Empathy in Response to Diverse Children’s Literature in a Fifth Grade Classroom

By

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Advisor’s Name

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Date

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Abstract

This action research study examined how fifth grade students in a predominantly white community respond to children's literature that includes members of diverse communities. Following a piece of diverse children's literature read aloud, students had purposeful discussions and completed reflective journals that aimed to promote the building of empathy. This study analyzed the impact this process had on students' empathy. Findings indicate that reading, discussing, and reflecting on diverse children's literature does impact empathy, making exposure to other cultural groups through literature important for teachers to do. This study also showed an increase in cultural awareness.

*Keywords*: empathy, diverse children's literature, discussion, reflective journal
Introduction

As a fifth-grade teacher in a rural town, many of my students come from a similar cultural background. Most of my students are white from European descent, are followers of the Christian religion, and have never left the surrounding areas, which have a similar cultural demographic. They are not exposed to the racial and cultural diversity of real-world America where only 60.7% of the American population considers themselves White according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017). Our community’s school population is currently 87.1% White which is not an accurate picture of how most of America looks in terms of race and culture. It is my responsibility as a teacher to expose my students to other memberships in the United States population that they will encounter throughout their lives and instill a respect and appreciation for all races and cultures, including their own. Studies have concluded that White children are more likely to have racial bias and lean towards racism by the age of three, especially when they are in a place of little diversity (Burnett, 2012). Fortunately, these biases can be unlearned through talk and exposure to different races. My students need to be aware of the experiences and lives of other cultural groups and how to be sensitive to and appreciative of them.

My students are taught empathy through character education from the very early years of schools for various reasons. Empathy can help students create strong bonds and relationships with others by understanding why someone else might be feeling a certain way. It also promotes acceptance of others and tolerance of people who may be different. These are also lifelong skills that will benefit them as they grow into adulthood and become an active part of society. My students come to my classroom with an understanding of what it means to ‘walk in someone else’s shoes’. While they can regurgitate this definition, I don’t see them actively applying it in school when they are talking about various cultural groups. My students are not knowledgeable
about current or past social justice issues and are not sure how to respond to tough questions about race and cultures. I have heard derogatory comments made about various groups of people, but my students don’t understand why those comments are inappropriate.

My goal as a teacher is to give my students more opportunities to learn about different cultures through children’s literature. Children’s literature is already a daily part of our reading time in my classroom, but I wanted to incorporate more diverse books that represent and expose my students to the world outside of our community. Books can act as windows into another cultural background (Bishop, 1990). Through these books, students can have a look at others’ cultures and histories that will, as Bishop explained (1990), "help us to understand each other better by helping to change our attitudes towards differences" (p. 2). We live in a diverse world and I want to make sure my students know how to empathize with people who are different from them that they will encounter during their lives. This leads me to ask: How does diverse children’s literature encourage empathy?

**Literature Review**

**Children’s Literature and Empathy**

Children’s literature is a staple of many elementary classrooms which is utilized in a variety of different ways. When properly used in a classroom, children’s literature can be much more than what it is typically seen as: books for kids. It can teach key reading skills, be used as mentor texts for writing, character education development, and can be the spark of higher-level discussions. Reading aloud to students has been a way to introduce new ideas and challenge students’ thinking through relatable stories. It also exposes readers to different topics that they normally wouldn’t see which can easily open the door for conversations. When students read or hear a story, they can learn about the characters’ problems or challenges and experience similar
feelings (McGowan, McGowan, & Wheeler, 1994). By reflecting on those feelings, students are practicing empathy, or “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). The simple activities related to a read aloud (reading/listening, discussing, and reflection) can be a powerful tool in exercising empathy and many teachers use children’s literature to do so.

Research by Borba (2016) suggests asking three questions to children after reading a story aloud in order to facilitate empathy building. The first question centers around the child stepping into the character’s place and asking, “What if this happened to me?” This allows the child to discuss what they would do if they were in that situation. The second question asks, “How would I feel?” This gives the child time to reflect on their own experiences and relate to a time where they may have had a similar feeling. The last question asks the child to place themselves in the same situation as the book’s character, but as themselves and not as the character. This final step changes the perspective because they truly have to think about how they would handle a situation and how it would affect their lives, not just the characters. These guiding questions should be asked frequently until they become natural in the book discussion conversation (Borba, 2016).

While young children are naturally empathetic, differences between empathy in the gender of people occur as we grow older (Chen, Lu, Liu, & Lin, 2014). This difference happens during the primary and secondary school age. One reason this happens is because females begin to have more of the hormone oxytocin which is related to empathy, while males have more testosterone which has a negative effect on empathy. The other reason for this change is linked to
gender roles and how females tend to believe they need to care for and focus on others, roles that
are linked to empathy (Chen et. al., 2014).

**Diverse Literature**

Diverse literature includes, and is not limited to, printed materials that include different
cultures, races, socioeconomic status, (dis)abilities, gender identity, sexual orientations and all
other literature that includes cultures that are not the norm for the greater population. This also
includes various family structures (foster families and adoptions), religions, language variations
and dialects (Boyd, Causey, & Galda, 2015). Diverse literature could also include books that
have characters that aren’t gender conforming like one with a strong female protagonist (i.e.
Princeless by Jeremy Whitley) or a ‘feminine’ male character (i.e. Julian is a Mermaid by Jessica
Love). Reading aloud, discussing, and reflecting on diverse children’s literature such as these
will provide students the opportunity to experience other characters’ lives in a way that allows
them to feel how the character is feeling.

