

Teach Empathy With Literature

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When I think about my highest goal as a teacher, it is to help create responsible citizens who take care of each other and their world. And the best way that I can help form human beings who do good is to teach them empathy. I'd like to think that the ability to understand and share the feelings of others is something that everyone is born with, but I also think that it is important enough to be explicitly taught just in case.



By giving students an idea of what it is like to walk in someone else's shoes, all literature that deals with big ideas and emotions is good for teaching empathy. Still, I have found a few types of stories that I go to when I really want to get my students working to think about how other people live.

These are the kinds of texts that I gravitate towards when I want my students to strengthen their empathy skills.

Stories About People Who Are Not Immediately Likable

Understanding the motivations and perspectives of people who we don't like very much is a key element of empathy. So I often choose books with off-putting characters.

One of my favorite unlikeable characters is Malvolio from *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare. While students start off seeing him as an annoying know-it-all, as he is bullied more and more by the other characters, they start to see the story from Malvolio's perspective. Eventually, by examining the play with close reading questions, they come to an understanding of the way that class and birth can limit happiness and the ability to get what we want in life.

Some of my other favorites in this category include Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe and Caliban in *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare. They both seem like monsters at some point in the story, but students come to understand that sometimes people aren't what they first seem.

Stories About People Who Are Similar But Also Very Different

Hooking students with an emotion or experience that they can relate to is a great way to get them thinking about people whose lives are also very different from theirs.

One of my all-time favorite short stories is "Barn Burning" by William Faulkner. The main character, Sarty, deals with universal feelings of being torn between family and society, and most teenagers can relate to that. But when students understand how the main characters' poverty factors into the plot of the story, they start to get a more complete idea of the themes of social justice and inequality.

I have also found success with "Elena" a poem by Pat Mora and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale

Hurston. These stories are examples of universal emotions hooked into different lives, and they help students understand a little more about those differences.

Stories About People From Other Places

I have found that often students assume that people around the world live lives very similar to theirs. The more I can expose them to what life is like in other countries, the more empathetic they will be when they come across those differences in real life.

Annie John by Jamaica Kincaid is one of my favorite world literature choices. While the novel tells the universal story of a young girl growing up and finding her independence from her mother, it also deals with specific issues of race, colonialism, and post-colonialism in a former English colony. And I have found that when students learn a little more about the context of the novel, they really broaden their understanding of the world.

My other favorite choices for literature from around the world include *What Is The What* by Dave Eggers and *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah. The struggles that the characters in these books face is like nothing my students have ever experienced in their lives.

Anything That Gets Students Questioning Their Own Assumptions

One of the key elements to developing empathy is the ability to realize and admit when we have made a mistake. Everyone judges at times, and everyone makes assumptions at times. But when we can see our mistakes as something that we can easily move past, then we will be much more likely to feel empathy for others.

All quality literature questions and probes and gets us thinking about why we think what we do. But for me, there is nothing that effectively gets students questioning their own assumptions as well as poetry. My favorite poems for exploring beliefs are Adrienne Rich's poem "Prospective Immigrants, Please Note," Langston Hughes poem "Let America Be America Again," and "The Victims" by Sharon Olds. All three of these poems bring up important questions, but they don't always offer concrete answers, and they help students to understand that finding their way in the world is a process.

By helping my students to feel compassion, understanding, and patience for people whose lives are nothing like their own, I hope that I can push them to grow up to be responsible citizens who make a difference in their worlds. If I can teach them those skills by reading a great story together, even better!