

# Cultivating Empathy in Students Within an English Language Arts (ELA) Classroom Through Literary and Narrative Texts

Emily M. Smith

**Abstract:** The relationship between empathy and literature is understudied in the English Language Arts context. English language arts (ELA) educators wonder if reading can produce skills beyond those of comprehension and other ELA skills within students. Although empathy can be difficult to measure, some in the English language arts education community have begun to investigate whether they can cultivate empathy, perspective-taking, and open-mindedness within their students. Through research of some studies and articles surrounding this topic, it appears that empathy can be cultivated within students through literature when paired with discussion, writing, and reflection, and that cultivating empathy within students is integral to developing critical thinking, informed, and open-minded individuals.

## Introduction

Within English language arts education, educators are required to weave literature into their curriculum to teach students reading and writing skills that will set them up for success beyond their public schooling. Considering that within the Ohio Social Emotional Learning Standards, in the “Social Awareness” section, they state the importance for students to “recognize, identify, and empathize with the feelings and perspectives of others” and to, “demonstrate empathy through compassion in self and encourage in others” (ODE, 2022, p. 15), it seems that there is another important component and outcome to what the reading and interaction with literature can do for students and their development into young adults. That important component is empathy, and it is important for English educators to know that empathy can be cultivated within their students through their reading of and interaction with literary and narrative texts, when paired with discussion, writing, and reflection strategies.

As English Language Arts educators, it is important to examine and research how our narrative and literary text selections could potentially foster empathy and understanding within our students, creating positive emotional impacts on our students as they develop into young adults. The language, discourse, and choices in what adults and teachers say around teens “stick” with them in ways they do not realize. This is because teenagers’ brains are in “discovery mode,” and are “experiencing new things, and their brains are developing accordingly. There’s simply a lot going on in their brains” (Edwards, 2010, p. 1). Therefore, knowing and understanding how our student’s brains are developing and operating is essential to understanding how our choices in what we teach in our English Language Arts curriculums impact students more than we know. According to Feinstein & Jensen (2009), “with cognitive maturation emerges idealistic behavior; teenagers are finally able to understand the way the world works as well as envision the possibilities of an

ideal place” (p. 18). It is worthwhile to examine how narratives and literary texts can foster empathy and open-mindedness within students because they are developing into independent thinkers who are more aware of the community and world around them. Therefore, English educators can use literature and narrative texts paired with discussion, writing, and reflection strategies to begin to aid students in navigating and better understanding the society and world around them.

## Empathy Definitions in an ELA Education Context

English Language Arts educators must know what empathy is to begin to understand its relationship with narrative and literature; therefore, it is important to know that there are two different types of empathy that people can cultivate: cognitive empathy and affective empathy. Cognitive empathy “is equivalent to what many writers refer to as ‘theory of mind’ (ToM), [which is our] attribution of mental states to others” (Hogan, 2022, p. 159). This ability in the human brain allows humans to understand each other’s emotions and feelings. Affective empathy is the sharing of another’s emotions or feelings. Hogan (2022) notes that, “affective empathy is not a matter of sharing the same emotion” (p. 161); rather, the emotion of the empathizer can be similar to that of the target (the other). Within the English Language Arts education context, empathy is defined as something in the middle of Hogan’s two definitions, which is “a form of interpersonal or social understanding, [referring to the] experience of gaining a substantive insight into the experience of another, while recognizing that this insight refers to someone else’s experience, rather than one’s own” (Meneses & Larkin, 2017, p. 4). This definition of empathy suggests that empathy can be cultivated within students through their interactions with literature and narrative texts.

In the following two sections, two studies will be presented, which showcase two English educators, Julie A. Sellers and Jake Stratman, who take it upon themselves to create curriculum units with goals of cultivating empathy and perspective-taking within their students. Both educators use different strategies and prove that empathy can be fostered within students through the reading and interaction of narrative and literary texts. Although empathy and perspective taking is difficult to measure, these two English educators attempt to measure empathy in their students by analyzing their verbal and written responses to the assessments and prompts within the units they created.