Sharing books containing diverse characters will open new worlds for students who may
not have regular contact with different cultures. Students have the chance to step inside a
different character’s shoes and experience a life which can be very different from their own.
Bishop (1990) describes how important it is for children to be exposed to authentic literature
about different cultures as well as their own culture. These authentic books will serve as
“mirrors,”“windows,” and “sliding glass doors.” A piece of literature in which the main
character reflects the reader would be considered a mirror and readers can easily connect with
the character. Windows and sliding glass doors are literature that invite readers into a different
setting with characters that are have different backgrounds. This may be the only time that a
student has met a character of a different culture. These books teach readers about experiences
they themselves may not have, but can foster appreciation and respect for the character’s culture and situations (Bishop, 1990). Sometimes a window or sliding glass door book can become a mirror book in the sense that a student can relate to something, other than race, that the character and themselves have in common. It could be as simple as being human and understanding the bigger picture of life (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014).

Another important aspect of diverse literature is the frequency in which stories are shared with students. Reading a “single story” about a culture or event, or multiple stories about one culture that are similar, can paint an unrealistic picture of that culture or event (Adichie, 2009). Students can make assumptions that everyone from that culture lives a similar life, which is not true. Even humans in the same culture are vastly different. Only showing students one variety of a story can lead to stereotypes, so teachers need to share books told from varying perspectives for students to get a full picture of a culture or event (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014).

While it is important for all students to read a variety of books, it is especially important for students to see characters like themselves in books. If they are not seeing themselves in books, they can form an assumption that people who look, act, or live like them are not worthy of being in a book (Boyd, Causey, & Galda, 2015). This can affect their sense of identity and belonging in a negative way (Morgan, 2009). The way that readers see themselves in literature can truly alter their view of self. On the other hand, if White students are only exposed to mirror literature, which is most of the literature available, they can form an untrue picture of the world’s diversity (Meadows-Fernandez, 2017).

**Selecting and integrating authentic diverse literature.**

The goal of incorporating more diverse children’s literature into a classroom library or into lessons may seem easy, but there are a few barriers that a teacher must recognize.
Availability of authentic diverse literature is shockingly low. According to the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC), which publishes annual data on diversity in children’s books, only 28.4% of children’s books that were published in the United States in 2018 are about People of Color and/or First/Native Nations (2019). These books contain African/African American, American Indians/First Nations, Asian Pacifecs/Asian Pacific Americans, and Latinx characters. From 1994, when they began documentation, to 2014, the percentage of books about these minorities was under 10%. The percentage of books about these cultural groups finally went up to 14.3% of books in 2015 (CCBC, 2019). While the percentage of books containing diverse characters has increased over the past twenty-five years, it still does not match the census percentage of non-White peoples in the United States. These statistics also only take into account the race of the characters in the books so other diverse groups could be even lower in representation. These books were only documented if the main or secondary characters were non-white, but not if they promoted stereotypes or prejudice. The CCBC’s process began changing in 2018, however, to look closer at books and their content and to start documenting other minority groups, such as disabilities, gender, and LGBTQ (2018). Having this data in the future will help determine if there has been a change in children’s literature.

There are initiatives to change children’s literature so that there is representation that is similar to our population in the United States. One such initiative is a group called We Need Diverse Books whose mission is to promote and distribute books to all children that contain diverse characters (WNDB, 2019). This group is dedicated to making changes in the publishing world so that more books by and about diverse experiences can be published (Meadows-Fernandez, 2017). In 2016, WNDB partnered with Scholastic Book Clubs to create lists of recent diverse literature so parents and teachers have access to such books (WNDB, 2016).
Another consideration when selecting diverse children’s literature is determining if the book is authentic and non-biased. Books that include diverse characters can also hold unkind bias and messages about certain cultures. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to choose books that will not hurt a child’s self-image or foster negative attitudes about another culture. In 1980, the Council on Interracial Books for Children published a guide to help a person determine if a book included racism or sexism which has been adapted by various organizations, most recently Teaching for Change (Derman-Sparks, 2016). The Guide for Selecting Non-Bias Books consists of nine questions to ask about a book before choosing it to read to a child. It asks the selector to think critically about the illustrations, words, and context among other things. By evaluating children’s literature for absence of stereotypes, authentic characters, and the portrayal of minorities, teachers and parents are helping to accurately represent other cultures and therefore encouraging appreciation for them (Norton, 2007).

**Instructional Techniques for Integrating Diverse Literature**

Reading aloud a diverse children’s book is just the beginning of the integration process. In order to fully utilize a story and allow students to learn from it, a teacher needs to “take the necessary steps” to allow time for students to “think more deeply or critically about literature” (Martinez, Temple, & Yokota, 2017, pg. 16). A teacher-led discussion and time for individual written reflection would give students a chance to share their insights. After reading a story aloud, the teacher can facilitate a discussion which will give students the opportunity to explore the characters and themes more closely and address any important issues that arise. Potential issues could include prejudice and bias, social justice, or the presentation of a single perspective in which a teacher can then foster an approach of critical thinking to deeper understand the issue (Tschida, Ryan, & Anne, 2014). Students can connect their lives and personal experiences to the
characters, expressing similarities and empathy. Delving into the true meaning behind the story through discussion should be done in a respectful way as to let all children openly share their thoughts (Martinez et al., 2017).

