



FOSTERING EMPATHY THROUGH LITERATURE (ELEMENTARY LEVEL)

"Stories teach us empathy. They reveal to us ourselves in the skins of others."

— Justin Simien

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.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To deepen students' understanding of characters and their experiences
- To help create a kinder, more connected classroom
- Anytime during the year

TIME REQUIRED

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

LEVEL

- PreK-Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary

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.)

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

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

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

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?

INSTRUCTIONS

THE PRACTICE

- 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)
 - [Empathy Lab](#)
 - [Charnaie Gordon's 11 Books that model empathy and compassion for young readers](#)
 - [24 books that teach about social justice](#)
 - [Michelle Borba's 50 Books for kids and teens that teach empathy](#)
 - [Boston Children's Hospital's list of books about children living with physical and mental health issues \(ages 8-12\)](#)
- Select questions from the list below to prompt individual writing 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 interested you the most? Why?*
- *Which character in this story do you think is most like you? Why?*
- *Which character in this story is not like you? Why?*

NAMING AND LABELING EMOTIONS

- Can you name some of the feelings the character might be feeling? *Have you ever felt that way? If so, what happened to make you feel like that?*
- How can you tell the character felt that way? (e.g., facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, words, behavior) *How do you show that emotion in your body/face/voice?*
- How does the character feel about this other character? How do you know? *Have you ever felt that way about someone? Did you show or tell this person how you felt? If so, how?*

UNDERSTANDING MOTIVATIONS

- What do you think the character is thinking in this situation? How do you know what he/she is thinking? Why do you think he/she is thinking that? *What would you be thinking if you were in this situation?*
- What do you think the character might do next? Why do you think he/she might do that? *What would you do next?*
- Why do you think the character decided to do what he/she did? *What would you have done?*
- How do you think the character is going to feel about another character's behavior? Why do you think he/she will feel that way? *How would you feel if someone acted like that?*
- What do you think the character will do when he/she sees another character's behavior? Why do you think he/she will do that? *What would you do if you saw someone behave like that?*

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Was it easy or challenging for students to identify characters' emotions or motivations?
- Did you observe a difference between when students were encouraged simply to imagine what a character was thinking or feeling vs. when they were asked to actively imagine their own response if they were in the character's shoes?
- After engaging in this activity, do you find that students are thinking more deeply about characters' feelings, motivations, or behaviors when reading other texts or books?
- Do you hear students talking about their own and others' emotions more frequently, or with greater sensitivity?
- Do you hear students discussing why they or another person might have acted in a certain way?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

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 IT 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.