## The Importance of Discussion in Cultivating Empathy

In researching the relationship between literature and empathy, one of the main themes presented throughout all the articles and studies reviewed for this manuscript was the use of discussion-based and collaborative instructional strategies in the methods of teaching. The articles and studies present findings that show that without collaboration and discussion used alongside reading literature, empathy is not really retained and increased within people. Rather, an increase in empathy, “requires a meaningful follow-up discussion. From the discussions, the reader can develop self-awareness, enhanced self-concept, and improved personal and social judgement” (Ugwu et al., 2022, p. 4). It is not enough for students to just read narra-

tive and literary texts to foster and cultivate empathy. Instead, they must interact and respond to the text. That is why implementing instructional strategies like Socratic seminars, think-pair-shares, philosophical chairs, fishbowls, and more can aid teachers in fostering empathy in students while reading a narrative or literary text.

Sellers (2021) presents, within the introduction of her essay “Eliciting Empathy Through the Study of Literature in the World Language Classroom,” how to conceptualize and utilize the action of “reading.” In other words, she presents another purpose or use of reading than just for comprehension practice, noting that reading should not be reduced to a “skill.” The author defines the construct of reading as an, “interpretive communication,” which “promotes understanding of cultural meanings,” and “integrating interpretive reading with project-based learning invests it with the context and purpose necessary for communication” (Sellers, 2021, p. 363). In other words, an interaction occurs between the student and the narrative or literary text as they read. The student interprets and tries to make sense of the characters, experiences, situations, conflicts, setting, dialogue, and symbols from their own experiences, culture, and knowledge of the world. Student discussion alongside this interaction can not only expose students to people, experiences, and situations different from their own, but it can also allow students to understand and make meaning from their peers’ interactions and reactions to the narrative or literary texts.

Sellers (2021) wrote this essay and conducted her research during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the shutdown, which she noted made her research even more essential and relevant than she initially thought, because, as she claimed, there had been an empathy deficit that Americans have been experiencing over the last couple years. Sellers uses her proposed construction of reading through a course design of four units created for a World Language Classroom. One of the units was called the “empathy unit,” which “fell as the third of four thematic, project-based units that addressed a unique driving question per unit; other unit topics included representations of the Americas, freedom, and power” (Sellers, 2021, p. 364). The empathy unit incorporated both poetry and fiction, and the seven students in the course collaborated in teams during class time to discuss their assigned readings while also completing active discussion tasks that addressed the topic of empathy in connection to the reading.

By using a variety of active discussion activities and techniques during these units with her students - techniques such as empathy mapping, café conversations, hatful of quotes, fishbowl, and TQE (thoughts, questions, and epiphanies)—Sellers (2021) was able to operationalize and test her proposed construction of reading. This theory connects to the social constructivism theory which says that knowledge develops from how people interact with each other, their culture, and society at large. Students rely on others to help create their building blocks, and learning from others helps them construct their own knowledge and reality. Sellers (2021) ended up finding that:

Learners’ discussions, comments, projects, and reflections during the empathy unit were striking in that they revealed thoughtful and articulate responses regarding the types of empathetic reactions learners experienced and how the pieces elicited those reactions. They were not, as one might suspect with a topic

such as empathy, highly subjective responses only worthy of social media, but rather formal and specific. (p. 365)

Viewing reading as a form of communication with a purpose (an interpretive communication that promotes understanding of cultural meanings) that can help students interact and learn from each other's cultures, backgrounds, and experiences can develop these students into well rounded individuals and lifelong learners.

## The Importance of Writing and Reflection in Cultivating Empathy

In addition to the instructional strategies, which involve student discussion alongside the reading of a narrative or literary text, instructional strategies which involve student writing and reflection, are also key components to fostering empathy, perspective-taking, and open mindedness within students and people. Writing reflectively "can invite students to think more explicitly about their own ability to empathize with others, especially in connection to the stranger" (Stratman, 2013, p. 25). Encouraging students to write and reflect through specific instructional strategies and in response to prompts that allow for deep reflection, it seems that it is indeed possible to foster empathy within students.

Stratman's (2013) classroom study, titled "Toward a Pedagogy of Hospitality, Empathy, Literature, and Community Engagement," focused on the relationship of writing, narrative, and empathy as he taught first year college students at a small Christian university. In addition, the main unit in his study addressed hospitality and its relation to empathy, literature, and community engagement. This review of Stratman's study will focus on the writing aspect of his results and methodology. Stratman (2013) notes that his hope for his study is to prove that:

The practice and study of hospitality as a historical Christian practice, conducted from an antifoundational approach to service-learning in connection with reading literature, engaging in the community, and writing reflectively, can invite students to think more explicitly about their own ability to empathize with others, especially in connection to the stranger. (p. 25)

In the design of his course, he focused on the idea of connecting hospitality with empathy, trying to help students increase empathy toward the stranger/other and to help students critically analyze their own prejudices, stereotypes, and narrow thinking. Stratman (2013) intended to do this by asking them to "think and write (and then rethink and rewrite) about the host-guest paradigm in an academic and community contexts [which] affords spaces where reconfiguration of hospitality (as well as empathic concern for the other) has the potential to occur" (p. 28). In his study, the specific writing tasks he asked his students to conduct were textual analysis, personal reflection and journaling, and community engagement (which won't be focused on in this study review).

