

# **By Way of the Heart: Cultivating Empathy Through Narrative Imagination**

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## **Abstract**

When trying to promote empathy, it is not sufficient to merely learn about other people and cultures if we seek to understand them better (Case, 1993). As a language arts teacher and researcher, the author sought to explore the potential for multicultural literature to expand adolescent learners' worldviews and shape their perceptions as global citizens through classroom inquiry. This doctoral research features the case study of her Grade 8 class. Findings revealed that through narrative imagination (Nussbaum, 1997), learners' experiences led to emerging themes of empathy, insight, and agency. This article focuses on the most prominent of these themes: empathy.

## **The Power of Story**

Stories are read, told, and heard. They are inhabited by curious and imaginative souls who seek to breathe life into them with their hearts and minds. Stories reside in a question, a dialogue, a response, or a sigh. They are shared with intention, determination, courage, and a vulnerability that allows them to live on. Stories live on the pages of a chapter book, in the illustrations of a picturebook, and everywhere in between. They shout injustice just as they whisper the promise of hope. Most of all, stories have allowed my students and me to live a unique experience abounding in growth and understanding as humans.

During the 2019-2020 school year, I conducted a qualitative teacher research project (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) with my Grade 8, English as a Second Language (ESL) class. Part of my doctoral work (Dias, 2021), this case study (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) featured a yearlong exploration of teaching and learning with multicultural literature. As both a teacher and researcher, I sought to examine how using multicultural literature in the classroom might expand adolescent learners' worldviews and shape their perceptions as global citizens. Nine novels, six picturebooks, dialogue journals, discussions and debates, portfolios brimming with poems, songs, research, and various artwork—all contributed to expanding these adolescent learners' perception of self, Other, and the world. Located in a mostly White, Francophone rural community, my ESL class provided a convenience sample (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) from which 12 participants (all names are pseudonyms) consented to engage in the study. Because teacher research is not an add-on activity, the whole class participated in everyday teaching and learning activities. This paper recounts participants' individual and collective journeys of learning through narrative imagination.

## The First Lens

Findings from this study were derived from multiple data sources, including participants' end-of-year reflective questionnaires and portfolios containing dialogue journal entries, responses from discussion boards, artwork, and various multimodal productions. I also drew upon my teacher journal as a supportive data source. After analyzing the data using a *constant comparative method* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I found myself contemplating my study's findings from three viewpoints, or three lenses: 1) a focus on the classroom, 2) a focus on my perspective as teacher, and 3) a closer look at three participant portraits. The first lens considers data in the context of the classroom as a whole and contextualizes emerging themes in relation to learners' experiences as they read and interacted with the books. Within this lens, three themes emerged: empathy, insight, and agency. In this article, I focus on findings from the first lens and the most prominent of its themes—empathy.

### Cultivating Humanity Through Narrative Imagination

Martha Nussbaum (1997) views cultivating humanity as an urgent matter and argues that as citizens of the world, we must develop certain abilities to achieve this. One of these abilities posits that, "citizens cannot think well on the basis of factual knowledge alone" (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 10). According to Nussbaum, narrative imagination is

the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have. (pp. 10–11)

Narrative imagination enriches our perspective of humanity and prepares us to confront moral dilemmas, which are brought to life in literature (Nussbaum, 1997). Because my teacher inquiry aimed to explore multicultural literature in our language arts class, storytelling became a powerful vehicle to promote narrative imagination. As I invited students to interact with the narratives in our multicultural books, they were poised to experience a literary imagining that draws "intense concern with the fate of characters" (p. 90).

Nussbaum (1997) suggests that when children participate in narrative imagination, they develop compassion, defined as "the recognition that another person, . . . has suffered some significant pain or misfortune in a way for which that person is not, or not fully, to blame" (pp. 90–91). This, in turn, requires the complex moral ability to imagine what it is like to be in that person's shoes; in other words, to empathize. Nussbaum asserts that novels foster the development of imaginative thinking and feeling about others. I recognized the salient role of literature in cultivating such abilities in our classroom.

