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How Can I Develop Children's Empathy through the Implementation of a Fictional Literature Programme?

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How Can I Develop Children's Empathy through the Implementation of a Fictional Literature Programme?

Helen O'Farrell

All the reading she had done had given her a view of life they had never seen.

Matilda, by Roald Dahl

Abstract

Inspired by my values for care, empathy and social justice and the deeply transformative power that I believe literature has the power to yield, this study grew from a personal interest to juxtapose these areas and hence improve my practice. The manner in which children's exposure to literature in my classroom was, for a time, largely permeated by surface-layer, basal understanding called for a radical change in my practice. I envisaged that deeper interactions with literature would broaden the world of the children and allow them to encounter different perspectives and empathise with the lives of others, consequently propelling social change. This change, I believed, would simultaneously allow me to live more closely in the direction of my values too.

This self-study action research project focuses on my experience of implementing a programme of fictional literature designed to enhance children's empathy. Empathy is a concept linked to a range of prosocial behaviours – such as altruism and a reduction in bullying behaviours. A range of literature, both prose and picture books, is employed in tandem with a number of interventions. Data deriving from this is gathered by means of questionnaires, observation, and my own, self-designed data gathering method. It is subsequently bolstered through consultations with a critical friend and validation group. Importantly, as is synonymous with action research, a reflective diary – imbued by reflective practice - is a paramount data collection tool also. Qualitative data is subsequently analysed thematically, with quantitative data analysed through exploratory data analysis.

Emergent findings from the data suggest that my literature programme successfully generates characteristics of empathy, like taking the perspective of another and feeling an emotion with them. My theory intimates that the most effective interventions at doing so are *Role Plays and Dramas, Making Connections, Lingering Questions, Post your Senses* and

Diary Entries. Vitally, I also observe that each of these are underpinned by the choice of literature and an adherence to a strict policy of vetting, particularly with regard to selecting culturally diverse literature.

A further finding of my research points to the prowess literature has to create a formidable empathy which can transform held beliefs and assumptions. For instance, children begin to have a greater empathy for the emotions of others and an understanding that nobody is binary. Additionally, through exposure to literature that focuses on diverse groups – such as refugees - feelings of 'otherness' and perceived impenetrable difference are eroded by a paradigm shift and children can instead begin to see the sameness of the human condition. Importantly, these findings and my subsequent claims to knowledge are bolstered and validated by their openness to public scrutiny through the presentations I have given, the publication of this thesis and dialogue with my critical friend, validation group and peers.

The results of this study have a range of ramifications for me personally, in that this research process, in addition to my allegiance to reflective practice, has enabled me to live significantly closer to my values than I had been hitherto and create a Living Theory of which I am proud. Furthermore, the ramifications it has regarding changes that should arise in policy, theory and the practice of other teachers is discussed.

Acknowledgments

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I express my gratitude to my critical friend, validation group and indeed, staff as a whole too, for their steadfast support. Their kindness, passion and honesty inspire me daily and I feel fortunate to work as part of such a special team.

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Declaration of Authenticity

> *"Plagiarism involves an attempt to use an element of another person's work, without appropriate acknowledgement in order to gain academic credit. It may include the unacknowledged verbatim reproduction of material, unsanctioned collusion, but is not limited to these matters; it may also include the unacknowledged adoption of an argumentative structure, or the unacknowledged use of a source or of research materials, including computer code or elements of mathematical formulae in an inappropriate manner."*
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Section 1: Rationale and Introduction

1.1 Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this study is to understand how I can enhance children's empathy through the implementation of a fictional literature programme. Simultaneously, it aims to explore the role that the literature I select - along with the particular interventions I use in tandem with it - can play in honing and developing children's empathy. It also seeks to consider the role that empathy, by way of literature, can play in transforming children's established beliefs and assumptions.

1.2 Ontological Values

Firstly, in order to better understand the impetus for this self-study action research project, I feel it important to divulge my own, personal perspective and values. This is particularly apt because, as exulted by Kelchtermann (2009), the personal and professional spheres of a teacher's life are intrinsically linked. Furthermore, McNiff (2013) attests that an identification of that which we value is catalytic in the practices and methodologies of a teacher. With this in mind, I consider the symbiosis of empathy, care and social justice to form the basis of my ontological values system.

Deriving from these values is an acute social conscience. For instance, on a micro-scale, I am passionate about the children showing care and empathy for one another and developing an understanding that no-one is binary – good or bad – instead we are complex, nuanced beings who deserve empathy and understanding. I strive to listen and respond appropriately to all of the children and gain an understanding of where they are 'coming from'

(Demetriou, 2018; 3) and in turn hope that they will replicate these behaviours. Indeed, I endeavour to align with the mores of Noddings (1995) who upholds that the most valuable lessons we can teach children is to care for others and to develop an awareness that they themselves are also cared for and understood too.

Furthermore, in a broader sense, I often find myself despairing of the apathy, lack of empathy and even systematic xenophobia shown to certain groups in society, such as refugees and other minorities, particularly in a world that increasingly views the 'other' as a threat to our own, western values. Indeed, this is further heightened by my awareness that the children whom I teach live and learn in largely homogenous environments, without much exposure to minority cohorts and thus they may be prone to believe the often ubiquitous stereotypes presented to them. As a teacher, I endeavour to disrupt the expansion of this ideology so that the children in my care can become agents of positive change for the future and practice greater empathy and acceptance.

1.3 Epistemological Values

Through this research, I have come to view knowledge as a deeply personal construct, created through exploration, experience and dialogue, existing in a constant state of flux - closely aligning with a Froebelian background, wherein the child forms the epicentre of my practice (Bruce, Elfer & Powell, 2018). Consequently, I endeavour to use child-centred methods that focus on critical thinking and rely closely upon children's intrinsic motivation. My interpretation of knowledge also impels me to provide scenarios for the children to engage in dialogue, critical thinking and guided discovery.

1.4 Personal Rationale

Literature and reading have long played an important role in my life. Books have carried me to other worlds, expanded my imagination and vocabulary and provided me with new learning about other cultures, further amplifying the store I place in empathy, care and social justice.

However, when I reflected on my own practice, I realised that I was - catalysed by an overwhelmingly academic fifth class curriculum - teaching reading in a stagnant, unimaginative way, with a heavy reliance on interrogative, surface-layer questioning. I was in opposition to my epistemological values as my methodologies were ascribing to a fixed view of knowledge. Additionally, children were failing to experience the transformative power of literature and I was not living out my values nor impressing them upon the children, as is patently displayed in this excerpt:

'These images represent the conflict I feel when teaching English. In one vain, Harry Potter represents my desire to teach English in a way that opens my pupils to the magic and transformative power of literature. Yet, on the other hand, the image of the text books serves as a representation of how the obligation to use text books weighs heavily on me professionally, and so opportunities to cover literature in a deep and exploratory manner are so often missed. (RD, 20/10/2018).

