




Empathy in the English Classroom: Broadening Perspectives Through Literature

Alanna Jamieson

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates a novel study of Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, used as a platform through which to discuss empathy and to promote deeper understanding with 18 grade eleven students in an English Language Arts classroom. Students' experiences, perceptions, emotions, and relationships as they read, discuss, and write about the novel were explored through the use of narrative inquiry. The data, gathered through interviews, classroom writing samples, and field notes, provided rich examples of empathetic responses and insightful thinking by students.

ne of the more rewarding parts of my career as a high school English teacher is that it gives me the opportunity to connect and develop relationships with my students. I believe that a healthy classroom is fundamentally based on relationships. I also feel strongly that reading fiction can improve our understanding of others. Essentially, I believe that empathy lies at the heart of good teaching, just as it lies at the heart of the English curriculum.

Reading novels helps students connect with other people. Empathy is literally the experience of one mind learning to understand the thinking of another. When we respond strongly to a text, the emotional components of our neural maps become active, with neurons firing within the emotional centre of the brain (Jones, 2008). Reading fiction, therefore, can be a powerful vehicle to open up empathetic spaces within the classroom. According to Dolby (2012), the study of literature is an important component in creating compassionate citizens, as it allows us to remain ourselves while

living and learning vicariously through the lives of its characters. Greene (2000) similarly suggests that empathy is fundamentally tied to the imagination:

[Imagination] is what enables us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called “other” over the years. If those others are willing to give us clues, we can look in some manner through strangers’ eyes and hear through their ears. (p. 3)

The act of learning to consider the perspective of another, perhaps of someone completely different from you, is one of the most powerful lessons of the English classroom. It is an experience in which I endeavour to have all my students participate.

I believe that classrooms are built on relationships and empathy, on the dynamic that exists between teacher and student, and any learning that occurs (or fails to occur) stems from that affective relationship. To maximize learning, there needs to be both intellectual and emotional support; students do not learn when they are stressed, anxious, or feeling intimidated. Lending support to others can build confidence and promote learning. “Emotional scaffolding includes the gift of confidence, the sharing of risk in the presentation of new ideas, constructive criticism, and the creation of a safety zone” (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002, pp. 51–52). Therefore, good teachers understand that emotion is a central part of literacy, both in terms of developing classroom relationships, and also towards the books we read (Dipardo & Schnack, 2004).

Human beings are fully capable of seeing the world from another perspective, and of experiencing others’ emotions (Dolby, 2012). While some students struggle with understanding others, my responsibility as a teacher is to try to help them improve in this area. Just as a teacher must learn to empathize with her or his students, all students should be given the opportunity to see through new sets of eyes. One of the most powerful tools teachers have in their quest to help nurture empathy in students is a variety of literature and the means to explore it.

Defining My Research Question and Theoretical Framework

According to Merriam (2009), teacher research derives from questions that challenge and perplex the mind. After more than 10 years of teaching high school English, in a diverse variety of settings, the one constant has been the number of students I have

Empathy in the English Classroom: Broadening Perspectives Through Literature

encountered who struggle to read and write. My thinking about my practice usually boils down to some variant of how to better help students acquire strong literacy skills. My research, completed for a Masters of Education thesis, focused on identifying *who* is struggling to read in my class, *why* they are struggling, and what might the possible solutions be.

Merriam (2009) suggests developing one's theoretical framework allows one to interrogate the theories that lie behind our daily routines and practices. As a teacher researcher, I tried to identify "the lens through which [I] viewed the world" (p. 67). Upon reflection, I believe feminist theory is the philosophical underpinning for all of my work. I admired the attempts by other researchers to empower students and to value the knowledge and lived experience they bring to the study. As a result, I was very much interested in hearing the stories and representing the words of my students, my research participants. Narrative inquiry was, therefore, particularly well suited for interrogating my research question. Like Clandinin and Huber (2002), I wanted to "represent people, not as taken apart by analytic categories, but as people who [are] composing lives full of richness and complexity" (p. 162). As a teacher researcher, I wanted to use empathy to understand my students better, and to help empower them to become stronger and more confident readers.