### The Emerging Theme of Empathy

Throughout my inquiry, I remained attentive to what the data might uncover. In the analysis stage, I sought to prioritize the data for its relevance and prominence (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994), and one of the main themes that emerged was empathy. This article features participants' testimonials, which

reveal how they strove to examine their assumptions about cultural differences through multicultural literature. The theme of empathy revealed three emergent subthemes (see Table 1).

Table 1

*First Lens, Emerging Theme of Empathy*

Developing Critical Awareness: The Value of Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learning About the World in Authentic and Credible Ways</li> <li>● Examining Assumptions and Biases</li> <li>● Acquiring a New Lens</li> </ul>
Engaging in Perspective-Taking: The Power of Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Perceiving Others Differently</li> <li>● Connecting With Characters</li> <li>● Cultivating Compassion</li> </ul>

*Homo Empathicus:*

The Nature of Empathy

**Developing Critical Awareness: The Value of Empathy**

As students delved into each novel, I observed how their curiosity turned into a growing sense of awareness, which led to a desire to know more. From the summertime adventures of Arturo, a spirited 13-year-old who loves his Cuban American family (*The Epic Fail of Arturo Zamora*, Cartaya, 2017), to the journey of Parvana, a courageous Afghani girl struggling for survival (*The Breadwinner* series, Ellis, 2000/2015a; 2002/2015b), to the tragedy of Jerome, a Black teenager killed by a White police officer (*Ghost Boys*, Rhodes, 2018)—each of these characters and their stories, among others, left an imprint on readers. They noticed early on that their knowledge of the world and others could be expanded by interacting with these novels. In the year-end reflective questionnaire, “Kate” shared, “The books helped me understand the world is more than just our little town here and there is a lot more to learn about. It changed the way I see certain things and people.” Students acknowledged the impact of the novels on their worldviews and responded to this new way of seeing the world by opening their minds to cultural differences and circumstances, at times unfamiliar to them.

***Learning About the World in Authentic and Credible Ways***

Reading books with greater representation and diversity opened the door for students to learn about different cultures, historical contexts, as well as global issues. Some of the topics prompted deep reflection and thought-provoking conversations around social justice. As readers encountered concepts such as gentrification, poverty, gender inequality, the effects of war on children, discrimination, prejudice, police brutality, racism, and so on, I noticed that the outcome went beyond expanding students’ knowledge base. They listened attentively, asked many questions, shared their wonderings and their reactions intently, and responded humbly. “Jessie” wrote:

Reading the multicultural novels, I began to better understand the state of the world and the states that other people live in. I am now more aware than ever of the inequity of our world. The inequity that affects people daily, relentlessly, and unfairly.

“Amber” explained why she enjoyed reading *The Breadwinner* series:

I also love this book cause it shows what is going on in Afghanistan without just being facts thrown at us or being just not developed stories, it’s more about great stories with beautiful characters and we are learning at the same time about them and their cultures and what they’re going through to survive.

Although students expressed emotions like sadness, frustration, and guilt after engaging with the books, they also asserted their eagerness to gain authentic and credible information. For example, as I read aloud the introductory sentence from *Parvana’s Journey* (Ellis, 2002/2015), the sequel to *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, 2000/2015), students gasped when they found out Parvana was burying her father. I noted how “emotions were running high among students—many disappointed that Father died so soon—even as they had made predictions during their book walk that Father would find the family with her” (Teacher Journal, January 16, 2020). “Phoebe” commented: “I love how Deborah Ellis wasn’t shy about describing how brutally challenging, difficult and miserable these children had to live through.” By immersing themselves in the stories and lives of the characters, students recognized their reading experience as transformative, and they began to see the world in new ways. Rather than learning only with facts, they were being taught through both their minds and their hearts (Bieger, 1995; Rasinski & Padak, 1990).