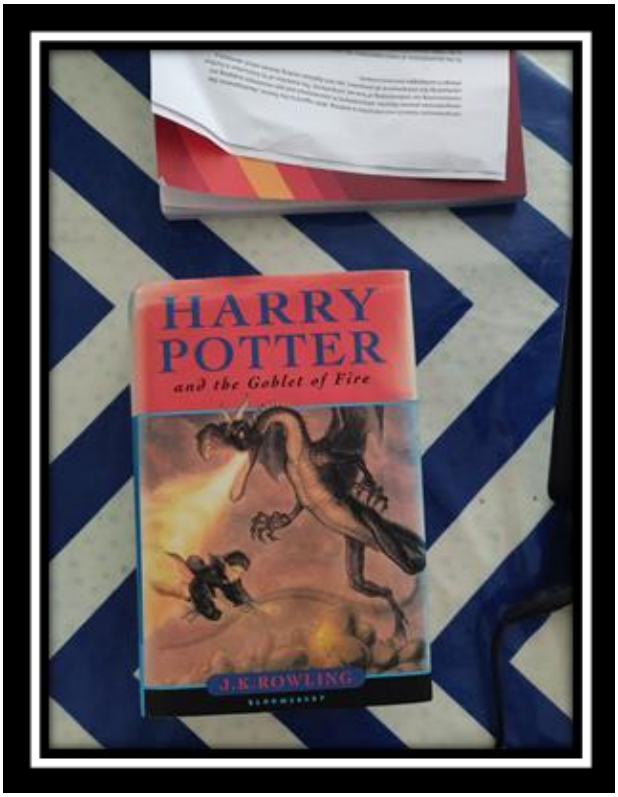


Figure 1. 1 Harry Potter Book

Figure 1.2 Text books

Similarly, while I exulted my devotion to empathy, care and social justice, I was forced to confront the uncomfortable truth that I was failing in these areas too. Take for instance, a particular pupil in my class who I felt was not always working to the best of his ability. In order to push him towards his potential, I found myself closely attending to him, with our interactions punctuated by my utterances to the effect of 'someday you'll thank me for this.' However, this had assumed a slight Machiavellian approach, wherein I was beginning to align with the end – the child working hard – justifying the means – consistently 'nagging' him to reach this end. I was failing to empathise with and care for him (Noddings, 1995), as the following excerpt shows:

'My relationship with James is in a worryingly negative spiral. I am struggling to motivate him and he is not finishing tasks. I find myself constantly frustrated with him and, if I step into his shoes, I am guessing he feels likewise. Our current relationship is in total opposition to the positive school experience I want the children to have. Should I lay off the pressure for the sake of our relationship? Or should I continue in this vain, to the detriment of our relationship but in the hopes he starts to work harder?' (Reflection 5, December, 2018).

I was living as a paradox; a living contradiction (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) and so I was forced to ask myself, 'How can I live out my values of empathy, care and social justice, whilst simultaneously teaching reading in the vein that aligns with my epistemological values?' As I reflected, I came to see that action research could provide me with the tools to address this by giving me the opportunity to study my practice with a view to improving and transforming it (Kemmis, 2009).

1.5 Theoretical Perspective and Rationale

With my values in mind, I was eager to gather whether or not the dichotomy of literature and empathy was echoic of any theoretical perspectives to aid in the improvement and subsequent transformation of my practice. Hearteningly, my hypothesis was met with a range of support. A variety of renowned scholars – such as Freire (1985), Greene (1980) and Rosenblatt (1978, 1994) - speak of the transformative power of literature and the manner in which it has the potential to build bridges of empathy and understanding to propel social change.

Greene's (1980) *Pedagogy of Social Imagination* is a powerful influence on this study and speaks of the transformative opportunities provided by literature wherein a reader can be altered by an encounter with prose or poetry when they meet it from a stance of alertness and questioning, freeing their imagination which allows us 'to give credence to alternative realities' (Greene, 1994; 3). This subsequently liberates us to suspend the 'single mindedness' spoken of by Baron-Cohen (2011) and we can enter a state of greater empathy – where we can understand the perspectives of others and respond appropriately.

Additionally, Rosenblatt (1994) echoed this sentiment, proposing that the focus of literature should be to encourage children to learn both about themselves and of the lives of others to foster affinities and subsequently develop a sense of empathy (Mills et al, 2004). This *Transactional Theory* proposes that a range of methodologies and interventions may be used in tandem with literature – like making connections, drama and bringing one's senses to bear when reading.

In alignment with my ontological values, empathy is closely associated with improvements in attitudes towards stigmatised groups, transformations in racial attitudes and improvements in peer relationships in schools (Decety, 2012). Relatedly, providing children

with culturally diverse literature has been shown to foster empathy and subsequently bear its fruits. Sims Bishop (1990) asserts that books can be 'windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors', offering insights into our own lives and those of others too. When I think of the homogeneity that encompasses the lives of the children in my class, exposure to culturally diverse literature can lead to the creation of empathetic affinities with characters from minority groups and cultures they have not yet encountered and they can be awakened to the commonalities of the human condition.

Of course, empathy is already taught in schools through a variety of mediums such as Religious Education, Social Personal and Health Education (S.P.H.E.) and History (NCCA, 1999). However, it is my hope that by honing the children's sense of empathy through literature, they will be able to think far beyond themselves and their own needs, (Baron-Cohen, 2011) have a greater understanding and acceptance for others and see the fundamental sameness of the human condition.

1.6 Conclusion

Rather patently, my values, both ontological and epistemological, were an undeniable force in guiding me towards this area of self-study action research. As is documented, this personal rationale found alliance in the theoretical, further driving the impetus to embark upon this study.

1.7 Thesis Structure

This study comprises five chapters. Following an introduction, Chapter Two subsequently explores the topic of empathy and its creation through the medium of literature

pertaining to the relevant academic research. It provides a brief outline of empathy and its trajectory, along with a justification for why it is such a worthwhile construct. Furthermore, the symbiosis that can be garnered between it and literature is also exculpated.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach and research design of the study. The chosen research methodology – self-study action research – is also defined and validated as an appropriate choice.

Thereafter, Chapter 4 details an analysis of the findings through both thematic and exploratory analysis.

Finally, Chapter Five provides a conclusion of insights gathered from the study. It details the profound effect it has had on my own practice and the potential it has to exert a similar prowess on that of my peers too. It subsequently details some recommendations in relation to policy and theory.

Section Two: Literature Review and Critique

2.1 Introduction

While it is largely accepted that theory should be the final target of research, reflexive action researchers must accept that - as proponed by architects of the methodology such as Lewin (1946, in McNiff, 2013 and Kemmis and McTaggert, 1988) - the best form of action is that which is informed by theory and understanding. Consequently, this literature review aims to examine and critically analyse appropriate research relating to the importance of empathy, how it catalyses moral behaviours, its development, and its role within education. Finally, as is the objective of this study, literature pertaining to how empathy can be enhanced through the medium of literature will be illustrated.

2.2 Defining Empathy

Since the beginning of the last century, the concept of empathy has been adopted to refer to several prosocial and moral emotional behaviours, including compassion, sympathy, kindness and an understanding of another's feelings (Alam, Danieli & Riccardi, 2018). As a result of its attribution to such a wide breadth of behaviours, it is a complex idea that has been defined in a plethora of ways. Essentially, it has been summarised as "an affective response more appropriate to another's situation than one's own" (Hoffman, 2000; 4). Indeed, Baron Cohen (2011; 10) further explains that 'empathy occurs when we suspend our single-minded focus of attention, and instead adopt a double minded focus of attention.' The idea of being 'single minded' relates to thinking only introspectively, prioritising ourselves and our own

perspective and interests. Conversely, ‘double mindedness’ pertains to the thought that we are thinking beyond ourselves and considering the interests of others.