The pervasive literacy vs. literature debate has been an ongoing discussion in my own high school and district, and beyond, for many years. I understand that as English teachers, it is important that we address our students' literacy abilities and challenges. However, I feel that one of the best ways to do this is to introduce them to texts that will invite them to extend their learning, and which have a significant amount of depth. As the teacher, one must provide scaffolding, and offer multiple access points into the text. I also feel strongly that students should also, simultaneously if possible, be independently reading texts of their own choosing. The skills-based approach favoured by many in my own district, which focuses on targeting and correcting basic literacy skills at the expense of the study of literary texts, is, in my opinion, too fragmented and regimental. I fear that a steady diet of this type of pedagogy would end up throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater, because I see deeper, contextualized reading under the guidance of a skilled teacher as the most logical approach to addressing literacy deficits.

A Qualitative Study in an Eleventh Grade English Classroom

Empathy is central to the kinds of teaching and learning that I both observed and participated in as a researcher in my classroom during this study. My research involved working with 18 participants drawn from my two grade eleven English classes to better understand their perspectives and the challenges they faced as the class embarked on and moved through a study of the classic Dickens novel *Oliver Twist* (1837-8). The thesis is entitled, *Which Boys and Which Girls? Seeing Beyond the Gender Gap in Literacy*, and examines how students' backgrounds, perceptions, and relationships impact their reading practices and attitudes during a study of *Oliver Twist*.

The study lasted six weeks, from April to June 2012. My 18 participants were 16- and 17-year-olds, mostly from middle-class homes. Several had experienced challenges such as the loss of family members, being kicked out of family homes, living in a series of foster homes, and significant reading/learning difficulties. Despite these challenges, the students all shared a genuine desire to do well and to improve their literacy skills. The participants were further separated into two groups: I received permission to use the class work and writing samples of all 18, and then I chose four from this larger group to interview, with the hope of gleaning more insight into my research from the students' perspective. My data consisted, firstly, of transcripts from three semi-structured interviews with these four students, two males and two females, who represented a range of literacy abilities. These interviews were conducted for approximately 30 minutes with each student, at the beginning, middle, and end of the novel study, and were audio-recorded. I transcribed the audio-recordings, and I supplemented this data with field notes and work samples, including assessments, personal essays, and journal responses, from all 18 students who were participants in the study.

The data analysis process involved tracking an evolving set of themes which emerged inductively from the data, based upon my research question (Which boys and which girls struggle to read challenging texts and why?), but open to other directions as well. The analysis was an ongoing process, whereby I reviewed my notes and transcripts frequently, started a dialogue with the data, and noted my observations both as initial analysis and to generate a list of criteria I looked for in the next round of data collection. My themes or descriptive categories were initially quite fluid, but in time I was able to narrow down the number of categories to five broad themes (one of which was empathy) that seemed representative of student experience. Once I established this, I then added as much as possible to each theme, using a series of codes to make sense

of all the data. At this point, I was able to write the outline for my thesis. Ultimately, I looked for the best way to arrange the material into a narrative retelling of my findings (Merriam, 2009).

Since stories help us make sense of our experience (Bruner, 1991), I was interested in determining how students engaged with the story of *Oliver Twist* and I interpreted their responses to the text. One of the primary models of narrative inquiry I employed was Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, which "allows inquiries to travel *inward, outward, backward, forward, and situated within place*" (p. 49, emphasis theirs). This model gives narrative inquirers a specific set of parameters to guide one's thinking about the stories that comprise their research. These parameters include the three dimensions of the temporal, the personal and social, and the specific place wherein the research has occurred. Temporal issues are addressed by looking backwards and forwards; in other words, the researcher looks "not only to the event but to its past and its future" (p. 56). The personal and social dimension points researchers inwards and outwards; inwards towards an understanding of the participants' inner thoughts and feelings, and outwards towards the larger social context or environment of the study. The final dimension is place, which entails the physical setting or location of the study, or where the inquiry occurs. In part through the use of this model, the student narratives provided an in-depth perspective on the complex lives of my students as they engaged in dialogue with the novel, *Oliver Twist*, and in relationships with their classmates, and me, the teacher.

