effect at an early age.

Promoting Pro-Social Behavior and Decreasing Prejudice

Building empathy in children should be a top priority for all teachers, parents, and stakeholders involved in positively influencing the development of children. Now that it is known that children's empathy can be affected by reading fiction, it is important to look at how this affects their social actions and perceptions of others. There are a number of studies that connect reading fiction to increased levels of pro-social behavior and decreased prejudice. In this section empathetic imaginations (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015) are explained first to emphasize how this can allow for readers to put themselves in the place of the characters. Then, the positive influences of fiction in reducing prejudices towards out-group members will be explained. This will be followed by the concept of "extended contact" and its ability to reduce anxiety for children prior to interacting with students who have disabilities (Cameron & Rutland, 2006).

Koopman and Hakemulder (2015) presented an overview of empirical studies that investigated the relationship between reading and empathy, and reading and self-reflection. Based on these findings Koopman and Hakemulder (2015) created a multi-factor model of literary reading. They pointed out that readers can become absorbed in a narrative that will simulate their empathetic imaginations which allows readers to go along with the author and imagine what it would be like in the shoes of a particular character. These findings present favorable evidence that readers identify with a character, which then allows for the reader to

understand perspectives and take on the emotions and feelings of the character. By simulating empathetic imaginations, teachers can teach perspective-taking and understanding what it is like to be in someone else's shoes.

There are several studies signifying positive effects on various empathetic measures including role-taking ability and motivation for pro-social behavior (Djikic et al. 2013; Mar et al. 2006). From these studies it can be concluded that reading stories of positive portrayals of out-group members' results in a positive change in attitude toward that group. Other findings showed that reading fiction is related to empathic ability while reading non-fiction is not (Djikic et al. 2013; Mar et al. 2006). This evidence can be translated over to classroom practice by teachers utilizing fiction books to teach their students the theme of acceptance. Students can be taught to be more welcoming and less judgmental of out-group members. Out-group members refers to classmates that mainstream learners do not typically identify with.

In the same way as Koopman and Hakemulder (2015) note the positive effects that literature can have on perspective-taking, Cameron and Rutland (2006) set out to develop and assess an intervention aimed at reducing prejudice for young children particularly towards disabled children. In this study the children were ages five to ten years old and took part in a six-week intervention that involved reading stories featuring disabled and non-disabled children in friendship contexts. The results showed that extended contact led to increased positivity toward the disabled, and this was most obvious in the intergroup-extended contact condition. This study was based on a recent theoretical development in the adult social psychology literature, "indirect cross friendship hypothesis" or "extended contact effect" (Cameron &Rutland, 2006, p. 470). This theory suggests that bias may be reduced through vicarious experiences of friendship. This can be experienced through reading about out-group members in fiction stories.

Cameron and Rutland (2006) argued that extended contact in the form of reading fiction books that included disabled children as characters had a number of advantages. They argued that there is less anxiety compared to direct contact when non-disabled children are first exposed to disabled children in the form of fiction text. Extended contact allows participants to experience contact while avoiding the feeling of anxiety. It can also be used when there is little opportunity for direct contact, which allows for widespread reduction in prejudice. In terms of education policy for children with disabilities these findings have significant impacts. These findings support the importance of the inclusive classroom and how students can benefit from a setting that includes both disabled and non-disabled children. This experience could be improved further by creating interventions prior to the arrival of children with disabilities.

Through all of these findings it is evident that by reading fiction, empathy levels can increase which translates to more positive pro-social behavior and decreased prejudice towards out-group members. In reading fiction students are able to relate and connect to characters, which then allows them to transfer these emotions to real-life situations. The idea of utilizing extended contact to prepare students for situations when they will meet students with unique needs is an outstanding strategy. Through extended contact students can reduce anxiety, understand the difference, and be more equipped to welcome the out-group member or student with a disability. It is extremely important for school-age children to be explicitly taught these skills from a young age so they become accepting of others and gain perspective of the world around them. Fiction books provide the outlet for teaching these transferrable skills.