Research commonly distinguishes between two components of empathy, bisecting it into cognitive and affective empathy. Baron-Cohen (2011) stipulates that the former relates to the ability to attribute mental capacities to others – such as thoughts, feelings, beliefs and behaviours. Indeed, it is important to note that this aspect of empathy is closely related to the concept of ‘Theory of mind,’ which simply refers to understanding what another is thinking or feeling. It is essentially the ability to view situations from another’s perspective – ‘putting yourself in someone else’s shoes’ - to gain insight into how they may feel, think or behave (Baron-Cohen, 2011). Meanwhile, the latter, affective empathy, is the sharing of feelings with another – such as joy, happiness or excitement - and the urge to respond to situations with an appropriate emotion (Maibom, 2017). From a neuroscientific perspective, studies show that empathy may be largely attributed to mirror neurons in the brain wherein the same brain activity is triggered when experiencing pain and empathising with the pain of others also (Decety, 2012). Interestingly, those with advanced emphatic capacities have been shown to have especially active mirror neuron systems.

To further delineate the multidimensionality of the two forms of empathy, cognitive neuroscientists, Decety and Jackson (2004) characterised empathy into 4 categories. The first is the capacity for an unconscious affective response to others, - such as the sharing of emotional states - the second is the ability to take the perspective of another, while they considered the third facet to be the ability to emotionally regulate. Finally, the last component of empathy is the ability to separate the self from another. They postulate that all four components must be activated for a human to experience the full breadth of empathy.

2.3 Why Empathy is Considered a Worthwhile Emotion

Studies support a strong correlation between empathy and pro-social behaviours and it has been shown to be a major predictor of helping behaviours and altruism (Bethleham, Allison, van Andel, Coles, Neil & Baron-Cohen, 2016). This phenomenon of empathy-induced altruism has been seen to improve attitudes towards stigmatised groups, alter racial attitudes, catalyse co-operation in competitive situations and improve peer relationships in schools (Decety, 2012). Indeed, Baron Cohen's summation (2011) that a lack of, or erosion of empathy is correlated with amoral behaviours such as violence, aggression and cruelty, illuminates the necessity for it in our society. Interestingly, on a neurological level, when areas of the brain associated with emphatic functioning are damaged, there are increased correlations with psychopathy and disruptive behavioural disorders (Baron Cohen, 2011). As Hoffman (2000; 3) attests, empathy is 'the spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible.'

However, excessive feeling of empathy can often hamper prosocial behaviours and actions. Hoffman (2000) calls this phenomenon empathic over arousal. In such instances, a person is so overwhelmed by a stimulus that he or she develops an aversion to it and thus any potential altruism that may have arisen from their empathy dissipates. Similarly, Bloom (2017) cautions the widely proponed belief that empathy is the bedrock of all morality, instead presenting a case against it. Within this, he argues that empathy is a poor moral guide, catalysing a bias in us where we only feel for those who are like us and those to whom we are attracted, thus ignoring the plight of other, marginalised groups. Mirroring the pain of others is not, Bloom contends, the pinnacle of morality and has in fact led to cruelty, indifference and corrosive relationships in the world. However, while denigrating empathy per se, Bloom's

(2017) ideal of a rational compassion still upholds - akin to empathy – that care is indeed at the epicentre of prosocial human behaviours.

2.4 The Development of Empathy in Children

The frontal lobe, the part of the human brain associated with social cognition – and consequently empathy – does not attain full maturity until the late teen years and early twenties (Hoffman, 2000). Despite this, instances of empathetic behaviours are shown to be present from early infancy and as Hoffman (2000) details, empathy begins with the ability to distinguish the self from the other. Indeed, this separation from the self is evident even in neonates who show their capacity for empathic concern in the first year of life by their demonstrations of distress at the sound of cries from their peers. This highlights that from an early stage, humans have an "unquestionable capacity to connect and share emotions with others" (Liddle, Bradley & McGrath, 2015; 456). Further to this, it has also been shown that from the second year of life, children can respond emphatically and pro-socially to a person in distress by inferring how the victim may feel and putting themselves in their position. This empathy has also been shown to take the form of toddlers sharing toys and food with peers (Hoffman, 2000).

Empathy continues to progress as the child matures. Its development is evident in the preschool years where children can relate their own experiences, like that of missing a parent, to a character in a story who is experiencing similar emotions (Hoffman, 2000). They may also begin to understand the subjectivity of experience and that the same situation can elicit different emotions amongst people. As children progress to middle childhood – about 6 or 7 years old - some demonstrate a rather mature understanding of the links between their own emotions and those of others. Many begin to understand components of friendship and are aware that communicating feelings can make their peers feel better – for instance telling a distressed peer

that they have also felt that way before. Furthermore, children at this age show a metacognitive awareness of emphatic distress. By the age of 8 or 9, most children understand that an event can bring about opposed feelings for people and have an awareness of the variables that affect self-esteem (Hoffman, 2000). Research (Gnepp & Gould, 1985) has shown that children are usually 9 or 10 years old before they begin to comprehend that a person's feelings are affected by his or her recent experiences. Finally, by adolescence, children can account for inconsistencies in how a person should feel in a situation versus how they really feel.

Naturally, the development of empathy has an array of implications for educators as they must be acutely aware of both the abilities and indeed, limitations of children's emphatic capacities at different stages. That said, however, despite the above portrayal of typical emphatic development, it is important for educators and parents alike to note that its development is not exact nor does it follow a linear trajectory. Instead, akin to other faculties, its development varies from child to child and such developmental illustrations should only be taken as a guide (Hoffman, 2000).

2.5 Why Teach Empathy in Schools?

Failures in education are often characterised by low scores in achievement tests and generally poor academic performance. However, Noddings (1995) asserts that this is a relatively low bar to set. Instead, she upholds that we should demand more from our educational endeavours than mere academic achievement. Instead, the most valuable lessons that school can teach children is to care for others and an awareness that they themselves are cared for too. It is only after such objectives are achieved that academic achievement can be fully realised. Similarly, Greene (1995) passionately professes that the hope for the future of education does

not lie in initiatives and projects but instead in allowing care and empathy to pervade the school curriculum.

Noddings (1995) claims that teaching care and empathy can lead to gains both academically and humanly. She hypothesises that the inclusion of themes of care can develop children's cultural literacy and broaden their horizons. For instance, in a maths or science class, children may hear new ideas, hypotheses and vocabulary when learning about mathematicians and scientists who attempted to prove the existence of a God. The same effect could be garnered in English class through the sharing of diverse literature.