Jessie became so enthralled with the story of Parvana that she decided to research Ellis’ background and intentions in writing the series for young readers. After learning more about the Canadian author, Jessie shared:

I admire Deborah Ellis because she portrayed an accurate and realistic depiction of what being a kid in Afghanistan is actually like. She didn’t use these characters as a way to pity and dehumanize them but as a way to educate, show and teach people. She didn’t put words in the mouth of real kids but rather she listened to them. I know I’m getting off topic, but I think that just makes the story a hundred times better. Deborah Ellis travelled to places like Afghanistan. She was willing to go learn, listen and help . . . learning about the world is so important to me and I am very thankful to authors like Deborah Ellis. Parvana somehow felt real to me. As if she is out there, somewhere, and real.

Learners also mentioned authenticity as a key characteristic of the books and authors. While reading our first novel, *The Epic Fail of Arturo Zamora*, “Andrew” appreciated the way the author focused on family as a main theme. Despite the harshness of life events, like death or illness, students preferred reading stories depicting realistic human situations which they themselves may have lived and expect people to live. Andrew explained that, “sometimes people die or become sick because this happens for everybody, but we got to pass over it.” Jessie was particularly taken with *A Bird on Water Street* (Dulemba, 2014), the story of Jack Hicks, a boy living in a small, Appalachian mining town, seeking to remain true to himself as his family and community endure economic hardships, and an environmental landscape ravaged by decades of pollution. Upon finishing the book, Jessie wrote:

They all experience and live life differently. They all have different beliefs and views and goals. This diversity affects the story by giving it a sense of authenticity . . . That's also why I have such a deep sense of respect for the characters (and their author). They aren't just blank pieces of paper, they're all complex and lively . . . This book makes me think a lot, it's truly eye-opening.

The above examples demonstrate how learners recognized, appreciated, and respected authors' decisions to address social justice struggles in their books by depicting genuine characters and situations, and rendering them credible within a historical context. They learned about the world in which they live in deeper, meaningful ways by developing empathic awareness.

### ***Examining Assumptions and Biases***

Just as students appreciated how multicultural books address tough topics in authentic and credible ways, those we read urged them to examine their own assumptions and personal biases. Jessie disclosed,

The books were sort of a revelation, they gave me a new and improved understanding of what I've never experienced, or even seen, for myself . . . I was blinded by my own surroundings for so long and *The Breadwinner* series made me see what I couldn't before.

Throughout this journey of self-reflection, students, like Jessie, came to realize that learning entails risk, and may even require them to "give up a former condition in favour of a new way of seeing things" (Boostrom, 1998, p. 399).

In the end-of-year survey, students indicated how the entertaining, yet informative, aspect of our books stood out to them. Phoebe indicated that books she usually read were ones in which she could escape. Realizing the stark reality of ongoing issues like racism, gender inequality, and poverty, Phoebe acknowledged how the multicultural books we read "didn't let you escape, they let you come in if that makes sense. Show you what the world really is." Phoebe, Jessie, "Timothy", and "Shane" each explained how the books "opened their eyes" to new cultures, issues, and worldviews. Taking a closer look at the differences in the lived experiences of others in the world, albeit through fictitious characters, created sobering moments in our classroom.

Our novel study of *Ghost Boys* presented opportunities for readers to consider the topic of racism. An initial read aloud of the afterword, which introduced the concepts of conscious and unconscious racism (Rhodes, 2018, p. 205), prompted a discussion around these terms. I reflected: "students are listening attentively and engaged already at this early stage . . . Many have ideas about racism" (Teacher Journal, March 6, 2020). Some students were quick to report that they had never engaged in racism, consciously or unconsciously. It seemed others were reluctant to avow or disavow in front of the others, and I reminded everyone about their choice and right to privacy as we tackled these complex issues in a mutually agreed upon, safe, and respectful environment. We defined and discussed other terms such as prejudice, oppression, privilege, discrimination, bias, diversity, and ostracism. Students pondered these concepts and captured their thoughts in their journals. "Vincent" shared: "I am able to be prejudice [sic] sometimes but I realize it only when it is too late sometimes." Andrew speculated that "[a]fter reading our books . . . we know so little about what's happening in the world around us. A lot of times, we don't even realize that we are being racist."