Literacy Strategies Open Up a Dialogue on the Treatment of Those We Label as Other

Oliver Twist is the story of the eponymous poor little orphan boy as he attempts to make his way in the world, in search of a home. Oliver was born in a workhouse, and as a young child was indentured to the parochial undertaker. To escape his poor treatment there, he runs away to London where he quickly encounters Fagin and his gang of child-thieves. Through abuse, heartbreak, and betrayal, the attentive reader is right there at Oliver's side. This seems to me the great strength of this novel: through a deep identification with and sympathy for the protagonist, the text offers us the possibility of opening a dialogue about the treatment of those we see as other (Greene, 2000). According to Greene, "we who are teachers would have to accommodate ourselves to lives as clerks or functionaries if we did not have in mind a quest for a better state of things for those we teach and for the world we share" (p. 1). For me, a large part of this quest involves using literature as a way to promote empathy and consideration of "alternative realities" (p. 3). In this section, I describe some of the ways I tried to create those possibilities.

In the beginning, I framed the novel with a guiding question: Do we live in a just society? I decided to focus on the text as an example of social criticism. To help with this, my students needed to understand some of the background of the time period (Jago, 2004; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). I accomplished this through an introductory PowerPoint presentation and supplementary readings. In my classroom, I approach novels as a new world that students must discover, a world that is entirely alien to them, and it is my hope that the background information will help them find their way and give them a frame of reference. *Oliver Twist* would make very little sense, for example, if students did not understand The Poor Laws, which established the unpopular workhouses, when Dickens is clearly attacking these new pieces of legislation that he felt blamed the poor for their situation (Smiley, 2002). In order to understand the biting satirical tone of the narrator, we discussed Dickens' background, especially the years in his young life when he was abandoned by his family and forced to work in a factory, as well as some of the history of the period. For example, we reviewed the solidly entrenched class structure of Victorian Britain and the gender roles of the day. We also studied the poem, "The Chimney Sweep," by William Blake, as another example of social criticism that looks at the poor in a similar way. Given the blatant injustices of the era, I sensed that student interest was piqued. They seemed engaged in the conversation, and there were many volunteers in our class discussions.

As we read the novel, I continually encouraged my students to make connections with the characters through a variety of close reading strategies. In addition to "front loading," a term Gallagher (2009) uses to refer to both activating or building background knowledge in students, I started the novel with an intense focus on the opening eight chapters, following Gallagher's advice to start with the "guided tour" and end with the "budget tour" (p. 79; Jago, 2000). The guided tour involves close reading, in-depth analysis, and the modelling of reading strategies. Once the students have an understanding of the plot and main characters, the teacher can then shift to the budget tour, meaning he or she can step back and allow the students to read more independently. In the opening weeks, my students were asked to read one or two chapters at a time, and we spent approximately 30 minutes out of each day's class analyzing their content either as a whole class or in smaller groups. Ample opportunity was provided for students to ask questions and seek help during these first eight chapters. I also frequently gave my students a purpose for reading. For example, I asked them to record one comment and one question on sticky notes for each chapter read. The next day, they had to sign up to share part of these notes with the class, and these formed the basis for our discussions. This strategy ensured greater reading accountability and it encouraged everyone to participate in the class discussion.

Empathy in the English Classroom: Broadening Perspectives Through Literature

Once the novel was underway, I tried a variety of different strategies mixed with a great deal of group work in an attempt to reach all of my diverse learners. The group work activities were very popular, and I found that my students took them very seriously. I formed groups of mixed ability, ensuring I had at least one strong reader in each group. Students then remained in these small groups for the remainder of the *Oliver* unit, generally meeting once or twice a week. We set up focus groups to look at specific aspects of the text, we made study guides aimed at helping a weaker reader, and we created expert groups on characters where the groups created drawings, symbols, and analyses of their particular character (see Figure 1, below). We had been studying the novel for a few weeks when the character group work took place. A number of my students remarked that the reading had gotten easier, even some of the weaker readers, which supports Jago's claim that most students can read a classic novel with specific support (2000). I think the successful group work was part of the support for struggling readers: there were lots of access points to allow students to get into the book, and the smaller groups contributed to more active learning.