Secondly, Noddings (1995) also upholds that the inclusion of themes of empathy and care in the school curriculum guide children away from the insularity that so often pervades academia and catalyses them into thinking philosophically about the larger existential questions, like 'Why am I here?' This view is shared by contemporaries like Giroux (2011), who posits that an education system which stresses the academic serves as an unwitting curator of neoliberalism, perpetuates narrow learning and is ultimately a rebuke to the quest for an equal society. Furthermore, making provisions for such themes can increase person-to-person connections and develop empathetic relationships in the classroom. When educators share themes of care and empathy, children begin to view them as real people with identities, challenging their assumptions and creating new knowledge.

It is important to note that while the desired result should be to develop children's capacities for care and empathy, Noddings (2001) contends that care is embodied in two distinct ways. The first is the idea to care *about* something, which relates to care in a virtue sense, like caring for a charitable cause or environmental issue. This may align itself with cognitive empathy and Theory of Mind. The second is to care *for*, which implies a relational interaction between the caregiver and cared-for – with connotations of affective empathy.

While it is very important to foster a sense of caring *about* issues of injustices and inequalities in children, - like environmental issues and human injustices - the aim should be to use this as a stepping stone, and ultimately transmute to establishing real-life, relative caring relationships where empathy is a proactive stimulus for altruistic behaviours.

2.6 Empathy within Education

Unlike the five basic human emotions, - joy, distress, fear, anger, and disgust - which are evolutionarily based, our higher cognitive emotions are not instinctive and thus can be taught and learned (Nikolajeva, 2013). Empathy is one such social emotion that can be honed and developed. According to a range of developmental theories there are several beneficial strategies and vehicles to mediate levels of empathy in children (Nikolajeva, 2013). In an Irish educational context, perhaps the most obvious subject associated with the teaching of empathy is that of Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE). The subject strands range from *'myself', 'myself and others'* and *'myself and the wider world'.* Under the strand of '*myself and others'* the curriculum makes provisions to provide children with the opportunities to develop a wide range of communication skills, such as the ability to resolve conflicts, and most pertinently, the ability to empathise (NCCA, 1999). This strand also deals with the subject of bullying, namely how to recognise it, coping mechanisms to alleviate its effects, along with the promotion of a general anti-bullying message. This outlook aligns itself with research to suggest that a lack of empathy is significant in instances of bullying behaviours. Indeed, researchers to the fore on anti-social behaviours in children attest that the incorporation of empathy training in schools as part of an anti-bullying policy is paramount in order to reduce bullying and other similar behaviours (Simon & Nail, 2013).

Another subject area - both in an Irish context and internationally - that strives to stimulate emphatic reactions and develop empathy in children is History. The NCCA (1999, p. 9) asserts that the study of the past '*relies on, and helps to develop, a sense of empathy*'. The History curriculum considers the variance in emphatic capacities over the course of childhood as it starts on a more micro, personal level, with the early elements focusing on the immediate world of the young learner, fostering empathy through activities like 'listening to local people telling stories about their past', (NCCA, 1999, p. 20) and responding through drama, roleplay and art. Subsequently, the curriculum then moves to more remote aspects, like *World War One*, as the child continues to develop and their capacity for empathy broadens.

Critically, this progression allies itself with Dewey's assertion that the curriculum should take both the child and subject matter into consideration when planning and executing its content (Fesmire, 2015). Of course, as empathy is such a subjective construct, educators must be aware of the dangers of exposing children to overly-graphic historical accounts so as to mitigate the risk of children becoming distressed and causing harm (Hoffman, 2000).

In addition to S.P.H.E. and History, it is also regarded that empathy is taught through religious and ethical education. Traditionally, religion has been linked to lessons in morality, with many religious teachings promoted as life mores. Through the *Grow in Love Program (Veritas, 2018),* taught in Catholic schools, children are taught a range of moral lessons. Indeed, despite tenuous correlations between religion and empathy regarding religious attendance and affiliation, studies have shown that a positive perception of a God figure is closely linked to emphatic capacity (Arweck & Jackson, 2012). Meanwhile, in several non-denominational Irish primary schools, an ethical education curriculum – *Learn Together* (Educate Together, 2004) – is taught in lieu of Religion. The programme intends to develop children's morality, sense of justice and equality – with each of these closely related to empathy. It contends that its objective

is to teach children about other faiths and encourages them to have an empathy for how others make moral decisions. This type of secular-based-moral-teaching is omnipresent in other European jurisdictions too, like France and The Netherlands (Ahlgren, Smyth, Lyons & Darmody, 2013).

In addition to well established subjects and methodologies, wellness programmes directed at empathy development – such as Roots of Empathy (Gordon, 2007) – have also been implemented in Irish and international schools alike. Research shows this to be an effective intervention, with children showing a development and improvement in emphatic behaviours as a result of it (Schonert-Reichl, et al, 2011). Furthermore, research also demonstrates that the implementation of a restorative approach in schools has been positively correlated with emphatic behaviours (Hopkins, 2002).. It considers empathy and the development of empathetic listening to be key to the development of all human connections.

Additionally, empathy can be taught and fostered through the mediums of art and literature. Greene (1980) speaks of the transformative opportunities provided by aesthetic encounters with them. Her *Pedagogy of Social Imagination* attests that children and adults alike can be changed by an encounter with a painting or a poem when they meet it from a stance of alertness and questioning, releasing the imagination. Indeed, as Greene (1995; 3) professes, our imagination 'permits us to give credence to alternative realities'. It is this entrance to the alternate that allows us to suspend the 'single mindedness' spoken of by Baron-Cohen (2011) and we can enter a state of 'double mindedness' where our capacities for empathy are developed and realised. Indeed, the development of empathy through the arts can extend to the realm of literature too.

2.7 Empathy through Literature

As has been explored, empathy is a malleable construct that has a strong correlation with a variety of moral and prosocial behaviours. Thus, as teachers, we should be acutely aware of potential methods to develop it, along with theory of mind, in children. Research shows that one such way is through the medium of literature, primarily fiction (Nikolajeva, 2013). Indeed, as Keane (2007; 29) observed, the human brain is predisposed to fiction as it 'deactivates readers' suspicions and opens the way to easier empathy.' Whereas real life scenarios designed to elicit empathy can oftentimes be punctuated by feelings of doubt and incredulity, fiction invites the reader to embrace feelings of care and empathy wholeheartedly. This aligns itself with the hypothesis that the 'human brain pleads an evolutionary advantage to our capacity for narrative' (Hunte & Golembiewski, 2014; 73)

Naturally, most children have not experienced the same cacophony of emotions as their adult counterparts and so reading fiction can serve to prepare them for real-life instances where empathy and mind-reading may be required to respond appropriately. Indeed, literary dialogue frequently contests that reading novels ought to develop your character and alter your conduct (Keen 2007). It can also expose children to a range of extreme emotions they may never experience and in such instances, they can live vicariously, expanding their world view while at the same time, comforted in the knowledge that they are safe. It is important to note that although not all children may be entirely passionate towards literature, nor might they see a future in the area, Noddings (1995) notes that they each can be guided towards leading existences that show concern and empathy for others, the natural world and its creatures, and for the preservation of the human-made world through its prowess.

Rather interestingly, there appears to be a reciprocal and symbiotic relationship between reading and empathy because studies show that in addition to reading increasing empathy, an increase in a child's empathetic capacities improves their reading also. Meanwhile, feelings of empathy are essential for critical engagement with literature as children are awakened to new understandings and can also better share the feelings of others (McCreary & Marchant, 2017).