Increasing Empathy through Popular Fiction

Much of the studies that have examined the impact of fiction on developing empathy have used texts that were written by the researcher or chosen based on their literariness. Until

recently, no studies used popular fiction to examine potential outcomes. It is important to think about the impact popular fiction can have on student engagement and investment in reading. As much of the research shows, students need to be bought into the text to fully experience emotional transportation and experience the positive effects of empathetic growth. Students need to be afforded the choice of popular novels that are relatable and provide relevant topics that allow for rich discussion. In the studies below, exposure to popular novels such as the *Harry Potter* series as well as *Wonder* are used in experiments to display the positive correlation between popular fiction and empathetic growth.

Vezzali, Stathi, Giovannini, Capozza, and Trifiletti (2015) conducted three studies to test whether extended contact through reading *Harry Potter* books improves attitude toward stigmatized groups (immigrants, homosexuals, and refugees). In these studies it was interesting that the effects were shown when none of these specific groups are directly stigmatized in the books. All of these studies supported the main hypothesis. Students were able to identify with the main character, Harry Potter and misidentify with the negative character, Voldemort, which moderated the effect. Perspective taking emerged and allowed attitude improvement toward refugees only among those who identified less with Voldemort.

This study is unique in that it takes an already popular, published book as opposed to other studies where stories were created for the purpose of the experiment. This shows that the quality of the text is an important predictor of whether there will be a change in empathy.

Vezzali et al. (2015) findings support findings by Koopman and Hakemulder (2015) as they reinforce the notion that novels can have the potential to achieve a positive social impact. They reiterate the importance of engaging students in order to motivate them to read which can lead to educational benefits around reading ability, reading engagement, and literacy

development. It would be beneficial for this study to be replicated with other popular books and see if there are similar results.

Much like Vezzali et al. (2015), Freeman and Guarisco (2015) also explored the impact that popular fiction can have on increasing empathetic abilities in school age children. These studies showed the strong empirical evidence that reading fiction does in fact help students develop socially as well as academically. Through these findings a collaborative research project was inspired and lead by an English teacher from an independent school and an academic psychologist from a liberal arts college. The purpose of the study was to determine if reading *Wonder* along with classroom activities on characterization, perspective, and empathy, could increase the student's empathy. The major finding was that sixth-grade students showed improved scores on an Interpersonal Reactivity Index after completing an academic six week unit on *Wonder.* Although the findings were small (5.8%), they were statistically significant. The main empathy subscale score to increase significantly was perspective-taking which shows that after this unit students more readily saw themselves able to adopt others' viewpoints.

Freeman and Guarisco (2015) are one of the first to show how a young reader's exposure to fiction can improve their ability to understand others psychological perspectives. It is also important to note that this study factored in the "sleeper effect," which explains how it can take time for empathy to rise. This must be acknowledged by teachers so that they can understand it takes time for their students to process what they have read which can lead to positive outcomes on empathy. This study allowed for a week to post test and three to four weeks after the guidance counselor-led perspective activities. This study also addressed findings in other studies in terms of identification with the protagonist. The novel *Wonder* was carefully selected in hopes that a majority, if not all of the students would be able to connect with Auggie. Previous studies

confirm that fiction induced empathy requires active engagement with the story (Johnson et al., 2013).

Further, Freeman and Guarisco (2015) confirmed the idea that fiction can have a positive effect on building empathy, particularly in school age children. While this study was fairly simple, I find that it is the most applicable to my own classroom in discovering ways to support empathetic growth. It pushes researchers to further collaborate on this topic with educators and psychologists. This study also sends a message to educators around the importance of text selection and student engagement. These are factors that must be considered very heavily when thinking about the overall development of children through teaching fiction.

Overall, Freeman and Guarisco's (2015) findings prove that is it important to not only consider fiction versus non-fiction when teaching, but also the type of fiction we are presenting to our students. The above findings prove that when a fiction novel is carefully selected based on the overall interests of the students being taught, there is major potential for empathetic growth as well as perspective taking abilities. Teachers need to broaden the "vault" of books that are often required by schools to teach and consider allowing student choice through the means of student surveys and book clubs.