In preparing for *Ghost Boys*, we talked about possible challenges readers may face, such as reconciling the perception of ourselves to our words and actions. In this study, *Ghost Boys* was instrumental in helping learners consider their attitudes, assumptions, and values. Engaging with multicultural literature prompted students to make discoveries about their current perspective. After reading *It Ain't So Awful, Falafel!* (Dumas, 2017), “Carter” wrote:

A quote that really made me think was ‘My dad says the dogs and cats in America are luckier than most people in the world.’ I had never thought of it like that when I read the quote, I thought about it for a while, something I hadn’t done for any other quote in the entire book. It is crazy to me that some pets have more rights than people.

According to Miall (2006), the power of stories can help students understand the social world in new ways by offering alternative frameworks to understand and feel about the world differently. In this case, heightened curiosity, and an appetite to know more about the world, prompted learners to self-reflect and weigh in on possible new lenses with which to see the world.

### ***Acquiring a New Lens***

Every participant indicated that they had gained some form of new awareness, whether through a sudden realization, or progressive change in their perception. “Esther” discovered that the world in which she lives is “not what it seems” and “Brooke” stated how it was “not fair for everyone.” Students’ responses supported that engaging with multicultural literature not only provided an opportunity to foster awareness, but also to instigate action upon the world (Morrell & Morrell, 2012; Newstreet et al., 2018)—another theme emerging from this research. Students described the repositioning of viewpoints as an unsettling learning process, which they welcomed. Many ascertained that they had not been granted occasions in their educational journey to learn about a more truthful version of the world. Amber appreciated being asked about her worldview and shared:

I discovered that my worldview was through ‘rose-coloured glasses’! In fact, after learning from all the books, I felt like I didn’t know the world at all, like my version of the world until now had been different—not living on the same planet.

Amber’s discovery was critical in the way she viewed her own education, regarding her reading journey as impactful, not only as a student, but as a teenage girl. For Jessie, being taught about the consequences of war on people evoked a deep learning experience:

I always knew war was a prominent issue in the world but reading about how it truly affects people—children—spoke to me differently. Maybe that’s because I was always given the watered-down version of things, or maybe it’s because I wasn’t properly informed and educated on the matter. Whatever the reason, *The Breadwinner* series taught me the most. You learn a lot from books that are set in environments different to your own. There’s an element of shock that comes with it; an element of shock that everyone should experience, mind you.

In *Teaching for Hope*, Werner (2016) argues that teachers can strengthen young people’s belief in their future by addressing global topics with care, rather than avoiding them. Jessie understood her learning

with the books to be a disruptive process through which she believes everyone should go if they are to empathize.

In their own words, students affirmed that acquiring a new lens with which to see the world was an exercise in reflexivity, responsibility, assertiveness, and the hope of change. Through reading multicultural literature, learners developed awareness and new ways of seeing that contributed to a flourishing sense of empathy.

### **Engaging in Perspective-Taking: The Power of Empathy**

As students participated in the multicultural book studies, they grew more attentive to what the act of perspective-taking would teach them. In the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960/2010), the protagonist, Atticus Finch, claims that “you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it” (p. 39). As humans, it can be difficult to change our mindsets and attitudes. Jessie divulged that because of the multiple perspectives offered in the novels, she “could see how each character was affected by their surroundings and how the events made them feel,” and by looking at a situation from different points of view, “it was easier for us readers to put ourselves in others’ shoes.” Jessie’s thoughts corresponded with Emery’s (1996) belief that students might gain a better understanding of the human condition, be moved by the characters’ experiences, and become more empathic. While empathy was present to begin with, the study revealed how perspective-taking became instrumental to students’ experiences. Their sense of empathy matured as they interacted with the stories, the characters, and each other.