2.8 Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of Reading

Current theories largely subscribe to the idea that reading is an interactive process that cannot be considered as merely decoding words on a page but instead it is a way of interpreting the world around us (Harvey & Goudvis, 2017). Indeed, as echoed by Freire (1985, p.19) 'reading is not walking on words, it is grasping the soul of them.' That is, reading is not restricted to phonemes and morphemes on a page but instead the task of reading is to uncover what is hidden in the text in order to access the deep meanings of it. Freire (1985) and Greene (1980 & 1995) viewed literacy as a vehicle to investigate and address social and political issues, injustices and diversity. Freire (1985) upholds that the teacher should carefully tread the line between teaching the technicality of reading - the words - and allowing the spontaneity of reading to flourish - the world of a text. He asserted that teaching children to read should be a creative event, where the stimuli derive from the children's own lives and not the teacher's book. Too often, reading is associated as a process devoid of emotions, inventions and without creativity. Instead, it must be borne of the children's world, with historical, social and cultural elements omnipresent throughout (Freire, 1985).

Indeed, this view was echoed by Rosenblatt (1994, p. 21) who attested that 'text is more than paper and ink' and that we should 'focus on helping children learn from literature about themselves, about their lives and about the lives of others' (Mills & Stephens, O'Keefe & Riley

Waugh 2004, p. 91). Thus, an awareness and study of this theory readily lends itself to the idea of reading and empathy being intertwined. The *Transactional Theory* proposed by Rosenblatt was borne of a time where New Critical Theory - the notion that reading is merely extracting information from texts - suffused approaches to reading. In contrast to this, *Transactional Theory* hypothesises that reading is a subjective experience wherein the reader actively makes meaning by engaging in a transactional process with the text, drawing on their background, interests and internal landscape. *Transactional Theory* aligns itself with the current consensus in reading research – that reading is a constructive process (Galda, 2010).

Transactional Theory postulates that each reader has two possible responses to a text – efferent and aesthetic. The former, 'efferent', responses, relate to facts drawn from the text, with the reader's attention 'focused primarily on what will remain as the residue after the reading' (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 23, in Rosenblatt, 1994). Conversely, while adopting the latter, aesthetic, type of response, the reader's attention is focused on the more private and emotive elements of a text. It is important to note that Rosenblatt's theory contends that no reading experience can be considered as purely efferent or aesthetic. Instead, most reading experiences are predominantly one, with facets of the other still present. Rosenblatt (1994) asserted that the most effective way to read works of fictional prose and poetry is with an aesthetic lens, with the opportunity to engage with the lived through experiences of fiction possible only when this stance is activated.

While assuming this stance, the reader is invited to think of the book, themselves and their own world, as well as the lives of others. Alternatively, when fiction is read from an efferent stance, readers are denied the opportunity to savour the 'images, the sounds, the smells, the actions, the associations and feelings that the words point to' (Rosenblatt, 1991, p. 447, in McCormack & Pasquarelli, 2010). Indeed, it is responses of the aesthetic kind that so often

align themselves with instances of empathy as Greene (1980 & 1995) so vehemently proponed. When children are afforded the opportunity to approach texts from an aesthetic perspective, their cognitive emphatic capacities are honed and developed as they put themselves in the shoes of characters from the text, consider characters thoughts and motives and think about what they would think or do.

However, when testing becomes increasingly omnipresent, reading very often becomes isolationist and children are provided with less and less opportunities to read from an aesthetic perspective (Galda, 2010). Rosenblatt (1994) cautions that efferent reading so often takes precedence in the classroom, denying children of the potential offered by the aesthetic. This phenomenon of a focus on the efferent has been observed in an Irish context, as illuminated by Concannon-Gibney (2011). The study reported that reading instruction in Irish classrooms is often imbalanced, with lessons mainly focused on decoding, effective approaches to reading and reading for enjoyment, leaving very little teaching time dedicated to aesthetic instruction and deep understanding. Indeed, the research found that when reading for meaning was addressed, it took the form of interrogative and literal questioning – showing an alignment with the traditional 'bottom-up', simple view of reading - rather than the more nuanced and interpretive passage advocated by the more modern balanced approaches.

Such phenomena echo the thoughts of Roche (2014) who, while acknowledging that cognitive levels of comprehension are a vital skill for meaning making in reading, teachers are too often tied to teaching the skills of reading comprehension with the main objective being that children can understand the texts they are reading on a literal level and that they are able to recall aspects and details of it. Instead, Roche (2014) posits that more emphasis should be placed on the deeper, critical levels of understanding, like enabling the children to challenge the ideologies of a text, interrogate the subtext, understand the nature of the world of the text

and take the perspectives of characters to understand their motives and beliefs. Alas, as more text-based, basal responses continue to be encouraged, children are denied of the opportunities to engage with literature on a deep level and may miss its transformative power and the vehicle by which it allows us to examine life (Giouroukakis, 2014).

2.9 Teaching Empathy through Aesthetic Responses

There are a variety of instructional methodologies that encourage the use of an aesthetic approach towards literature, hence advancing these empathetic tendencies (Ryan, 2011). Firstly, Galda and Beach (2001) detail that above all, teachers must think carefully and systematically about how best to encourage aesthetic responses in children as it is through classroom activities that they learn to respond to literature and the depths that their responses can reach are realised. With that in mind, classroom instruction must then seek to foster an appreciation of the aesthetic by placing the emphasis on the reader's response to a text so that the lived through experience can pervade (Ryan, 2011). Reader's responses can take a variety of forms, like making visual representations of the text through artwork and by creating images from their senses – like a 'post your senses' activity where they identify the senses activated by reading a passage of text (Rosenblatt, 1994). By bringing the readers senses to bear when responding to a text, they can see, hear, feel, taste and smell what a character might, thus arousing their emphatic capacities (Galda & Beach, 2001).

Another way to elicit deeply emotive 'aesthetic' responses to literature and develop empathy is to make connections – with background knowledge, oneself, other texts and the wider world (Ryan, 2011). In reference to background knowledge, the context the reader brings to the reading process serves as a bridge from the unknown to the known (Ryan, 2011). At the

beginning, it is important for the teacher to select reading material that is relevant and pertinent to the lives of the children so that their background knowledge is easily activated and affinities with characters and their worlds can be quickly identified through text to self-connections (Harvey & Goudvis, 2017). This may be further explained by the *Theory of Transportation* (Green, Brock & Kaufman 2004), which suggests that identification with a text can lead to increased engagement with and enjoyment of it as the reader feels more of an involvement. This consequently affects the reader's impetus to seek out similar experiences with literature which in turn serves as a major predictor of their future relationship and attitude towards reading.