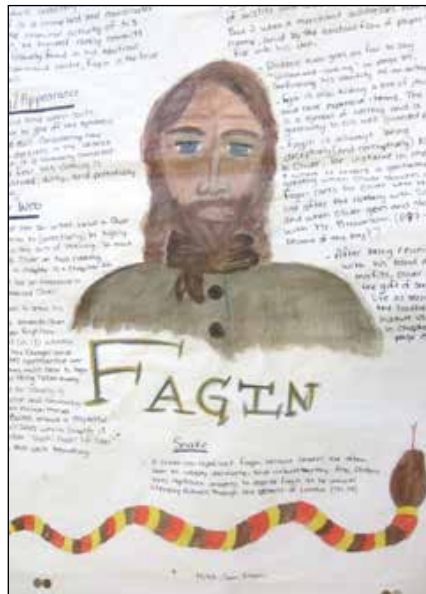


Fig. 1: Students' character portraits

The novel, *Oliver Twist* stirs many instances of empathy in its reader, most notably the early descriptions of Oliver and the other orphans. Just after birth, he lies struggling to breathe, all alone on a small mattress. His mother is dying, the doctor ignores him and the “nurse” is drunk. This is one of the many images of sadness and neglect that are common in the novel, and in some way make it the perfect vehicle to discuss empathy. When we read this and other scenes like it, I pointed out to my students that I felt Dickens specifically engineered this scene and others like it to create empathy in the reader, and that it would take a hard heart indeed not to be moved to pity by scenes like this. Feeling sympathy for characters is not something I had ever specifically talked about before with my classes. I think it was effective, because many of my students seemed engaged with the text, and they felt a strong connection to Oliver. According to Charlotte, he is “just an innocent boy who is trying to understand life, and along the way he is hurt and abused mentally and physically solely due to his social class, and I have a tremendous amount of sympathy for him” (Writing Sample, May 7, 2012).

Creating Deeper Understanding Through Empathetic Connections With Characters

Towards the end of the novel, I asked my students to choose both their favourite character and the character with whom they could most identify. The two most frequent answers were Nancy and Oliver. As mentioned previously, my students in general demonstrated a deep empathy for Oliver, and this connection seemed to help sustain many of them through some difficult reading territory. If readers have some kind of emotional connection, then the experience of reading the novel will be more meaningful, especially with a novel like this (Jones, 2008). Students in my classes particularly seemed to admire Oliver’s resiliency, frequently mentioning that he holds fast to his morals, no matter how bad things get. Tracy described Oliver as being memorable “for his impeccable morals when put into situations with Fagin and the thieves. He is incredibly respectful and behaves himself, even when everything goes wrong for him. Something is special about Oliver that makes him likeable by everyone” (Writing Sample, May 3, 2012). For Isabelle, Oliver was her favourite character because

he has had a really horrible life and very few people have ever shown him love. Yet he’s this sweet boy. He treats others amazing when they treat him horrible. He has this light inside of him, this undying hope that perhaps his circumstance will improve throughout the book. It shows strong character and that he is not a product of his environment. (Writing Sample, May 3, 2012)

Many other students echoed this admiration for Oliver.

Some students connected with Oliver because they had experienced personal difficulties in their past; for example, times they felt lost and all alone in the world. Bianca identified with Oliver because of his status as underdog. She said,

I can relate to Oliver the most [of any character in the book]. We both want to do what's right and if we don't it kind of stays on both our consciences. He gets abused and I grew up getting bullied so I can understand his feelings better. (Writing Sample, May 3, 2012)

Similarly, Tracy agrees that "he has an extremely gentle manner, and I just feel so bad for the horrible things that keep happening to him" (Writing Sample, May 7, 2012).