### **Perceiving Others Differently**

As students examined assumptions about cultural differences, I noticed how, like Atticus Finch, some slipped into characters’ skins and transported themselves into a powerful moment. Many students expressed their thoughts unprompted, in their journals, or in group conversations. In a written dialogue with her classmate, Brooke shared her opinion about an injustice encountered in *The Breadwinner*:

Something I’ve always wondered about is why the Taliban have to beat up women when they go outside alone . . . If only the Taliban would put themselves in the girls’ position and imagine how they would feel if women beat them up and men couldn’t go outside without a woman.

Amber imagined herself in another time, place, and position when she witnessed the cruelty in *Stella by Starlight* (Draper, 2015). In this story about Stella, a young African American girl growing up in the 1930s segregated South, the right to vote is not viewed as a privilege for all. When Stella rides into town with her father and his friends seeking to register their vote, she witnesses the blatant inequality and disrespect dispensed by the White townsmen. Despite the mistreatment, her father and companions stand together, and bravely exercise their right to vote. Surprised by the story’s historical context and its crude racism, Amber internalized the characters’ experience by mirroring how they reacted (Oatley, 2011),

The thing that surprised me the most so far, is the way that they treat black people and how the Ku Klux Klan operate. Like how rude can they be to other people. Like when they went to go

vote, they made Stella's father and the priest pay for voting when white people didn't even have to pay or to take the test before. Plus they say it right to their face that the reason that all of this is happening is because they're black. Honestly, imagine if like people told this to you and how shocked you would be? Like if I tried to go vote which is one of our rights and people tried to stop me from doing that, I would have done the same thing as them.

About midway through *Ghost Boys*, students contemplated characters' perspectives as they faced different consequences. To contextualize, Jerome is the protagonist, a Black boy who is shot by a White police officer, Officer Moore. From his perspective as "Dead" and "Alive," we read accounts of the story as he moves back and forth from one state to the other. In his ghost state, Jerome struggles to understand his death and its devastating consequences on his family. In contrast, the White officer defends his actions during a preliminary hearing and admits that he feared for his life when he shot the boy. Witnessing this allegation, Jerome asks, "When truth's a feeling, can it be both? Both true and untrue?" (Rhodes, 2018, p. 132). Phoebe explained:

When truth is a feeling, it can be both, true and untrue. It always is. Because there is always someone somewhere that is gonna say that your truth is wrong and theirs is right. A person will choose whether the feeling regarding the truth is true or untrue based on their perspective.

Phoebe's assuredness was palpable as she pointed to a decisive factor—one's perspective. Students wrestled with this concept and juggled with their understanding of it, especially as it pertained to absolutes, like truth versus untruth, and right versus wrong. Whether writing in their dialogue journals, debating with their peers in class, or reflecting on their own beliefs and assumptions, learners were grappling with the mechanics of perspective-taking.

Readers realized that the aspect of positionality played a crucial role in how they read the story. It became second nature for them to adopt characters' viewpoints and consider the story through these multiple filters as it unfolded. Digging deeper to understand human qualities embedded in stories (Emery, 1996), learners began to infer from characters' actions what their motivations might be. Timothy wrote,

The officer that killed Jerome let his personal opinions influence how he saw the situation. It made the officer think that Jerome was dangerous when in reality Jerome just had a toy. This is the same sort of situation with the others [ghost boys], the person that killed them let their biases get the better of them and that clouded their judgment.

Students discovered that positionality was not the only aspect that could shape someone's perspective. Reading the text critically also means paying attention to the voices that might have been silenced (Harste et al., 2000), as well as questioning whose voices are missing (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Timothy's entry illustrates his suspicion that bias and clouded judgment were influential in the deaths of Jerome, Emmett Till, and the other ghost boys roaming about—a thought that was echoed by Phoebe:

A person's perspective is how they view a certain thing or situation. They use previous knowledge and experiences to choose on what 'side' they are on. But some people also let their emotions cloud their judgement, which can interfere with the actual perspective.