Supportively, Alexander, Miller and Hengst (2001) found that children are drawn to stories that have parallels to their own lives and contexts so that they can personalise them and fit them to their schema. This has implications for teachers as efforts should be made to supply reading material that aligns with the lives of the children in a variety of ways. Importantly, Alexander, Miiller and Hengst (2011) advise that teachers should model their own text-to-self connections to the children to support and scaffold them in creating their own such connections. Subsequently, when children are comfortable making connections with narratives like their own context, subject matter can then evolve to more globalist issues, perhaps dealing with other cultures and worlds. As aforementioned, teaching text to text connections – intertextuality - is also an important part of developing aesthetic responses and building bridges of understanding and empathy (Harvey & Goudvis, 2017). Finally, as children begin to encounter broader themes, the insularity of their own existences is transformed, and their sense of empathy is activated. They are then presented with new insights and understandings of the world and of the sameness of the human experience (Harvey & Goudvis, 2017).

It is important, however, that the teacher watches carefully for authentic connections to support understanding and empathy from the children. Oftentimes, children can make connections for the sake of it, becoming overly enthusiastic at the prospect of a new exercise (Harvey and Goudvis, 2017). To eradicate this, teachers should explicitly model how a connection can lead to deep understandings and give the children enough time to hone and refine their connections so that they can achieve their purpose.

Rosenblaat (1994) also suggests that another way to stimulate empathetic and aesthetic responses to literature is by using open-ended questions to guide students' responses back to the emotive and experiential aspects of reading and away from closed-ended, efferent ones. Indeed, as professed by Harvey and Goudvis (2007; 109), 'questions propel us forward and take us deeper into reading.' Posing questions like 'What interested or fascinated you?' 'How did it make you feel?' draw the reader back to the deeper layers of the text and prompt inferences and interpretations. In addition, exercises relating to a text wherein children complete sentences beginning with 'I wonder...' also have a similar effect. Encouraging lingering questions at the close of a text, where some aspects have been left up in the air, with no definitive answer, can also help children to empathise with several perspectives and pushes their thinking further along (Harvey and Gouvis, 2017).

2.10 Drama Activities to Develop Empathy

Drama activities in response to a text can also aid children in exploring and developing empathy (Hurley, Linsley & Van der Zwan, 2014). Even the very act of role-playing or creating an improvisation in relation to a text allows children to take the perspective of characters, enabling them to better understand their motives and beliefs- hence developing a sense of

empathy. Additionally, *Thought Tunnels* (often known as *Conscience Alleys*) involve children forming two lines on either side of the classroom. Assuming a character from a text, one child walks down the centre, between the two lines as the other children speak his or her thoughts and emotions relating to their situation aloud. The child in character subsequently communicates the impact of the different thoughts and emotions has had on their conscience and the course of action they may now take (Hurley, Linsley & Van der Zwan, 2014).

This is a valuable lesson for the other children as they learn to put themselves in another person's position, experience feelings and emotions from their perspective and understand the impact that thoughtless words can have. *Thought Tunnels* also align with the methodology of *Thought Tracking* (Hurley et al, 2014). This involves the children acting out a specific scene from a book as a drama. The teacher can freeze the drama at any point, tap one of the in-role children on the shoulder (or gives some other signal) and ask for their thoughts at that moment. The expectation is that each child gives only a sentence or two about how their character is feeling, so that each child has enough time to engage in the activity. Similarly, the methodology of hot-seating, where a child is in role and the other children interview them is another way children can learn perspective taking and hone their emphatic skills (Hurley et al, 2014).

2.11 Character Identification

Research shows that when consulted about reading experiences connected to feelings of empathy, most readers cite character identification as a cornerstone (Keen, 2007). Specifically, children and adult readers alike report evocations of strong feelings of empathy for characters who suffer cruelty and injustices. Importantly, however, a reader does not have to have shared these experiences with a character to feel a strong emphatic response. Such strong responses can align the reader with a character and allow them to uncover aspects of

themselves and their emotions. Keen (2007) identifies that this has implications for teaching as, if character identification does indeed catalyse empathy, a teacher can use this phenomenon didactically to develop morality in children through texts that centre on issues of injustices. Activities such as diary entries or letters, where the child assumes the role of the character can further foster this affinity with a character (Keen, 2007).

Of course, it is important to note that emphatic character connection applies to - but is not limited to - human characters. Indeed, many readers detail how empathy can overcome 'the significant barrier of species difference', and affinities with animals, toys and mythical creatures can develop (Keen, 2007; 68). This is particularly pertinent as much children's literature features andromorphic characters and talking animals and so selection of books of this nature by educators and parents alike should acknowledge this phenomenon and select books in accordance.

However, as previously mentioned, while the phenomenon of empathic over arousal within a social context can render a person helpless and unwilling to exhibit prosocial behaviours (Hoffman, 2000), the same issue can also arise during reading when a reader may become empathically over-aroused by a book that causes personal distress and cease to read it, avoiding its genre or themes in future. This anomaly has clear ramifications for the literature a teacher selects for his or her class. Naturally, while it is important to choose literature that is diverse by theme and genre to broaden and advance the children's empathy, an educator must not be overly ambitious, ensuring that they are always guided by morality and a sensitivity to those in their care.

While all the above hypotheses detail various facets of empathy and literature, one cannot ignore the individual dispositions, experiences and personality that each reader brings to the reading process. In acknowledging this, Keen (2007) concedes that the reading of

emotional and evocative fiction may not always establish affinities between the reader and the fictional character and as teachers, it is important to reconcile with this.

2.12 Selecting Culturally Diverse Texts to Foster Empathy

Books are a large factor in shaping children's world views (Boyd Causey & Galda, 2015). Indeed, the idea that culturally diverse literature is catalytic to the expansion of this worldview has been promoted for many years. Hitherto, diversity is a term that has traditionally been related to issues of ethnicity, race and culture. However, Boyd, Causey and Galda (2015) caution that we must expand the parameters of what it means to be culturally diverse and ensure that children are provided with literature that extends to 'physical and mental disabilities, socioeconomic status, language variations, dialect differences, and religion' (p. 379). Such provisions may lead to children becoming more understanding and empathetic towards wider cohorts of people as their encounters with diverse groups increases. Indeed, Bishop (1990) asserts that books can be 'windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors', offering insights into our own lives and those of others too. With respect to the notion of books being 'windows', literature can provide children with opportunities to view worlds that are both real and imagined and oftentimes these windows can transform into mirrors, allowing the reader to see the commonalities of the human experience and condition. Similarly, these windows can also take the form of sliding glass doors, wherein the reader can feel part of the fictional narrative and enter the 'alternate reality' spoken of by Greene.

Of course, children from prevailing social groups have long found mirrors and points of reference for text-to-self-connections in literature. While it is important for all children to see their lives reflected in books, the over-dominance of able bodied, Caucasian characters,

can, ironically, be to their very detriment too, isolating them and providing them with an inflated sense of self (Bishop, 1990). The ever-present opportunities for mirrors in literature deprives them of opportunities to expand their world view and develop affinities and empathy for characters from other backgrounds, cultures, histories and traditions. Conversely, their counterparts from minority groups who have not enjoyed the same prominence in the realm of literature see their absence and often negative representations as lessons in devaluation and reflective of their low place in society. Speaking to this, Bland (2016) depicts that literature so often depicts Australian Aboriginal peoples and Native Americans with stereotypical facial and physical features, wearing traditional clothing and lacking eye contact with the reader. Readers are denied an accurate and genuine picture of contemporary indigenous characters and the effect of this is two-fold – while children from indigenous cultures feel devalued and misunderstood, readers from other cultures miss opportunities to be informed of indigenous life and co create emphatic affinities with legitimate characters.