Nancy is a controversial and enigmatic character, and she certainly held my students' interest. As a woman, a prostitute, and as someone involved with Sikes, she would have held very little power in the social milieu of Victorian London. She belonged on the outskirts of society, yet she was incredibly brave and self-sacrificing. Isabelle identified the most with Nancy because

she takes what happened to her and uses it to help Oliver. I try to do the same. If I see someone going through a hard time, similar to what I went through, I usually try my best to help them. I feel like Nancy did this with Oliver because they were both found by Fagin at a young age and introduced to a life of crime. (Writing Sample, May 3, 2012)

Isabelle pointed out an interesting part of Nancy's personality. She was able to empathize with Oliver, it would seem, because she saw a younger version of herself in him. Nancy was able to put herself in his shoes, just as these students were able to do with this character. Ruth also identifies with Nancy, even though, she said

I am not a prostitute, nor am I involved in any illegal activities; however, I still connect with her. She is a girl living in a man's world trying to be strong in the hardest of times. I am the only girl in my family, and know what it is to be looked at as a girl. I understand how it feels to try and find yourself in a strange world. (Writing Sample, May 3, 2012)

Ruth perceptively picked up on the fact that Nancy's gender is seen as a weakness in the world of the novel, and it would appear that she has had similar experiences

within her own family. The idea that my students can be so far removed from Nancy's character in time and circumstance, yet still see a part of themselves in her, is a great strength of this character-driven novel, and a good reason to include novels such as this in the English classroom.

Not all of my students, however, were so enthusiastic. One of my participants, Dylan, either could not or did not read the novel. He also showed no signs of empathy for the characters and seemed unable to identify with any of them. Dylan was the only student in both classes who would not open a book for the reading period, and he was also the only one of my participants who really showed no obvious signs of improvement as the year progressed. His blatant dislike (or fear) of reading caused me to believe he might have had some sort of reading disability. He had never been tested however, even though his father told me that he had always struggled with reading. Dylan was my reality check as I attempted to analyze my results. As positive as much of my research has turned out to be, it is exceedingly difficult as a teacher to reach out and help every one of the students in your class. For each student you manage to help, it seems there are always others for whom you feel you could have done more.

Of all the students I taught that year, Tara had the most in common with characters like Nancy and Oliver. She also struggled with literacy skills and was having difficulty in the course. Her story in the following section describes a student's experience while reading the novel, and illustrates the importance of creating the classroom space to enable students to connect with characters.

Empathy as a Path Toward Deeper Reading, and Vice Versa

Tara was a 17-year-old girl in my grade eleven English class. She was a quiet, unassuming student who was very perceptive, but lacked confidence in her abilities. The past year was very difficult for her as she had recently lost a sibling and was struggling to find a way to cope with this tragic loss. When I first met Tara, she entered my second semester English class with a failing grade from the first semester and a host of psychological problems she was in the midst of trying to overcome. Tara's story is told in her own voice and illustrates, among other things, how one struggling student discovered strong connections to the characters in *Oliver Twist* through empathetic reading.

Tara's story.¹ The biggest difference over the years in English is that I read a lot more now. Last year there wasn't as much support and I almost failed the major paper. I just couldn't get into books; they seemed hard or else really bland. I never went on Sparknotes; I just kinda flipped through the pages and scanned everything. It was kind of like reading but not really. But I knew I had to improve my English mark and that I needed to be able to read, so I started trying to read more. I seem to like the more challenging books. I've always been that way: I am less interested in the texts from the first semester which were easier and I was bored in grade nine. Now I'm actually starting to realize what I was doing wrong in the past...I wasn't reading, and I wasn't really focused on the work.

I usually read before bed and during school. It is calming for me when I need time away. It's an escape. When I get a good book, I *love* reading. If I'm not feeling up to going to class because I'm so stressed out I'll just sit down and read. It's like a sanctuary; I'll just get into the book and forget about everything else. I always empathize with characters in books; I always put my life in their shoes. I like helping out people as much as I can. I tell every one of my friends, my cell phone is always on; I don't care if you text me or call me at two am, I'm up if you need me.

There is definitely value in reading a novel like *Oliver Twist*. The book is still relevant. I think of his life as how my life could have been. I'm able to put myself in his place and to experience his life. It helps me to connect to poor people and to see their life. There's a whole bunch of these things that are in this book, and they're still around, they're just not noticed as much. We still have a lot of problems to fix. But are we gonna fix them? I don't know. I'm enjoying the novel, especially the drama that's involved and how all the characters come together. And just the mystery of it. I kind of like his writing style; I mean, it's a little hard at points but I would read another Dickens novel for sure.