Beyond improving social skills and developing empathy, reading stories creates simulated experiences which can bring readers to connect characters' lives with human character in general (Oatley, 2011).



Could perspective-taking, coupled with curiosity, help us envision a more understanding society? As learners grew to understand throughout their reading journey, perspective-taking becomes a fundamental skill to acquire for building empathy (Hodges et al., 2018).

### **Connecting With Characters**

When students participated in perspective-taking, the effects went beyond developing an ability to perceive others differently. Students emotionally connected with many of the characters, saw themselves in them, and used them as role models (Bruner, 1986). Amber described how she bonded with Parvana in *The Breadwinner* series: “I felt like we could be friends, that we connected on some level.” In the same series, Brooke identified with the character of Leila, seeing herself reflected in her:

My least favorite part was when Leila died because she was like a little sister to Parvana. She was an important character in the book, and also one of my favorite characters because of her personality. She kinda reminds me of myself.

In narrative worlds such as Parvana’s, students became deeply affected by conflicts portrayed, reacted to characters’ relationships, and found themselves feeling genuine emotions (Oatley, 1995). After young Leila is killed by a landmine, Amber reflected,

I found that it’s very sad how Leila died, and I find it very sad how children die this way and actually have to face these struggles . . . When in the book Leila passed away, it was something that really marked me, and I almost cried cause I don’t know why but she really stucked [sic] out for me and reminded me of my little cousin that I love more than the whole entire world.

Through Leila, Parvana, Asif, and other characters in Ellis’ novels, students grappled with foreign concepts like war and its devastating consequences on children especially. Emotions became a prominent attribute in students’ journey with multicultural literature as they came to understand characters in the novels to be extensions of real human subjects. Although the concept of a character is “an extraordinarily elusive idea” (Bruner, 1986, p. 37), they yearned to connect with them, make meaning of their circumstances, and even feel hope for them. Jessie admitted growing attached to the characters:

I want to know what happens next. I want to know Shauzia’s story and what has happened to her. Most importantly I want to know if all the characters will be okay. I guess it’s kind of silly since chances are, none of them actually exist. At least, if I knew these fictional kids were okay, it would give me hope for all the real ones.

Like Wilhelm (2016), I noticed that readers consciously connected with characters by bringing their own lives to the literature, which enabled them to “draw comparisons from the literary experience to their own lives” (p. 114). Phoebe wished she could talk to Henry, the Black medic in *Allies* (Gratz, 2019). Moved by this character’s story, set amid events of the Normandy landings during World War II, she noted how “people still fight, people still judge, people still discriminate. I’d tell him that I’m proud of him to want to save lives, even when it was hard for him to maybe even save his.” Jessie yearned to understand Officer Moore’s (*Ghost Boys*) mind and the way he sees the world because “it would give insight on how many real people, who have done things similar as him, see it.” As I watched my students

engage with characters in the stories, I observed what Oatley (1999) calls a simulated social experience, both cognitively and emotionally. Jessie described her experience in the year-end survey:

Because I could see myself in some of the characters of the books we read, I was able to use them as role models. I could relate to some of them. Even if our situations were different in most ways, we still had similarities. And when a character you can see yourself in succeeds or finds what they were looking for, it makes you feel like the same is possible for you.

Monobe and Son (2014) suggest that students are inclined to critically view the world once they connect personally to characters' lives, and vicariously experience others' emotions by reading literature, participating in discussions, and engaging in other pedagogical activities that deepen their understanding of global matters. Participants' responses revealed that they were not left unscathed by child characters' unjust environments, nor were they left uninspired by their constant courage and determination.