These studies provided significant results around the potential for developing empathy in school-age children. Furthermore, the experiences that fiction can bring will increase pro-social behavior and decrease prejudice. All of these favorable findings can have a powerful role in the way educators and parents are able to influence children's growth in both reading and emotional intelligence. Current brain research substantiates aforementioned findings and proves empathetic areas of the brain are being activated when a reader is experiencing empathy in a book. All in all, children need to be reading more fiction and teachers and parents need to be providing a platform

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in which children can have the opportunity to choose from texts that appeal to them allowing for greater connections.

Learning from My Own Classroom

The inspiration for the following implications and above research sparked from my lessons learned as an upper elementary literacy teacher. While I understand the importance of following a rigorous, standards based curriculum that is often times tied to standardized testing, I had an epiphany in my own practice that allowed for my students to fully enjoy and experience reading. As a reading teacher it is common to say that the main goal is to create life-long readers; however, what does this actually take? For the first time ever, as a literacy teacher I veered away from the curriculum and brought in rich novels that related to my students. These novels were loosely tied to what I was supposed to be teaching on the curriculum map. In choosing these novels I was able to trigger something inside of my students that brought out their personalities, built their confidence, and increased positive classroom culture. Now, as I wrap up this school year I have students reaching double digit numbers in the amount of books they have read. Many of these books were inspired or connected to our in class novels that emphasized empathy. I have had parents come to me and say, "I don't know what you are doing, but for the first time ever my child has asked for a book for Christmas." I do believe I have made a small dent in trying to figure out how to inspire students to read, however, I will continue to seek out practices as I develop my teaching.

In order to continue to increase emotional literacy in my own classroom, I plan to create an "Empathy Library" that will contain books with strong themes about acceptance, compassion, and empathy. There will be characters, and positive role-models representing all students. The library will be organized by reading level and will contain multiple titles that could be used to

emphasize the lesson that one should learn. For example, when thinking about the lesson of acceptance, the shelf will contain titles ranging from picture books such as *My Cousin Momo* by Zachariah O'Hora to novels like R.J. Palcio's, *Wonder*. This library will be accessible to all students. Because I teach upper elementary, the titles will range in reading level from 1st grade to 6th grade, covering a wide range of reading abilities (see Appendix A for a list of recommended titles to teach empathy).

How this library will be utilized will depend on the needs within the classroom. In my own experience it is extremely important to begin the year by building a strong class culture of trust, acceptance, and curiosity. For students to feel safe and willing to bring in their own perspectives, it is my job as a teacher to set that foundation by getting to know each student personally. That being said, I would ease into more difficult topics around empathy with relatable picture books before diving deep into a novel that could unearth many difficult emotions for my students. Through this, I would begin the year with class read alouds that generate rich conversations allowing students to begin to feel comfortable in our classroom.

After this foundation is set, I would then choose meaningful novels that pair with each individual unit I am teaching (see Appendix A for suggested novels). These novels would also share a larger theme of empathy. I believe it is extremely important for these novels to initially be taught whole class so that the teacher can guide the students through the process of understanding the characters and their feelings/actions. This will then translate over to the student practicing this type of engagement as they read novels on their own.

Students will also have the option of utilizing the Empathy Library by choosing to read books for pleasure or to present their take-ways through a "Book Bistro" project. The Book Bistro is a way for students to record their thinking, take notes, illustrate their thoughts, and step

into the shoes of a character. See Appendix B for an example. They then engage in a café-like setting and share this information with their peers from the perspective of one of the characters. Parents are invited to join and learn about what their child is reading. This is a powerful experience because the student is required to take on a different perspective and develop an understanding of how someone else thinks. Parents also become more familiar with the titles of popular books that their child enjoys and can begin to engage in reading with them in the home.

Significance

The empathy library has great potential for positive social change on the individual level, the organizational level, and the societal level. Now that we know the benefits of reading go far beyond increasing literacy levels, it is important to think about how to incorporate more fiction into classrooms to support the growth of empathy. Empathy does not need to be taught in isolation, but rather it needs to be embedded into rich, well-planned literacy units. As a nation, we need to rethink the way social emotional learning is being taught as well as the emphasis that is being put on reading informational text rather than fiction.