Oliver is my favourite character—point blank. He is lost in the world not knowing what to do, and I find this very intriguing. I wouldn't be able to do that; I would be changed. I would be devastated, my whole entire life would go downhill, but he keeps on going. I identify with Oliver the most because, although I have a great mother, my father is a drunk who doesn't care about his children as much as he should. I would say my dad is like Sikes. And my stepdad treats me like I am worthless, so I guess my points of view on life are the wrong ones. But even with everything that happens to him, Oliver is still such a caring, kind person who dreams to live a happy life. I have dreams, too.

I hope that Oliver's dreams will come true just like I wish for mine to come true. I want to live my life to the fullest.

Nancy's murder was an emotional part of the book, and I can't believe the detail put into it. I was shocked when I read it. She's speaking and she's begging him not to do it and he still does it. I don't understand how a person can do that. This chapter put a lot of feelings and overwhelming thoughts into my head, and it made me second-guess human nature because of what Sikes did. It also makes me think of today's society and all the men who have killed their wives or their whole family. Yes, in those ages, the men were always controlling and they could do whatever to their wives but I don't think it's changed that much. In the news right now, there is a murderer who killed his wife mostly because she wouldn't listen to him.²

Reading the book at home is really hard because I have so much going on. I have so much work for all my other classes and I'm trying to get all that done. At the end when I'm done all my work I want to go to bed, and I can't read because I'm too tired. The students who don't read the book can't understand it or they don't think they have time to do it. A big reason would be they just don't think they *can* do it. I didn't even know who Charles Dickens was before we read the book. I thought *this is a huge novel and I'm not going to be able to get into it and this is gonna suck because my final exam's going to be on it and I'm going to fail, like always*. But then I read the novel and I love detail, myself. I love putting detail into my own writing, so I really like the detail that he puts into it. Students are not prepared for books like this because of the novels nowadays, they're not as detailed, they don't have all of the things that Dickens put into his books. Today books are just all action or plot. That's why this book is really, really good. It makes you focus on the details. After I finished reading, I find that I'm focused more on my work. It's changed me.

Finding Yourself in the Text: Delving Into Tara's Story

Tara's story raises many interesting points. Firstly, it suggests that it is never too late for reluctant or struggling adolescent readers to discover the pleasures of reading. Secondly, the story underscores the necessity of teachers providing students with time to read during the school day. It is obvious that Tara struggled with self-confidence and

feelings of anxiety. Building trust and relationships with her teachers has helped Tara see herself differently as a student. She is no longer someone who “will fail, like always,” but someone who is capable of improving, of setting and conquering her goals for the future. She needed both support and motivation to improve her literacy skills. Using Clandinin and Connelly’s three-dimensional narrative inquiry space model (2000), which includes the personal/social continuum, the temporal, and place, I delve into one moment from Tara’s story in more depth. The point of inquiry is Tara’s comment that she “always empathize[s] with characters in books.” She goes on to say that, in this book in particular, she is “able to put [her]self in [Oliver’s] place and to experience his life.” Comments like this illustrate Tara’s strong sense of empathy. Inquiring narratively along the personal and social dimension, Tara’s strong ability to empathize appears to have helped her to connect with this novel, and with books in general. She talked of seeing many similarities between her life and Oliver’s, and she was able to put herself in his shoes, talking about the characters as if they are real people. She made the connection between Nancy’s murder and the many examples of domestic violence, which still permeate our society today, showing her awareness of the phenomenon of men who beat their partners. She even compared her father to Sikes, as he struggled with alcohol and apparently had a violent temper as well, so it appears she was able to see herself in the text in many ways. Tara’s reading of the text showed her ability to empathize with the characters, making personal connections to her reading, and to deepen these to construct social commentary on the issue of domestic violence.

In terms of place, Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) second dimension, I would say that our classroom became a tiny community during this novel study, wherein a space opened up which allowed students to experience these feelings of empathy. Tara also stated that the group work did help her tremendously when she was able to be there. Tara needed to feel safe before any learning could occur, and she found this safe space in the classroom, and quite frequently within the pages of a book. Temporality is the third dimension of the narrative inquiry model. Temporally, Tara made big changes on her own as a student over the year of the study. Ironically, these improvements came at a time of great trauma in her personal life. Before this year, Tara said she did not like reading at all. In grade eleven, starting with a novel study in the fall, she quickly developed a love and an appreciation for reading. It is incredible to think that a student who admitted she did not like reading one year ago could become so engrossed in *Oliver Twist*. I believe her strong empathetic side (and, perhaps, her increased sense of confidence as a reader) allowed her to connect with the novel in such a profound way. The importance of student confidence and motivation is one of the lessons I have learned from Tara’s story.