Teacher-led discussions can also help address stereotypes that may arise after reading a diverse children’s book. Some students might take the book at face value and assume that all members of a culture are the same as the characters depicted in one book (Brashears, 2012). Having the teacher facilitate and ask deeper questions about students’ thoughts without putting down their ideas can help combat these stereotypes. Discussions are invaluable and help create a conversation about different cultures and the issues that they experience.

Since some students don’t feel comfortable with sharing their thoughts in front of others during a discussion, giving students time to reflect through written response is another useful way to get the most out of diverse children’s literature. This would encourage students to reflect on their personal beliefs and how they connect with the text (Martinez et al., 2017). The teacher should also allow time for the students to share their responses with one another.

**Teacher whiteness.**

While the world is growing into a more diverse place, some communities are not. According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 95% of licensed Wisconsin teachers identify as White and of those 75% are female (2018). The diversity in the education field is very limited which can impact students’ learning. This can make lessons and conversations about race and other cultures awkward. White educators are more likely to bypass a conversation about race or fail to understand inappropriate comments that are made. By ignoring those comments, a vital conversation is missed which may lead to the continuation of racism in America rather than fighting it by having these tough discussions. (Haviland, 2008).
Ladson-Billings (2003) found that many white teachers were not aware that the questions they were asking their students were avoiding social and racial issues. This can be remedied by a teacher being aware of these issues, appropriately scaffolding discussion questions, and being prepared to correct any misconceptions or stereotypes that may arise (Martinez et al., 2017). In addition, these teachers must be aware of their own cultural biases and insights and make sure they are not pushing them onto their students during these discussions and any other time in the classroom (Martinez et al., 2017).

**The Problem**

Most of my students are part of the majority in our school and thus are surrounded by other White people. The goal of my study was to expose my students to different cultures and groups that they may not be exposed to while living in their small town. I did this action research through exposing my students to diverse children’s literature to see if there was an effect on their empathy. The aforementioned ideas are all important to my study because it suggests that diverse children’s literature has positive impacts on students and any literature can promote empathy if properly presented. In the next section I will outline how these ideas were put into my action research study.

**Methodology**

**Setting and Participants**

This study took place from January to March of 2019 in an upper Midwest rural middle school. The school houses about 300 students in grades 4-8 with the student to teacher ratio at 13:1. The school receives Title 1 services and 44.8% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch. There are currently zero English Language Learners enrolled in the school and 87.1% of the students identify as White.
The student population that will be specifically impacted by this study will be one fifth grade class with 23 students. There are twelve girls and eleven boys with two students on individualized education plans. The class has twenty White students, one Hispanic student, and two students of 2 or more races. To determine the specific participants of this study, I administered the Empathy Formative Questionnaire (Appendix A) to all students in the class and students completed a short answer form with two empathy related questions (Gaumer Erickson, Soukup, Noonan, & McGurn, 2015). Based on the results of the survey and form, four students were selected as a focus group for further analysis. The names given for the students are pseudonyms (Axel, Ian, Robby, and Sara). There are three male students and one female student between the ages of 10 and 11. The students of the focus group are all identified as White. All are part of the general education class and none of them receive additional services. All students in the class still participated in the activities of the study, but data from only those selected students was analyzed. The study spanned over a 10-week period, including pre- and post-questionnaires, and included ten sessions.

Materials and Procedures

The students were asked to complete the Empathy Formative Questionnaire as a pre- and post-measurement. This questionnaire was created by The Research Collaboration, a part of the University of Kansas Center for Research Learning, to aid in the measurement of empathy in students (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2015). It includes fifteen statements in which the participant must answer using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 is ‘not very like me’ and 5 is ‘very like me’. The other options, 2 through 4, offer less extreme and neutral options. When scoring the questionnaires, each statement’s score is out of five, with the highest total possible score of 75.
To make the interpretation of the data easier, results can be adjusted to a 100-point scale in which they can then be examined for strengths and areas for improvement and percentiles.

This questionnaire measures two different components of empathy: understanding others and communicating understanding. The understanding others component includes eight statements that show if an individual makes efforts to understand others’ situation, actions, and feelings. The communicating understanding component includes seven statements that measure the individual’s ability to communicate their understanding of others’ situation (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2015). Both are essential components of proficient empathy. The Empathy Formative Questionnaire was tested for reliability using 3,147 students. The internal consistency was found to be moderately acceptable ($\alpha = .812$) using the Cronbach’s coefficient alpha where ($\alpha = .7$) is considered acceptable. The different components scored slightly lower when calculated separately, with understanding others scoring ($\alpha = .728$), making it acceptable, and communicating understanding scoring ($\alpha = .666$), making it questionable (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2015). Together, all fifteen items on the questionnaire score an acceptable rating.

To begin the data collection process, I shared the purpose and gave a brief overview of the questionnaire with student. The statements are written at a seventh-grade reading level so I read each one aloud and offered clarification when necessary.

Students also took a two-item short answer form as a pre-measurement that asks what empathy means to them and how they show empathy (Appendix B). The post-measurement short answer form had the same two questions and two additional questions asking what the students learned about other cultures through picture books and if this experience will change how they treat others (Appendix C). These two questions were answered with no time limits.

