



Greater Good in Education

SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

Fostering Empathy Through Literature (Middle School & High School)

Overview: Teachers choose from a list of discussion questions that prompt students to consider a character’s emotions, motivations, and behaviors, helping them to cultivate empathy.

“Stories teach us empathy. They reveal to us ourselves in the skins of others.” —Justin Simien

Time Required: 15-30 minutes, depending on the length of the book or text

Level:

- Middle School
- High School

Learning Objective:

Students will:

- Identify and analyze the emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and motivations of characters featured in books or texts

Materials:

- Book or text with characters who find themselves in emotionally evocative or cognitively complex situations. For example, they express intense emotions, make difficult decisions, or face challenging experiences. (See the “How to Do It” section for suggestions.)

SEL Competencies:

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness
- Responsible Decision-Making

How to Do It:

Reflection before the practice:

- Review what empathy is and why it’s important.
- Think about the stories, books, and fictional characters that have most influenced you. Why were those experiences so powerful for you? How did they change your perspective?

- How can you create a learning experience and tone in your classroom that fosters empathy, openness, and understanding?

Instructions:

- How to choose a book or text:
 - Look for a fictional or non-fictional (e.g., a biography or autobiography) book or text that provides thought-provoking characters and/or situations.
 - Consider whether the book or text serves as a [“window” or a “mirror”](#) to your students.
 - A “window” book provides students with a glimpse into the identities, motivations, and experiences of people who, on the surface, seem different from them; whereas a “mirror” book reflects students’ own identities, motivations, and experiences back to them.
 - For students coming from a country’s dominant culture where the majority of books reflect their identities, motivations, and experiences, window books can help them to see the world from others’ perspectives and to question taken-for-granted assumptions and mental models of their own world.
 - For students coming from marginalized groups, mirror books serve as a form of self-affirmation, validating and acknowledging the value of students’ own lives and experiences.
- The following websites offer lists of books for teaching empathy:
 - [Common Sense Media](#) (All ages)
 - [TeachThought](#) (All ages)
 - [24 books that teach about social justice](#)
 - [Michel Stone’s 11 touching books to boost empathy in teen readers](#)
 - [Michelle Borba’s 50 Books for kids and teens that teach empathy](#)
 - Young adult LGBTQ literature list
- Select questions from the list below in order to prompt individual journal responses, conversations in pairs or small groups, and/or whole class discussions.
- **For the greatest impact, be sure to select at least some of the italicized questions, which relate the content back to students’ own emotions and experiences.** Research suggests that students experience more empathy when prompted to put themselves in someone else’s shoes.

Identifying—or not—with characters:

- *Which character do you relate to most in this book/text? Why?*
- *Which character do you relate to least in this book/text? Why?*

Naming and labeling emotions:

- How do you think the character is feeling right now? Identify the range of emotions he/she could be feeling. *Can you think of a time when you felt like this? What was happening?*

- What evidence do you have that the character is feeling that way? *Write, tell, or draw a description of how you express that emotion(s) OR how you “see” that emotion.*

Understanding motivations:

- What do you think the character is thinking? Why? *What would you be thinking if you were in this situation?*
- What evidence do you have that the character is thinking that way?
- What do you predict the character might do next? Why? *What would you do if you were in this situation?*
- What impact does the character’s actions have on another character? How do you know? *Think of a time when your actions impacted another person. What happened and what was the outcome? Would you have done anything differently?*
- How do you think the character is going to react to another character’s behavior? *How would you react in a situation like this?*
- What does this saying mean: “Don’t criticize someone until you have walked a mile in their shoes”? How does it help you to think about the character? *Think of someone you wish would “walk a mile” in your shoes. What would you want this person to know or understand about you?*
- If you recall all the things that the character has experienced, do you think you can understand why he/she made that choice and/or felt a certain emotion or several emotions? Identify the experiences, thoughts, and feelings that may have brought him/her to this place.

Reflection After the Practice:

- What challenges arose when asking students to identify and understand a character’s emotions, motivations, and behaviors?
- Were students able to relate the character’s emotions, motivations, and behaviors to their own lives?
- Did students engage more deeply in the text when asked to think about a character’s emotions, motivations, and behaviors?
- In subsequent readings, assignments, and/or discussions are students considering a person’s emotions, motivations, and behaviors?

The Research Behind the Practice:

Research suggests that [reading fictional texts](#) can actually enhance empathy—the ability to sense other people’s emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling.

Why does this matter? Studies have found that [cultivating empathy in students](#) makes them kinder and more inclusive toward their peers and decreases bullying and aggression. In addition, [students who are empathetic](#) are more cooperative in class, have better relationships with their teachers, and are more engaged in school.

When we expose students to a variety of texts, we provide them with [windows into others' thoughts](#), feelings, and motivations, as well as an opportunity to better understand and relate to others.

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Santos R. G., Chartier M. J., Whalen, J. C., Chateau, D., & Boyd, L. (2011). Effectiveness of school-based violence prevention for children and youth: Cluster randomized controlled field trial of the Roots of Empathy program with replication and three-year follow-up. *Healthcare Quarterly*, *14*, 80-91.

Spinrad, T. L., & Eisenberg, N. (2014). Empathy, prosocial behavior, and positive development in schools. In M. J. Furlong, R. Gilman, & E. S. Huebner (Eds.), *Handbook of Positive Psychology in Schools* (82-98). New York: Routledge.