Concluding Thoughts

Prior to conducting this research, I had not explicitly inquired into the value of using literature as a vehicle for opening up the possibilities of caring for one another in the classroom (Noddings, 2005). I knew intuitively that literature could do this, but it was something I took for granted. After completing this study, I began to see the possibilities of teaching a novel such as *Oliver Twist*, a novel very much concerned with issues of social justice and with caring for one another, as a platform through which to discuss empathy and promote deeper understanding among my students. In opening up spaces through which students could feel connected to characters, and simultaneously, could demonstrate their concern for some of the more marginalized members of our own society, I believe I helped the students see the author's purpose. It gave them a means through which to engage with the text, to achieve what Gallagher (2009) calls reading flow. In addition to caring about the characters, students must also see the point in reading the novel. They must both value literacy, *and* believe that they can improve their literacy. The relationships that have been established inside the classroom are essential to coming to a common purpose for reading. There needs to be a sense of trust between (and among) the students and me, their teacher (Dipardo & Schnack, 2004).

I think it is a powerful moment when a student, or indeed any of us, is given a window into another world through narrative. By inviting us to care about Oliver when no one else does, Dickens allows us a glimpse into an unknown time and place from the perspective of the most disadvantaged in society. In the current educational climate, where there is a push for texts to be relevant and accessible, I worry that we may not be allowing enough "windows" into other worlds (Jago, 2004). I believe reading *Oliver Twist* provided such windows for my students, and the students' voices as represented in this article are evidence of the need for close reading of challenging texts. In this novel study, students gained new perspectives through the power of story, the power of connecting to characters, cutting through the many cultural and temporal differences that exist between my students and those characters in a Victorian novel.

Notes

1. Tara's story was pieced together using interview transcripts. I interviewed Tara on three occasions: April 14, May 10, and June 7, 2012.
2. Tara is referring to a local woman who was brutally beaten and murdered by her husband in the community.

References

- Bruner, J. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 18(1), 1–21.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Huber, J. (2002). Narrative inquiry: Towards understanding life's artistry. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 32(2), 161–169.
- Dickens, C. (1837-8). *Oliver Twist*. Toronto, ON: Penguin.
- Dipardo, A., & Schnack, P. (2004). Expanding the web of meaning: Thought and emotion in an intergenerational reading and writing program. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 39(1), 14–37.
- Dolby, N. (2012). *Rethinking multicultural education for the next generation: The new empathy and social justice*. New York: Routledge.
- Gallagher, K. (2009). *Readicide: How schools are killing reading and what you can do about it*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Greene, M. (2000). *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Jago, C. (2000). *With rigor for all: Teaching the classics to contemporary students*. Portland, ME: Calendar Islands.
- Jago, C. (2004). *Classics in the classroom: Designing accessible literature lessons*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Jones, W. (2008). Emma, gender and the mind-brain. *ELH*, 75(2), 315–343. doi: 10.1353/elh.0.0004
- Mahn, H., & John-Steiner, V. (2002). The gift of confidence: A Vygotskian view of emotions. In G. Wells & G. Claxton (Eds.), *Learning for life in the 21st century: Sociocultural perspectives on the future of education* (pp. 46–58). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Noddings, N. (2005). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Smiley, J. (2002). *Charles Dickens: A life*. New York: Penguin.
- Smith, M. W., & Wilhelm, J. D. (2002). "Reading don't fix no Chevys": Literacy in the lives of young men. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.



Alanna Jamieson teaches high school English and Sociology in Riverview, New Brunswick. She recently completed her Masters in Curriculum and Development at St. Francis Xavier University, with a focus on literacy-related issues. She lives in Moncton with her husband and two young children. As an educator, she is most passionate about the teaching of poetry, working with struggling readers, and on raising awareness of social justice issues.