At the most individualized level, the results of this research may inform parents and how they can play a large role in the development of their child's empathy. Parents can support empathy through a number of different avenues. Parents need to become aware of the books available for their children that have strong teachable themes such as compassion, acceptance, and belonging. They can also help by engaging in discussions with their child about the book and its characters. Something I can do in my own practice is to create a list of recommended books as well as discussion questions that families can engage in and enjoy. These books can further be divided by specific themes.

At the organizational level, the findings of these studies have implication for positive social change for improving teacher practices across the country. Teachers need to rethink the so called "vault" of recommended books. Regardless of the common core's emphasis on informational texts, it is the teachers' responsibility to provide meaningful reading experiences through fiction texts. One approach is to find texts exploring familiar life scenarios to help children understand what their peers might be experiencing. At primary and secondary level there's a text for just about every situation that mirrors a difficult moment or time in one's life. These texts should have characters that represent all the different backgrounds in the class as well as have believable characters with understandable character motivations. By providing a wide variety of culturally responsive texts that have strong themes to build on empathy, students can have choice in what they read and will be more invested in their reading. Teachers can also allow students to choose books within literature circles. In each group they would be responsible for identifying the theme and finding supporting evidence as they read. Through this wide variety of ways to incorporate fiction novels, teachers can emphasize teaching vocabulary for feelings. Many students struggle to find the appropriate language to express their feelings as well as what words to use to describe what a character feels in a book. Educators can explicitly teach feeling words which will allow students to be more specific when describing emotions. Please see Appendix C for a list a recommended words.

Lastly, the results of this research might also have implications at the societal level. By highlighting the importance of fiction reading from an early age parents and teachers can have a significant impact on their child's ability to become a more empathetic person. Empathetic people understand the feelings of others. In order for society to advance, we need empathy. According to Roger Ebert, "I believe empathy is the most essential quality of civilization"

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(Pockross, p. 1). Empathy is essential quality to a leader. Leaders need to understand others in order to lead. Without empathy people cannot understand the perspectives, backgrounds, and feeling of others. It cannot be assumed that empathy is something that every child is born with, we must as a society work to develop this quality.

Conclusion

By incorporating empathy into instruction there will not only be immediate results in the classroom, but also in the outside community. According to Sornson (2014) "empathy is the heart of a great classroom culture" (p. 1). In building empathy students learn how to understand their peers, develop friendships, and act as understanding humans. Teaching empathy can also improve teacher and student relationships. A certain level of trust is obtained when students feel they are being understood by their teachers and peers (Sornson, 2014). Clark and Rumbold (2006) reiterate this idea by explaining the importance of reading and its path to personal and social development. Based on the budding research and my own classroom experiences, this work is more important than ever in our increasingly globalized world. It is my educational mission to bring my passion for utilizing fiction as a teaching tool to develop the whole child. Whatever school, classroom, or teaching platform I land on in my educational journey, I will seek to show other educators the potential that reading fiction can have on creating better humans. I will encourage teachers of all experiences and backgrounds to break away from the prescribed curriculum, get to know their students, honor their unique backgrounds, and to choose texts that will have lasting impacts both educationally and emotionally.

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Appendix A

Empathy Library Book Titles

1ˢᵗ-2ⁿᵈ Grade Reading Level

Bully by Laura Vaccaro Seege(2013)

Coat of Many Colors by Dolly Parton (2016)

Dad and the Dinosaur by Gennifer Choldenko (2017)

First Grade Dropout by Audrey Vernick (2015)

Good News, Bad News by Jeff Mack (2012)

A Hat for Mrs. Goldman: A Story about Knitting and Love by Michelle Edwards (2016)

The Invisible Boy by Trudy Ludwig (2013)

Hey Jack! Series by Sally Rippin (2016)

In Plain Sight by Richard Jackson (2017)

Ivan: The Remarkable True Story of the Shopping Mall Gorilla by Katherine Applegate (2014)