After the pre-measurements, ten instructional sessions were completed over eight weeks.
The process for each session was similar with the reading aloud of a piece of diverse children’s literature, a whole-class discussion, and a reflective journal time. The diverse children’s literature, mostly picture books, were selected using the Guide for Selecting Non-Bias Books (Derman-Sparks, 2015) and through consulting local librarians for more recent literature. I selected one middle-grade novel and read it aloud continually for four weeks, only having discussions and reflective journals on three occurrences. I purposefully selected multiple books that were about the same culture in hopes of disrupting the “single story” and letting my students see the differences within cultures (Adichie, 2009). Table 1 lists the selections, their genre and format, and the primary culture that is represented within the text. These book selections continued to align with my district’s reading program mandates, but they were read aloud in a less formal way to promote engagement and interaction.

Table 1

Integrated Diverse Children’s Literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Genre &amp; Format</th>
<th>Culture Displayed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Big Red Lollipop by Rukhsana Khan</td>
<td>Fiction picture book</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separate is Never Equal by Duncan Tonatiuh</td>
<td>Historical fiction picture book</td>
<td>Mexican-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malala’s Magic Pencil by Malala Yousafzai</td>
<td>Autobiography picture book</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dreamers by Yuyi Morales</td>
<td>Autobiography picture book</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All the Way to Havana by Margarita Engle and Mike Curato</td>
<td>Fiction picture book</td>
<td>Cuban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowwow Powwow by Brenda</td>
<td>Fiction picture book</td>
<td>Ojibwe (American Indian)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A discussion was held at the conclusion of each book, or series of chapters of *Amal Unbound*, for approximately 15 minutes, or until the conversation became stagnant, in the classroom. At the beginning of every session I would set the expectations for the discussions. The expectations were that only one student was talking at a time, we would respectfully disagree and explain our reasoning, and if we agreed with another student we would restate with what we agreed. To make sure only one student was talking at a time, we used a ‘talking ball’ that was tossed gently to those with their hands raised. The questions I asked the students varied on the book, but still centered on making connections, building relationships, and fostering empathy. Appendix D lists the discussion questions that guided the teacher-led discussions for each book. To analyze these results, I listened to the recorded conversations, transcribed them, and then decided categories/themes that best represented students’ thinking. Empathetic comments were comments that reflected thoughts on how a character was feeling or what they would do in a similar situation. Culturally aware comments were comments that mentioned the character’s culture in a positive way or asked a clarifying question about the culture. Finally, any other comments that didn’t fit those categories were noted as ‘other’.

Lastly, the students used a journal and the same prompts used to discuss the book (Appendix D) to individually reflect on the piece of literature. Each student generated their journals using their school-provided Chromebooks to start a Google document that was continually used throughout the sessions. I had access to the Google document for all students.
This is a mixed-methods research study. The qualitative components were the observations, discussion comments, journal reflections, and the short answer empathy form. I took field notes during the discussions about the selected students and their comments that were made. The discussions were recorded so I could listen and make accurate notes about relevancy of the given topics. Examples of specific quotes were included as necessary. The journal reflections were collected and analyzed for signs of empathy and depth of responses. Reflection journals were assessed for length, relevancy, and thoughtfulness. The Empathy Short Answer Form from the pre- and post-measurement were analyzed and compared for differences based on length and relevancy. Quantitatively, the Empathy Formative Questionnaire was scored based on the scoring guide, as detailed above, and used as a pre- and post-measurement. I analyzed these points to determine changes in empathy that are displayed by my students. I fully explored how my students’ empathy was changed by the use of diverse children’s literature.

Findings

Whole Class Patterns

The results from the Empathy Formative Questionnaire for all 23 students in the class showed various trends and patterns. One trend was the difference in male and female responses and changes (increases or decreases in score). The raw scores for each component and the changes from pre- and post-measurement for female students are shown in Table 2. The same information for male students is shown in Table 3. The twelve females had an average increase of 5.08 points, meaning they improved their empathetic responses by around 5 points using the Likert scale. This is a 6.8% increase overall. The eleven males had an average increase of 2.73 points, or a 3.6% increase overall. While all students had an increase, the females increased their empathetic responses by almost double compared to the males. The breakdown of the Empathy
Formative Questionnaire between the two components, understanding others and communicating understanding, showed that females had an average increase of 3.3% while males had a decrease of 0.1% in the understanding others component. Both male and female communicating understanding component averages increased with females increasing 3.5% and males increasing 3.8%. The whole class averages for the two components were both increased in which understanding others increased 1.6% and communicating understanding increased 3.7%. Overall there were four students, two female and two male, with no change or a decrease in raw score from the pre-measurement to the post-measurement. There were only three statements in the post-measurement that averaged a raw Likert-scale score of 4 or more, or statements that the students felt described themselves well. These statements were:

- I try to imagine how I would feel in someone else’s situation.
- When a friend or family member is sad, my actions let them know I understand (like a hug or a pat on the back).
- When I know one of my friends is upset, I try to talk to them about it (Gaumer Erickson et al., 2015).

All other statement averages were within the 3-point range.

Table 2

Formative Empathy Questionnaire: Female Pre- and Post-Measurement Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Pre-Measurement</th>
<th>Post-Measurement</th>
<th>Change</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UO</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>25</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>47</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
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Table 3

*Formative Empathy Questionnaire: Male Pre- and Post-Measurement Results*

<table>
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<th>Post-Measurement</th>
<th>Change</th>
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<td>Robby</td>
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<td>19</td>
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Note. UE = Understanding Others (component of Empathy Formative Questionnaire). CU = Communicating Understanding (component of Empathy Formative Questionnaire). T = Total.
The four students that I selected for my focus group were students that scored the lowest in their pre-measurement Empathy Formative Questionnaire. I chose them because I wanted to focus on students who had the biggest original deficit compared to their classmates.