Amber, Brooke, Jessie, and Phoebe's responses testify to Robinson's (2013) belief that learners need to engage with literature depicting human experiences and emotions that "provide opportunities for catharsis and empathy" (p. 43). The intimate connections with characters, and their lasting impression on readers, is a testament to the power of literature in the development of empathic responses.

### ***Cultivating Compassion***

Students imagined conversations with their beloved characters that included messages of concern, encouragement, hope, and compassion. As they created artwork, poems, and wrote letters to them, they developed relationships with characters and became keenly invested in their fictional lives. These relationships moved beyond the act of perspective-taking, toward developing compassion through imagination. Brooke expressed her gratitude to Stella (*Stella by Starlight*): "I find that Stella has taught me more than I already knew. She changed my point of view on the world and the people who live in it. And I thank her for that." The powerful impact of the characters on my students left an impression on me. I noted:

There is something powerful about a teenager expressing worry, sadness, and other feelings of being "unsettled" about fictitious characters in a book. The character is not real, and they are aware of this, yet their emotional reactions are! They are reacting as if the people were alive and real. I think they grasp the potential of them being real, especially the children characters. Also, based on many of their comments, they comprehend the truth about the characters' representation of real people, living in such circumstances even today. (Teacher Journal, March 8, 2020)

Like Nussbaum (1995), I was cognizant of the narrative imagination that occurred as we engaged with literature because of "an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own" (p. xvi, preface). Indeed, when students were prompted to imagine themselves inviting a favorite character to their house for one day, they responded without hesitation. Kate picked Jerome, for whom she had many questions:

What was your first thought of being shot? Did you immediately think it was because of your skin colour? Were you surprised when you realize [sic] that after death you become a ghost? . . . I would ask him questions like that but, the biggest question I would ask him before he left would be: How can I, a white person, help stop racism?

Throughout the entire multicultural book adventure, Kate grew to accept that sometimes, questions remain unanswered. According to Bruner (1986), narrative as a distinctive mode of thought deals with possibility rather than certainty. As such, learners explored their conceptions of human nature, and within this subjunctive reality of storytelling, grappled with the way characters' intentions collide with reality (Bruner, 1986).

Gerrig (1993) refers to the way stories can draw in and enthrall their readers as *narrative engagement*. When this phenomenon occurs, readers' thoughts and emotions move beyond solely entertaining to affecting them with actual, durable consequences (Mar et al., 2006). For instance, students were invited to write a piece of advice to a character of their choice. Kate's message to Esteban (*Harbor Me*, Woodson, 2018), a young Dominican boy whose father is detained by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agent, illustrates this:

Dear Esteban, I don't know what it's like when someone takes your Papi from you and you don't know where he is, but it must be hard. Sometimes you just have to try hoping for the best and ignore the worst. I'm not [Dominican] or Black and I don't have the problem of walking down the street and everyone assuming I'm a bad person, but I do want to apologize. What white people do and think of people of colour is wrong and I wish I could change the way some think, but I can't. If I could give you some piece of advice it would be to always look on the bright side of things and appreciate the people around you who respect you like if you're no different.

While Kate's advice to Esteban focused on encouragement, Jessie's letter to Jack reflected a more personal account as she confided knowing how he feels. Even if circumstances in characters' stories are very different from the learners' environment, their lived experiences may be akin to each other. Jessie's words demonstrate empathy toward Jack (see Figure 1).

Dear Jack,

As I've noticed, things in Coppertown aren't like they used to be. I can only imagine what that's like for you. I know what it feels like to see people you love not be themselves. It's terrible. When everyone around you is sad, it's hard to stay positive. I can understand the want for things to go back to normal. I've also noticed that you feel the need to hide the fact you don't want to be a miner. What I want to say to you is that there is nothing wrong with wanting different things than what people expect from you. You should talk to your mom about it, I know she would understand. And to your dad too. Even if he doesn't understand immediately, he'll come around at some point. As for what it is of the gloomy mood that has overcome Coppertown, my best advice is to be patient. Bad things never last forever. They are only a part of our lives, they don't have to define our entire existence. Try to do things that make you happy. I know you've been reading plenty about trees. It is a truly wonderful thing that you are able to really appreciate them. I will hope with you that one day Coppertown will recover what once was and that trees will come back in big numbers. Remember that you are in control of your own life.