Little Elliot, Big Fun by Mike Curato (2016)

Malala's Magic Pencil by Malala Yousafzai (2017)

Otis and the Scarecrow by Loren Long (2014)

We're All Wonders by R.J. Palacio (2017)

3ʳᵈ-4ᵗʰ Grade Reading Level

Big Nate Lives it Up by Lincoln Peirce (2015)

Charlie Bumpers vs. The Teacher of the Year by Bill Harley (2013)

Charlotte's Web by E.B. White (2006)

The Goldfish Boy by Lisa Thompson (2017)

Just My Luck by Cammie McGovern (2016)

The Life and Times of Benny Alvarez by Peter Johnson (2014)

Moo by Sharon Creech (2016)

Ms. Bixby's Last Day by John David Anderson (2016)

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One Day and One Amazing Morning on Orange Street by Joanne Rocklin (2011)

Prairie Evers by Ellen Airgood (2012)

Ramona the Pest by Beverly Cleary (2003)

Wishtree by Katherine Applegate (2017)

5th-6th Grade Reading Level

Al Capone Does My Shirts by Gennifer Choldenko (2005)

Ambassador by William Alexander (2014)

Auggie and Me by R.J. Palacio (2016)

Blackbird Fly by Erin Entrada Kelly (2015)

Boy21 by Matthew Quick (2013)

The Boy on the Wooden Box by Leon Leyson, Leon Leyson, Marilyn J. Harran (2013)

El Deafo by Cece Bell (2014)

Freak the Mighy by Rodman Philbrick (2004)

Fuzzy Mud by Louis Sachar (2015)

Junonia by Kevin Henkes (2011)

The Key that Swallowed Joey Pigza by Jack Gantos (2014)

Lilly and Dunkin by Donna Gephart (2016)

Love and First Sight by Josh Sundquist (2017)

Mars Evacuees by Sophia McDougall (2015)

Mockingbird by Kathryn Erskine (2010)

The Night Gardener by Jonathan Auxier (2014)

Ninth Ward by Jewell Parker Rhodes (2011)

Raymie Nightingale by Kate DiCamillo (2016)

Reign Rain by Ann M. Martin (2014)

The Warden's Daughter by Jerry Spinelli (2017)

Wonder by R.J. Palacio (2014)

A Wrinkle in Time: The Graphic Novel by Madeleine L'Engle, Hope Larson (2012)

Appendix B

Book Bistro

Book Bistro

In the next month you will be required to complete the following pages about a book you are reading. This will require you to read at least 30 minutes per night. This assignment will take the place of your weekly homework. At the end of the month we will have a "Book Bistro" where you get to talk to your classmates about what you have read while enjoying refreshments.

You need to make sure that your book has been approved by Mrs. Laliberte or Mr. Cady. It must be on your appropriate reading level.

Name: _____

Book: _____

Author: _____

Due Date: _____

Book approval signature (Mrs. L/Mr. Cady)_____

SUMMARY (do this page last): In 6-8 sentences write a summary of the book you have read. You must include the following: setting, main character, and conflict. Be sure to not give away the ending!

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Connections (do this as you read): Make 4 connections to the text using the following sentence stems.

- This reminds me of _____because
- I connected to this when _____because
- _____ made me remember a time when _____because
- This relates to my life because . . .
- _____ makes me think about _____because
- This illustration makes me think about _____because
- This part makes me remember _____because
- I really had a strong connection to this part because . . .
- This is familiar to me because . . .

1. _____
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2. _____
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_____

3. _____
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4. _____
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Overall rating (do this after you read): On a star scale from zero to five stars what do you rate this book? Fill in the stars below.

In the lines below describe in **2 paragraphs** why you gave the book a certain number of stars.

_____

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Questions (do this as you read): Great readers are always asking questions as they read! Write down 6 questions you have about your book as you read. If you are able to answer then fill in the right column.

Question **Who? What? When? Where? Why?** **What does___mean? I wonder_____**	Answer **(not all will have an answer)**
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

Visualize (do this as you read): Draw a scene from the book that you can picture very clearly in your head. Be sure you use color and add as much detail as possible.