Whole class discussion lengths are shown in Table 4. The amount of time spent discussing each book, or series of chapters, was communicated to the students as endless, but was stopped when the discussion became stagnant. *Amal Unbound* was only discussed once as a full class so the discussion time for that book was after reading chapters 16 and 17. Five of the eight discussions lasted over ten minutes (*Red Lollipop, Separate is Never Equal, Malala’s Magic Pencil, Bowwow Powwow, and Amal Unbound*) while three of them were under ten minutes (*Dreamers, All the Way to Havana, I Dissent*). All of the books about the Pakistani culture had a discussion over 14 minutes in length. The two books read aloud that included the Mexican and Mexican-American cultures had varied discussion times with one around 9 minutes and the other around 14 minutes. Two of the books about a culture that only had one story during the sessions had discussions under 9 minutes. In contrast, *Bowwow Powwow* was the only story about American Indian culture and the discussion was over 15 minutes in length.

Table 4

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>20</th>
<th>28</th>
<th>21</th>
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<td>Means</td>
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<td>49.09</td>
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<td>25.73</td>
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**Book Discussion Lengths**

<table>
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<th>Book Title</th>
<th>Discussion Time (in minutes)</th>
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<td><em>Red Lollipop</em></td>
<td>16:13</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Separate is Never Equal</em></td>
<td>13:43</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Malala’s Magic Pencil</em></td>
<td>15:39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Dreamers</em></td>
<td>9:29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>All the Way to Havana</em></td>
<td>8:31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Bowwow Powwow</em></td>
<td>15:06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Amal Unbound</em></td>
<td>14:39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>I Dissent</em></td>
<td>7:21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Focus Students**

The four students selected as part of the focus group had their discussion comments, journal reflections, and pre-measurement answers analyzed. These students had the lowest pre-measurement scores from the Empathy Formative Questionnaire and thus had the most room for growth based on this measurement instrument. The results from their Empathy Formative Questionnaire are listed in Tables 2 and 3 which show the pre- and post-measurement for the different components: Understanding Others, Communicating Understanding, and total for a combined score of the two components. These are raw scores based on the Likert-scale. The highest possible score for the Understanding Others component is 40 with the highest possible for Communicating Understanding being 40. The highest possible total score is 75. The following subsections will comprise of individual data for each focus student.

**Axel’s individual results.**
Axel’s Formative Empathy Questionnaire shows that he increased his total by a raw score of 2 points, or 2.7% growth. His empathy short answer form showed similar results with his pre- and post-measurement tool with very similar answers. His session discussion comments and reflective journal showed more growth as his answers and comments for both started as short comments during the first few sessions and grew to much more complex answers. During the first two books, his journal responses would be answered in 1-6 words, i.e. “sad,” “no,” “I would be mad,” etc. The rest of his responses for the other eight books were deeper with his connection-making and explaining. He seemed to be more passionate with his responses when he was talking about what he would do if he were in a similar situation. Some of the comments that stood out as more complex were:

- “Amal’s world is not fair. Boys have more opportunities than girls because Amal can’t go to the school she wants … because girls can’t go there[…] It is only for boys.” (Amal Unbound response)
- “I would stand up and say this is not right. We should all be able to go to school.” (Malala’s Magic Pencil response)
- “I would feel mad because she has to work for her mistakes. I would try to escape when Jawad goes on his trip and I would have [some] people escape with me and run home.” (Amal Unbound response)

Axel also made three cultural assumptions in his reflective journals based on the information he knew and learned from the discussions. In Dreamers, the main character migrates to America from Mexico. Axel wrote, “They might have moved to the place where they [are] at [because] they might [have] had a war down there.” In All the Way to Havana, Axel wrote about the cars from the book and knew, “USA stopped trading with them”. Lastly, after reading
Bowwow Powwow, he reflected with “Native Americans still keep on doing their traditions by dancing, singing, and others.”

During the eight whole-class discussions, Axel participated quite frequently with 26 comments overall. He made empathetic comments 27% of the time, culturally aware comments 31% of the time, and other comments 42% of the time. Some of his comments were made to try to make his classmates laugh like, “I have a dog,” to deeper comments when discussing the Mexican-American characters from Separate is Never Equal like, “I don’t think it’s right to lie about how they are and if they have lice. And if they do have that stuff, they don’t know if it’s true or not!” Out of the four focus students, Axel made the most comments during discussions.

Ian’s individual results.

Ian’s score on the Formative Empathy Questionnaire shows that he increased his total score by 3 points, or 4% overall. His pre- and post-measurement empathy short answer form had similar answers, but the final two questions had something different. He recorded that he learned, “it is not ok to judge others by their culture. Some are kinda cool”. He also wrote, “I will be kinder” when asked how this experience will change him. Ian’s reflective journal showed the most growth as his responses were detailed and filled with connections and emotions. In the first few reflective journals, he had some aggressive comments like, “[I will] get revenge,” and, “I would take it back from the person that takes my thing.” No further aggression was shown in the reflective comments. He was also very passionate in his journal responses when he wrote about groups being treated unfairly. Some of those comments were:

- “Boys have more opportunities than girls. Boys have more books and can go to better schools. I think that it is not fair that boys have more rights than girls do in
the village. There are other places that treat girls not as good as boys.” (*Amal
Unbound* response)

- “We both think that girls should have equal rights as boys because it is not there
  *sic* fault that they were born a female not male. I would protest and do what she
did.” (*I Dissent* response)

Ian also made a lot of connections while writing his responses. He mentions his family,
his feelings about being treated unfairly and often how he would feel and what he would do in a
similar situation. During the eight whole-class discussions, Ian made a total of 14 comments. Of
those comments, 36% were empathetic, 7% were culturally aware, and 57% were other
comments. He also had 16 interruptions over all the sessions while his classmates very rarely
interrupted one another. His responses during the discussions were not very thoughtful, while his
reflective journal comments were very thoughtful.