Sincerely, a supporter of your thinking

Note. Image used with the permission of the participant.

Fig. 1: Jessie's Letter to Jack Hicks (Dialogue Journal, May 2020).

During my inquiry, I mindfully attended to manifestations of compassion and empathy as I guided my students along our multicultural journey. Through a narrative imagination, I observed learners forge a deeper understanding of our common humanity, working to dismantle the notion of *us* versus *them*, and replacing it with a *we* perspective (Monobe & Son, 2014).

### ***Homo Empathicus*: The Nature of Empathy**

The notion of empathy is valuable and powerful. This theme was manifested as elemental by learners, and each of their experiences with multicultural literature had been an empowering one. Jessie ascribed her learning about strength and courage to the characters in *Parvana's Journey*, noting that:

All these kids were being couragous [sic] and strong. At the beggining [sic] of the book, when Deborah Ellis dedicates her novel to 'the children we force to be braver than they should have

to be', it really goes to show how being brave can sometimes be harmful . . . I admire every kid who has to feel like they have to be an adult. This novel really put that into perspective for me. It will make me remember to be strong, just like all it's [sic] wonderful characters.

Kate shared how multicultural novels taught her to imagine a better world:

Reading books is a great way to change our perspective, in a good way, of the world we have today and make us imagine how different our society could be. All the books we read reflect on something, either a good thing or a thing we can change.

Through their journey in narrative landscapes, students attributed to others, and recognized in themselves, that which makes us human: our proneness to hope, distress, courage, perseverance, and fairness (Nussbaum, 1997). They tapped into their better selves, or what social theorist Jeremy Rifkin (2010) refers to as “homo empathicus—wired for empathy” (p. 42). When we engage with novels, “empathy, 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” (Keen, 2006, p. 208). Although the notion of empathy is not new, Krznaric (2014) suggests that one of the reasons it has resurfaced in the last decade may derive from neuroscience research, which shows evidence that human beings’ empathic natures are just as strong as their selfish ones. As we seek to educate students to become better humans, could empathy be the highest form of critical thinking “that doesn’t just read the words on a page but rather truly sees, hears, and acts upon a world beyond ourselves” (Schneider, 2020)?

## Conclusion

During a keynote address, Deborah Ellis alluded to the idea of creating a day before, reminding the audience about the power of our best selves and the possibility of making a difference before it is too late. Praising good children’s literature as a powerful vehicle to achieve a more sustainable future, the author hoped her own books would allow children who read them to “carry the compassion they hopefully learn from them into their adult lives and their adult decision-making—whether to be kind or to lash out, whether to give a helping hand or let their government drop a bomb” (Ellis, 2018). Correspondingly, Jewell Parker Rhodes believes that literature can ignite conversations about the world’s most pressing social justice issues, such as race, and poverty, among others. The author confesses that the pandemic has crystallized their need to write stories in which they hope to remind readers of our common humanity (Terrill, 2020).

As I think back to the intricate process by which my students “[immersed] . . . in a new consciousness” (Krznaric, 2011, Question 3), I witnessed how they began to see the world differently. Their journey corroborated the argument that literature supports building empathy (Mar et al., 2006). First, they examined empathy and discovered its value through their enhanced critical awareness. Second, they cultivated empathy and became empowered in the act of perspective-taking. Last, they showcased empathy, and endeavored to cherish the stories and characters which helped them acquire new ideas about the world. If “empathy is at the heart of storytelling itself” (Krznaric, 2014, p. 150), then my students experienced it firsthand through the stories they read, as much as in the ones they told.

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