The literary/narrative text that Stratman (2013) used for his course was Alan Paton's (1948) *Cry, the Beloved Country*. The students had already read the novel and watched the film prior to this study. The author and his students analyzed how and why particular characters illustrated and/or withheld hospitality in the novel, and he asked his students to "listen to the characters to make room for different

perspectives” and share with them the idea that, “hospitality designates occasions of potential discovery which can open up our narrow, provincial worlds. Strangers have stories to tell which we have never heard before, stories which can redirect our seeing and stimulate our imaginations” (Stratman, 2013, p. 29). The author noted that throughout the semester, in examining his student’s textual analysis writing, he noticed students begin to understand the relationship between discovery and storytelling.

Stratman (2013) understands that “reading alone cannot create empathy,” and that “books are not enough. Thinking about books is not enough” (Junker & Jacquemin, 2017, p. 34). Stratman (2013) noted that his incorporation of reflective journaling was difficult because his students illustrated a strong resistance to reflecting on their experiences (in and out of the classroom). To combat this, he incorporated Christine Pohl’s (1999) *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* alongside the re-reading of *Cry, The Beloved Country* to align the student’s experiences more with the content of Alan Paton’s novel.

For this, he asked students to write four journal entries over the semester, containing 500-600 words, in response to specific prompts Stratman (2013) created. He also asked students to conduct daily writing assignments as well. Later in the semester, he asked his students to reflect on their writings from the beginning and he noted that “these readings, reflective writing assignments, journal entries, class discussions, and hours spent engaging with strangers in the community all lead to questioning and resistance of prior definitions of host, guest, stranger, and hospitality, especially anything static or fixed” (Stratman, 2013, p. 44). He saw within his students’ critiques of their prior ideas about hospitality, which shows reflection is happening.

Overall, Stratman (2013) noted that his course successfully invited students to lead more empathetic lives and that “through reading and analyzing student journals and other informal in-class writings, it is clear that integrating reading literature, writing reflective journals, and engaging in the community has encouraged (if not forced, in some instances) students to think and rethink what hospitality means and looks like in their lives” (p. 45). After examining Stratman’s (2013) study, it is clear that writing and reflection in connection to literature makes an important impact on the ways students rethink, revalue, and redefine their own constructions of the world and strangers/the other around them, which is a key skill in that can foster empathy, perspective taking, and open-mindedness within people.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that literature can be utilized as a powerful tool that can cultivate empathy, perspective-taking, and open-mindedness within students. English Language Arts educators need to understand that simply reading narrative and literary texts is not enough to cultivate this empathy, but rather, pairing the reading with discussion, collaboration, writing, and reflection can create success in cultivating empathy within students.

It is shown, through the results of Sellers’ (2021) and Stratman’s (2013) units, that empathy can be cultivated within students through the reading of and interaction with literary and narrative texts. In examining Sellers’ (2021) and Stratman’s

(2013) units, it appears that writing, reflection, and discussion must be consistent and continual in a unit for empathy to be cultivated. This is something that should be considered as English educators tailor their curriculums with the goal to foster empathy within their students. Students in both courses practiced and illustrated critical thinking, perspective-taking, and empathy as they reflected on and discussed their own biases, ideas, and experiences which they brought to the texts that they were reading.

Overall, knowing that responding and interacting with literature can cultivate empathy, perspective-taking, and open-mindedness within students and knowing how to effectively engage students in responding and interacting with literature will assist English Language Arts educators in ensuring that students can develop the critical analysis skills, communication skills, social, emotional skills, and collaborative skills needed to pursue their life goals and passions and to participate as informed members of our democratic society.

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## About the Author

Emily M. Smith obtained her bachelor's degree in English, minoring in Creative Writing, at Bowling Green State University and obtained her master's degree in Secondary Education at the University of Toledo. In August, Emily will begin her career teaching freshman English at Springfield High School in Toledo, Ohio.