**Robby’s individual results.**

Robby’s Formative Empathy Questionnaire results were interesting since he increased his
score in the understanding others component by 7 points, or 9.3%, but he decreased his score in
the communicating understanding component by 3 points, or 4%. This makes his total score have
an increase of 5.3%. He was the only focus student who had a score drop in any category. He
was more descriptive with his post-measurement empathy short answers compared to his pre-
measurement as he gave a specific example of how he can show empathy, “saying things like
I’ve felt that way before.” He also wrote that this experience has taught him that people of
different cultures are “treated differently,” but that this experience and new knowledge won’t
change how he treats others.
Robby’s reflective journal responses were shorter than the other focus students and comparatively were not as deep in making connections or understanding the characters’ situations. Some of his journal responses were more thoughtful than others with more complete sentences and details, but they were sporadic. His most passionate responses were when he wrote about more fortunate individuals or things that he seemed to be insecure about. Some of those examples are:

- “Some rich people are always impatient and rude. I would yell [at them] even if people said the situation would’ve got worse. I get mad at rude/stupid people easily.” (Amal Unbound response)
- “Some people are just rude. The football teams at recess are unfair. It’s always the popular kids vs. the others. We almost always win tho :)
- “People judge me because I have glasses but I am very athletic.”

Robby did make a lot of comments in his reflective journal and during whole-class discussions that put him in the character’s position. He was the only student in the class to mention how difficult it would be to move somewhere new, like the character from Dreamers. He wrote, “Moving to Mexico it would take me a little while to understand their language.” Robby made 14 comments during the eight whole-class discussions. He was very patient and detailed when describing his thoughts to his classmates. He made empathetic comments 50% of the time (the highest of the focus students), culturally aware comments 14% of the time, and 36% of his comments were unrelated to empathy or culture. Some of those other comments were copying other student’s responses in what I perceive as an attempt to make his classmates laugh.

Sara’s individual results.
Sara had the biggest change of score in her Formative Empathy Questionnaire of all students in the class with a total increase of 14 points, or 18.7%. Her responses for the pre- and post-measurement empathy short answer were similar as she was detailed and gave examples in both. She did add a comment about what she learned from this experience which was, “I learned that just because your [sic] a different color or your [sic] LGBTQ doesn’t mean you can’t do the things that other people do.” Sara’s reflective journal responses were very detailed and thoughtful. She used “I would…” and “I would feel…” to start ten of her sentences when describing what she would do if she were in a similar position. She also had a lot of culturally aware comments that bridged her knowledge and the situation from the story well.

- “I don’t think it’s fair because girls and boys at our school these days have the same opportunities as everyone else so they should get treated the same way.” (*Amal Unbound* response)
- “When the blacks and whites didn’t get to go to the same school, they were bullied, so at the end of the book they actually were happy because they all got to know each other more and went to school together and actually became friends!” (*Separate is Never Equal* response)
- “The characters are similar to me because the schools near us have pow-wows and they dance around in a circle if their [sic] Native American.” (*Bowwow Powwow* response)

Sara participated in the classroom discussions frequently, making 17 comments over the eight sessions. Of those 17 comments, 35% of them were empathetic comments, 41% were culturally aware comments, and 24% were other comments. Most of the comments she made during the discussions were very similar to her reflective journals. Another thing that was apparent was that she would make connections as much as possible to her own life. She
mentioned that a character from *I Dissent* is similar to her because she doesn’t live with her mother either and that she was taken care of by her stepdad for 8 years. She volunteered a lot of personal information that most of my students did not do. “My life is similar to Amal’s because we both get sad moments and happy moments” was a response to *Amal Unbound* that exemplified a lot of her emotional and thoughtful responses.

**Discussion**

In this study, I analyzed and examined the effect of reading aloud, discussing, and reflecting on diverse children’s literature on a students’ empathy. The results indicated positive relationships between those pieces of literature and expressed empathy through discussion and reflections. Overall the qualitative findings and quantitative results showed empathetic growth in multiple ways. Most of my students had increases in empathy based on their Empathy Formative Questionnaire. The Empathy Formative Questionnaire was helpful in seeing changes in my students’ empathy, but I believe that it could be easily thrown-off if a student is not in the mindset to take it. An example of this could be if a student is upset about something else in school or with a friendship, their responses might not accurately reflect their average empathy on a normal day. There was also a statement on the questionnaire that mentioned the participant’s parents which I would alter in the future since I have multiple students who do not live with their parents. This also could have skewed the results. Nonetheless, 19 of my 23 students, or 83%, had positive increases in this questionnaire. I believe that shows one way that this action research process helped increase my students’ empathy.

Based on the male and female growth on the Empathy Formative Questionnaire, one could gather that female students’ empathy grew at a much higher rate compared to the male students. This made sense when thinking about the hormonal development in youth at this age.
(Chen et. al., 2014). When I listened again to the recorded post-reading discussions, I noticed that females tended to talk more and their comments were usually thoughtful. While there were males that were very invested in the discussions, some would only agree to others’ comments or try to say something to make their classmates laugh, like Robby and Axel did on various occasions. There were no instances of females trying to make others laugh.