Interestingly, books like Harry Potter - though not overtly diverse in theme - have been shown to transform attitudes towards stigmatized groups, like refugees and immigrants, through an interrogation of the subordination imposed upon certain cohorts in the book. Consequently, children can view the mistreatment of fictional characters as a microcosm for the inequality suffered by many in society (Vezzali et al, 2014).

Additionally, children from minority cultures are denied chances to experience what Rosenblatt (1994) called transactionalism – the transformative interaction between reader and text that uses the reader's cultural capital to connect and identify with a text. In order to ameliorate this, books must be challenged and interrogated so that these children are provided with literature 'upon which they can build their self-perceptions as they prepare to be the designers of their future communities' (Donovan, 2017; 47).

2.13 Picture Books

Research illustrates that reading a range of high-quality picture books has been shown to provide a framework for building socio-emotional skills like empathy and tolerance (Harper, 2016). Picture books can catalyse a range of moral behaviours, like emotional awareness, sensitivity to other's feelings and emphatic behaviours. Additionally, they can also develop children's emotional literacy – their ability to identify, express and label emotions- through exposure to a range of facial expressions and depictions of emotions. Harper (2016) caveats that it is paramount that the picture books a teacher chooses to share with the class undergo a rigorous process. They should be chosen based on their literary and visual elements, artistic style and artistic medium to ensure that they are of a high standard.

Furthermore, Bland (2016) upholds that picture books must also contain realistic stories and plots, employing characters that are relatable to children and who experience the same spectrum of emotions shared by all children. Indeed, the text and pictures must complement one another, again illustrating a gamut of relatable emotions to aid children in developing their emotional literacy. Finally, selection should also ensure that a range of vivid imagery is present in the picture book to help the readers create meaningful affinities to the text, their own lives, and the wider world. Indeed, it is this vivid imagery that may increase retention of the message and language of a story, leaving an imprint on the child's mind and lingering in their 'reader's repertoire of experience', transforming held ideas, concepts and feelings, while also creating new language (Bland, 2016; 46).

The positive effects that reading picturebooks can have on a child's sense of empathy is further exulted by Roche (2014). She underscores that engaging in critical discussions with children about picturebooks – a methodology she calls *Critical Thinking and Book Talk (CTBT)*

- is a worthwhile methodology and that those who have experience of engaging in class discussions and dialogue about picturebooks from Junior Infants onwards show high levels of empathy and insight. For authentic discussions to occur and for empathy to subsequently flow, a culture of democracy, trust, openness and respect must first exist in the class. A teacher must realise that the execution of thoughtful, reflective discussions takes time and patience and they must ensure that open-ended questions are used, and all children can reflect and answer them. This dialogue can span a variety of areas relating the book such as the plot, characters, setting, and illustrations. Through this CTBT a link between the child's life and those portrayed in the text can be established, allowing the child to easily take a character's perspective and exercise their empathy.

In addition, Bland (2016) also directs that issues of diversity should also come into play when selecting appropriate picture books. Questions such as 'Does the characterisation in words and illustrations encourage empathy?', 'Is the representation of the world and of people accurate and respectful?' and 'Does the story encourage a questioning stance and genuine communication?' (p. 45) should all be positively answered by a text. Echoing Bishop (1990), picture books should narrate the experiences of minorities around the world, so that no one perspective is dominant. This includes issues like gender-equality, disability, cultural identity and refugee status (Roche, 2014). The provision of picture books that deal with these issues can add to the development of intercultural understanding and empathy towards minority groups as children experience the ultimate commonalities of the human condition, regardless of ethnic and cultural background. In addition, such books can also serve as a moral blueprint for the reader as characters in these stories so often show altruistic behaviours towards members of minority cohorts, so children can mirror these actions and act in prosocial and empathetic ways.

Harper (2016) illustrates that a range of strategies can be employed to develop empathy and other socio-emotional skills through these high quality picturebooks. Venn diagrams can be used to compare a character with another in the story. Similarly, they can also be used for children to compare themselves to a character and effectively identify the differences and similarities between them. Indeed, this methodology could also be employed with novels to catalyse affinities and connections with characters. Secondly, open-mind portraits that link events and what a character says to how they might be feeling fosters empathy in children and allows them to put themselves in a character's position. Furthermore, allowing children to express their emotions and feelings toward characters through art and a variety of artistic media also develops their socio-emotional capacities. It is noteworthy that in addition to picturebooks, such strategies could also be applied to novels, poetry and other prose.

2.14 Conclusion

The literature reviewed for this study supports the hypothesis that empathy can catalyse a number of prosocial behaviours and can be honed and developed in a number of ways (Baron-Cohen, 2011). Crucially, it intimates that one such way may be through the medium of literature, thus resonating with the primary objective of this study. In particular, theories such as Rosenblatt's (1994) *Transactional Theory* and Greene's (1980) *Pedagogy of Social Imagination* speak to the sentiment of my research and indeed, my values, and will consequently exert a powerful influence on my methodology and the interventions I will employ. Indeed, the next section describes the methods and procedure employed in this study as it endeavours to address the research question and add to the current discourse on the relationship between literature and empathy.

Section 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to both detail and justify the chosen methodological approach and research design of this study, while simultaneously chronicling the facets of action research and documenting my experiences with its cyclicality. It will also explicate the chosen data collection tools and the rationale behind their appropriateness for the purpose of this study. To conclude, key theoretical issues such as validity, reliability, limitations and ethical considerations will be outlined.

3.2 Context of Research

The focus of this research is on improving my own practice. In order to conduct this study, the children of my current 5th class group, comprising 29 children, between the ages of 10 and 11 were agreeable participants. The research site was a mainstream senior national school, catering for pupils from 3rd to 6th class. There were 486 pupils in the school; 255 boys and 231 girls. It is a mainly middle class school, with most pupils having a relatively high socio-economic status. The study took place over an 8 week period, from the end of January, 2019 to the end of March, 2019 for 1 hour, 3 - 4 times a week.

3.3 Methodological Approach

Methodology can be explained as a way to generate new theory (McNiff, 2013). Akin to most aspects of research, it is not homogenous and instead may be approached in a variety of ways, depending on the nature and context of the research. Dash (2005) avows the

importance of selecting a methodological approach and paradigm that is reflective of the study and the values of the researcher. With this in mind, I began the search, studying positivist, interpretivist and action research models alike to discover the most appropriate:

Positivism

As I considered the different methodological approaches, I began to imagine research as part a spectrum - positivist, scientific approaches and paradigms lay at one end, with more interpretive approaches residing at the other. McAteer (2013) specifies that positivism has its values in the contention that knowledge is derived from sources like empirical, quantitative data where results are wholly replicable and without context. Indeed, while characteristics like replicability are paramount to certain branches of research, I did not believe that the positivist paradigm allowed for the nuance that is imperative to research in a classroom.