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Infer (do this as you read): Stop as you read to make 6 inferences using the stems below. Remember inferences are not predictions. You are using your brain plus the text!

- From the text clues, I can conclude _____because_____
- Based on what the text says and what I know, I think_____because_____
- This information makes me think _____because_____
- This evidence suggests _____because_____
- Although the writer does not come right out and say it, I can figure out that _____because_____

1. _____
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2. _____
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3. _____
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4. _____
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5. _____
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6. _____
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Evaluating (do this as you read): Great readers stop as they read to make judgments about the plot, character, actions, and setting. Use the following sentence stems to make 5 evaluations as you read.

• This is good because...
• I like the part where... because...
• I dislike the part where... because...
• My favorite part so far is... because...
• I think that... because...
• I think this setting is important because...
• This part is very realistic/unrealistic because...
• I think the relationship between_____ and_____ is interesting because...
• I like/dislike (name the character) because...
• The character I most admire is_____ because...

1. _____
   _____
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2. _____
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3. _____
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4. _____
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5. _____
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Dear Parent/Guardian,

This letter is to inform you that for the next month of school your child will be working on a guided project that involves reading at home every night. This project will be in place of their usual weekly reading homework. For the project, each student is responsible for finishing one book over the course of 1 month. While reading the book they need to complete the assigned reading strategies in the packet. It is recommended that they do not wait till the last week to complete the pages. The intention is 15-20 minutes per night on 1-2 pages. I will be checking in with your student every Monday.

The purpose of the project is to read a book of choice and be able to share the information learned with his/her peers. In March we will have a "Book Bistro" where your child will talk about their book with their peers. Parents will be welcome to join and light refreshments will be served.

The project was explained in depth to your child during class, and all their questions were addressed. If you need any further clarification please feel free to call or email me with questions.

Thank you for your support,

Mrs. Laliberte

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Appendix C

Feeling Words

Retrieved from: https://testedtools.wordpress.com/2014/01/03/emotions-feeling-words-vocabulary/

Emotions - Feelings Word Vocabulary
Emotion

Intensity	Happy	Sad		Angry		Scared	Confused
Strong	ecstatic elated energized enthusiastic excited exuberant jubilant loved marvelous terrific thrilled uplifted	crushed defeated dejected depressed devastated disgraced drained exhausted helpless hopeless hurt rejected terrible unloved unwanted discarded	sorrowful uncared for worthless wounded burdened condemned demoralized deserted distraught empty grievous humbled miserable mournful pitiful	abused betrayed enraged furious hateful hostile humiliated incensed outraged pissed off rebellious repulsed seething strangled vengeful	exploited fuming mad patronized repulsed spiteful throttled used vindictive	afraid appalled desperate dread fearful frantic horrified intimidated overwhelmed panicky petrified shocked terrified tormented vulnerable	baffled bewildered constricted directionless flustered stagnant trapped
Mild	admired alive amused appreciated assured cheerful confident delighted determined encouraged fulfilled grateful gratified joyful justified optimistic proud relieved resolved respected valued	ashamed despised disappointed discouraged disheartened disillusioned dismal distant distressed inadequate isolated lonely neglected slighted unappreciated upset	abandoned alienated degraded deprived disturbed drained islanded resigned slighted wasted	agitated annoyed controlled disgusted exasperated frustrated harassed infantilized irritated offended peeved resentful ridiculed smothered stifled	aggravated anguished cheated coerced deceived dominated provoked	alarmed apprehensive axed defensive guarded insecure shaken skeptical startled stunned suspicious tense threatened uneasy	ambivalent awkward disorganized doubt foggy hesitant misunderstood perplexed puzzled torn troubled
weak	content flattered fortunate glad good hopeful peaceful pleased relaxed satisfied	apathetic bad deflated disenchanted lost sorry		dismayed displeased tolerant uptight		anxious concerned doubtful impatient nervous perplexed reluctant shy timid unsure	bothered distracted surprised uncertain uncomfortable undecided unsettled unsure

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