The evidence showed that my students participated more and had deeper conversation as the sessions progressed. Borba’s (2016) repeated questioning to build empathy proved to work with my students as they became accustomed to knowing what questions I was going to ask during every session. The discussions were filled with more empathetic and culturally aware comments as the sessions progressed. While some of my students got annoyed at the repetitive nature of my questioning, most appreciated the consistency and routine. I am curious to see if my students continue to address these questions during book discussions without the exact framework as Borba (2016) proposes.

I learned that all of my focus students wrote responses in their reflection journals that had similar comments to those they made or heard during the discussion. This leads me to believe that the discussion portion of each session helped them formulate their own thoughts which they were able to reflect on individually. This worked because it gave my students a chance to take other perspectives and opinions in account and then form their own. This gave each student the time to reflect on their personal beliefs and expand on them (Martinez et al., 2017).

Upon listening to the discussions after the sessions were completed, I noticed a lot of the comments made were about culture. As Bishop (1990) and Norton (2007) proposed, the exposure to these different cultures through books was fostering an appreciation and respect for other cultures in my students. I could see this through the polite corrections of their classmates if
they said something stereotypical, the amount of sincere questions being asked in order to gain more knowledge about a culture, and all of the culturally aware comments made during discussion and in their reflective journals. Sometimes the comments that they would make would be connections they had to the text. In the early sessions I would push my students to dig deeper and make a bigger connection, like when Axel said the only similarities he had with the characters were that they were both boys. Tschida, Ryan, and Ticknor (2014) say that any connection is a step towards understanding that we are all human. This realization made me stop pushing them to look deeper at a character and themselves, and let them reflect as they wanted. I did notice that there was a deeper cultural discussion when the book that was read was about a specific cultural issue (*Separate is Never Equal, Malala’s Magic Pencil*), but there was more empathetic comments made for other books that were not focused on a cultural issue (*Big Red Lollipop, All the Way to Havana*).

Another explanation as to why some students made deeper or more thoughtful connections to certain books could be that some students viewed a book as a window into another culture while others could have felt a deeper connection and viewed it as a sliding glass door (Bishop, 2009). Sara would often make personal connections to the books, making them sliding glass doors, while Robby often just said generic comments, viewing the book as a window in which he did not fully immerse himself. McGowan, McGowan, and Wheeler (1994) stated that students should be able to experience similar feelings as a character when they place themselves in the character’s shoes. I see this as something my students got increasingly better at as the sessions progressed. Their discussions were more thoughtful and they participated more during the later sessions, making less random comments and more empathetic and culturally
aware comments. They also had more thoughtful comments in their reflective journals. By using Borba’s (2016) questioning strategies, students were able to practice using empathy.

While I only analyzed four students’ discussion comments and journal responses, the amount of empathetic comments that were made throughout the sessions were significant. Sara was the focus student who would write her reflective journals with more in-depth and lengthy comments than the others and her final Empathy Formative Questionnaire showed the most gain. She also was the student who would make the most connections to her personal life, reflecting back to the characters often. This showed me that her empathetic behaviors were exercised and strengthened due to this study.

The discussions that had the longest length and most thoughtful comments made were those about the Pakistani culture. When I first started reading *Amal Unbound* the students had a few misconceptions about the culture. I continued to read various books about the same culture in hopes that they would learn more about it, dispelling their assumptions through discussions and eliminating the single story (Adichie, 2009). The more perspectives of the culture through different stories and characters they were exposed to, the more empathetic their comments became. The discussions became less culture-based and more empathy-driven as I would then use Borba’s empathy questioning strategies (2016).

One trend that I had not anticipated was the amount of culturally aware comments that were made. The students live in a small community that is not very diverse so talking about different cultures is something I strive to do as a teacher, but this intentional planning and implementation of diverse literature had positive impacts. My students asked questions and discussed what they thought the answers were based on the books we read and their background information. As the discussion facilitator, I made sure to address any possible misconceptions
about a culture as to not let those turn into prejudice or racist comments (Haviland, 2008).
Through the exposure to the many different cultures in the literature, I believe my students have
a better view of the diverse world and not the world that our current books portray (Meadows-
Fernandez, 2017). Through this action research study, I learned that integrating diverse
children’s literature while using a structured format of discussion and reflection in my classroom
can have many positive effects.

Implications and Conclusion

The results of my study will impact me as a teacher in multiple ways. I will continue to
be more intentional when it comes to integrating diverse children’s literature in my classroom. I
will be aware of the books I am purchasing for my classroom and make sure that I am supplying
mirrors for my students, especially those who are part of minorities, and windows and sliding
glass doors for everyone (Bishop, 1990). Those books will also be analyzed for bias using the
Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children’s Books to ensure that they foster positive images of
diverse groups (Derman-Sparks, 2016). I will also continue to utilize discussions as a way of
strengthening empathy and discuss different cultures.

Further research is warranted to better understand the effects of diverse children’s
literature on fifth grade students’ empathy. This research would benefit from a measurement tool
that is more consistent. Student interviews or surveys that are taken more often throughout the
process could be beneficial in this sense. By having students take additional surveys, there could
be a better opportunity to see if changes in empathy are being made. This would also help to see
what books encourage more empathetic responses. Every child is going to connect and respond
to different books in different ways, but having a baseline of diverse books that promote empathy
or foster positive cultural awareness would be an added benefit.
Another aspect of this research that could be furthered would be to extend the sessions and have more consistency. Borba (2016) found that by continually using her empathy-promoting questioning strategies during discussion, those conversations would start happening more often without the direction of an adult. These additional sessions could provide more decisive results as to the impact on students’ empathy.

In conclusion, students’ empathy has a positive response to diverse children’s literature as seen through the quantitative and qualitative data from this study. Properly utilizing diverse children’s literature through read aloud, discussion, and reflective journaling can impact a student’s empathy. I am excited to use these strategies in the future to strengthen my teaching and my students’ personal growth.

**Limitations**

There were limitations that interfered with this study. One limitation was the schedule of sessions was altered because of an influx of cancelled days of school because of snowfall and severe cold. The loss of school hours made it difficult to incorporate a set schedule of two read alouds, discussions, and reflections twice a week. The sessions ended up being spread throughout nine weeks, with a weeklong spring break included. The loss of time also forced me to cut out two discussions of *Amal Unbound* which may have altered the reflective journals of those sessions. These inconsistencies could have altered the data results and findings.

Another limitation that may have had an effect was student who was continually gone for portions of the sessions. This student is on an individualized education plan and was getting the required services during some of the sessions. He was excluded from the data set for this reason.
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EMPATHY & DIVERSE CHILDREN’S LITERATURE


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Appendix A

Empathy Formative Questionnaire

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Not very like me</th>
<th>Very like me</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I try to see things from other people’s points of view.</td>
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<td>2. When I don’t understand someone’s point of view, I ask questions to learn more.</td>
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<td>3. When I disagree with others, it’s hard for me to understand their perspective.</td>
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<td>4. I consider people’s circumstances when I’m talking with them.</td>
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<td>5. I try to imagine how I would feel in someone else’s situation.</td>
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<td>6. When someone is upset, I try to remember a time when I felt the same way.</td>
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<td>7. When I’m reading a book or watching a movie, I think about how I would react if I was one of the characters.</td>
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<td>8. Sometimes I wonder what it would feel like to be in my parents’ situation.</td>
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<td>9. When a friend is upset, I try to show them that I understand how they feel.</td>
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<td>10. I say things like “I can see why you feel that way.”</td>
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<td>11. I’ve been known to say “You are wrong” when someone is sharing their opinion.</td>
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<td>12. When a friend or family member is sad, my actions let them know I understand (like a hug or a pat on the back).</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. I say things like “Something like that happened to me once, I understand how you feel.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. I’ve told my friends things like, “You shouldn’t be upset about that” or “Stop feeling that way.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. When I know one of my friends is upset, I try to talk to them about it.</td>
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Appendix B

Pre-Measurement Empathy Short Answer Form

Name: ________________________

1. What does empathy mean to you?

2. How do you show empathy?
Appendix C

Post-Measurement Empathy Short Answer Form

Name: ________________________

1. What does empathy mean to you?

2. How do you show empathy?

3. What have you learned about different cultures through our picture books?

4. How will this experience change how you treat people?
Appendix D

Teacher-Led Discussion Prompts and Journal Reflection Prompts Adapted from Brashears (2012)

**Book: Big Red Lollipop**

Where do the people in this book live? How are the characters similar to you? How are the characters different from you? What would you do if you were in a similar situation? How do you think the characters are feeling? Are there any stereotypes in this book? Use this space to reflect on anything else you’d like.

**Book: Separate is Never Equal**

Reflect on the book. Where do they live? How did you feel for Sylvia? What would you do if you were in a similar situation? How are you similar or different than Sylvia?

**Book: Amal Unbound**

What stands out to you about Amal and the world she lives in? What is similar to or different from your daily life? Boys have more opportunities in Amal’s society than Amal and the other girls in her village. Is this unique to the world Amal lives in? Why or why not? What are the ways girls and boys are treated differently in her village? How do you think Amal is feeling? What would you do if you were in Amal’s situation?

**Book: Malala’s Magic Pencil**

Where is this happening? Describe the setting. How do you think the characters feel? What would you do if you were in their situation? Add anything else you’d like.

**Book: Dreamers**

Where is this happening? Tell me about the main character. What do you think she was doing? How would you feel if you were in her situation? Anything else you’d like to add.
**Book: All the Way to Havana**

Where is this story taking place? How is this place or the events in the story different from your life? How is this place or the events in the story similar to your life?

**Book: Amal Unbound**

“I wish it wasn’t this way, but this is how the world works. It doesn’t mean I don’t love my daughters. I love each and every one of you.” Have you ever felt like something in your life is unfair? Describe the situation. How is your life different from Amal’s? Think about the situation she is in. How is your life similar? How is Amal feeling right now? Why does she feel that way?

**Book: Bowwow Powwow**

Where do the people in this book live? How are the characters similar to you? How are the characters different from you? What did you learn from this book?

**Book: Amal Unbound**

Describe Amal’s new situation. Why does Amal cry at the end of chapter 17 when talking to Jawad Sahib? How would you feel if you were Amal? What would you do if you were Amal?

**Book: I Dissent: Ruth Bader Ginsburg Makes Her Mark**

Where do the people in this book live? How are the characters similar to you? How are the characters different from you? What prejudices did Ruth Bader Ginsburg confront in her lifetime? What would you do if you were in her shoes?