Interpretivist Paradigm

Admittedly, its counterpart, interpretive research, at first seemed a far better fit as it is centred around understanding the world as it is viewed from subjective experience (Cohen et al, 2018).Yet, upon closer inspection (Bryman, 2012), I found its passivity and desire to merely understand phenomenon, rather than be an agent of change and liberation, to be in contrast to the empowerment and emancipation I would like my research to give. Furthermore, the participant-researcher detachment and the small credence it gives to the effect of ontological factors (McAteer, 2013) also forced me to reconsider.

Action Research

As I grew more familiar with action research (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) and its facets, it became clear that it was significantly more befitting than its counterparts through its general ethos, ontology, epistemology and methodological approach as the following will outline.

3.4 What is Action Research?

Action Research espouses that each researcher is shaped by views, values and assumptions (Sullivan et al, 2016). Purveyors of this methodology perceive the research process to be a values-laden, moral commitment and view themselves as permanently relational to their social contexts, never choosing to adopt the stance of a spectator – a view ubiquitous in positivist and interpretivist research (McNiff, 2013). Instead, they strive to be non-judgmental and take the perspective of others before making judgments. Serendipitously, this aligns itself with the quest for empathy sought by this research project, and its 'double-minded' nature (Baron-Cohen, 2014), which initially piqued my interest. Furthermore, as I reflected, I also found that this reticence to judge also aligned with the context of own school, wherein restorative practice – which promotes a sense of fairness and empathy - permeates the culture.

As the name would suggest, action research is the marriage and integration of action and research. The former refers to what a teacher does to improve practice - the actions taken - and the latter entails how they learn and explain what they do to improve (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). It is 'a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such an intervention' (Cohen Manion & Morrisson 2018, p. 186). In this way, it provides teachers with the opportunity to study their practice with a view to improving and transforming it (Kemmis, 2009). This idea of improvement was another

attractive facet. Meanwhile, it is its 'small-scale' idea that I believe renders it appropriate to the work of a teacher, practicing in a classroom, that, although small, exists within a particular context that is influenced by and connected to the 'real world'.

Another factor that attracted me to action research was its earnest ambition to redress the hierarchy of traditional research - wherein detachment of researcher from participants is commonplace – and instead substitute it with democratisation (McNiff, 2013). It draws on democratic practices, where the teacher researcher is in the driving seat and can collaborate with peers, colleagues and pupils alike. Professionals are enabled to experience the research process and see the value of their own embodied knowledge (McNiff, 2013). Consequently, they are then more likely to integrate the theory and research of others into their teaching (Delong, 2011), allowing the voice of the researcher - a concept Whitehead, (1989) declared as the living 'I'- to emerge. Yet, a succinct representation of action research could not be given without an acknowledgement of the importance played by critical reflection.

3.4 The Role of Reflection within Action Research

Action research contends that reflection grants us the opportunity to review experience and provides us with a tool to understand our practice (Sullivan et. al, 2016). Distinctive from other branches of research, it distinguishes itself by the contention that the researcher must engage with 'ongoing and evolving' reflection as part of their research process, in order to determine if their practice is acceptable, improve it and subsequently generate knowledge from it (McAteer, 2013). Indeed, critical reflection is a well-established cornerstone of self-study action research, upheld by many as the guide to ensure that teachers act in a moral and ethical manner in order to preserve the virtuosity of the teaching profession (Brookfield, 2017).

This critical reflection incorporates the purposeful and deliberate observation of phenomena from a multitude of angles and perspectives – ourselves, colleagues, students and literature (Brookfield, 2017) - evaluating their impacts on the researcher and others, with the ultimate aim to hone our critical capabilities and catalyse more informed decision making in future (Sullivan et al, 2016).

As teachers, our actions are dictated by our schema and the many assumptions we hold. Yet, by engaging in critical reflection, we allow ourselves the opportunity to test the verity and validity of these closely held, but often irrationally based beliefs (Sullivan et al., 2016). Certainly, through my own introspective reflection – bolstered by Gibbs (1988) model of reflection - consultations with theory and engaging in critical discourse with children and colleagues, new ideas were illuminated to me and I was confronted with deeply embedded assumptions I held in relation to hierarchies of power and hegemony that were hitherto unexcavated.

3.5 The Role of Values in Self-Study Action Research

Action research dictates that this type of criticality must also be brought to the consideration of our values (Sullivan et al, 2016). Values are a core aspect of reflective practice and understanding what we value informs our practice and methodology (McNiff, 2013). Values may derive from a number of perspectives, yet the most pervasive are educational, ontological and epistemological (Sullivan et al, 2016).

Epistemology

Epistemology refers to how we view knowledge – its definitions and methods of acquisition (McNiff, 2013). Our views on knowledge generation can dictate our actions. Should

we view knowledge as fixed, we will teach to this, delivering a curriculum with a predominant emphasis on measurable scores. However, if our epistemology contends that knowledge construction is experiential (McNiff, 2013), our methodology and teaching practices will reflect this. While positivist-leaning research – and indeed most cultures - would contend that knowledge is characterised by scientific proofs, action research seeks to interrogate traditional definitions, its derivatives and constructions (McAteer, 2013).

Ontology

Action research also calls on the researcher to reflect on their ontology (McNiff, 2013). This refers to the study of our being and affects how we view our roles in relationships and in the wider world –'embodied values, which we make external and explicit through our practices and theories' (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006 p.86). In order to establish values, it is necessary to unearth and subsequently scrutinise them - a term Habermas named 'moral communication and value communication' (Veugelers & Vedder, 2003; 381).

3.6 Rigour and Validity within Self-Study Action Research

So, the question begs, how do I ensure that my self-study action research is of a good quality? Many branches of research contend that validity corresponds to replication and generalisation. However, action research does not align with such hypotheses (Sullivan et al, 2016). Instead, it posits that authenticity and trustworthiness can be used as standards of validity, citing Habermas' (1976 in Sullivan et al, 2016) social validity. This theory proposes that reliability and credibility can be constructed through truthful, authentic discourse with groups such as colleagues, critical friends and validation groups.

Relatedly, I worked closely with my co-teacher, who assumed the role of 'Critical Friend'. This term was originally coined by Stenhouse (1975 in McNiff, 2013) who posited that a 'Critical Friend' may offer impartial advice and critique to the researcher. Furthermore, McNiff (2013) and Brookfield (2017) maintain that this critical evaluation is central to quality research. In order to capitalise on this endeavour, I was fastidious in following the recommendations of Feldman et al (2018) by meeting with my Critical Friend in the preliminary stages of research to discuss the research and ideas.

As the research progressed, my Critical Friend observed me teaching once per week and gave feedback following each observation. This relationship was a source of immeasurable support and provided me with a canvas onto which I could test ideas and experiment with social validity. This same model was also adopted through the use of a validation group, comprising three peers who came together to discuss one another's work and offer support and critical feedback (McNiff, 2013). Action research also contends that validity can be further bolstered by making studies accessible and public, where they lie open to critique (Sullivan et al, 2016). To fulfil this, I presented my study and its findings to my colleagues and to an audience of peers and academics at Maynooth University.

3.7 Model of Action Research

Whilst undertaking my research, I subscribed to McNiff's (2013) 4 phase model of action research. A number of models of action research exist, however I found this to be the most accessible. In order to guide the planning, implementation and reflection on the process, as identified in Figure 3.1:

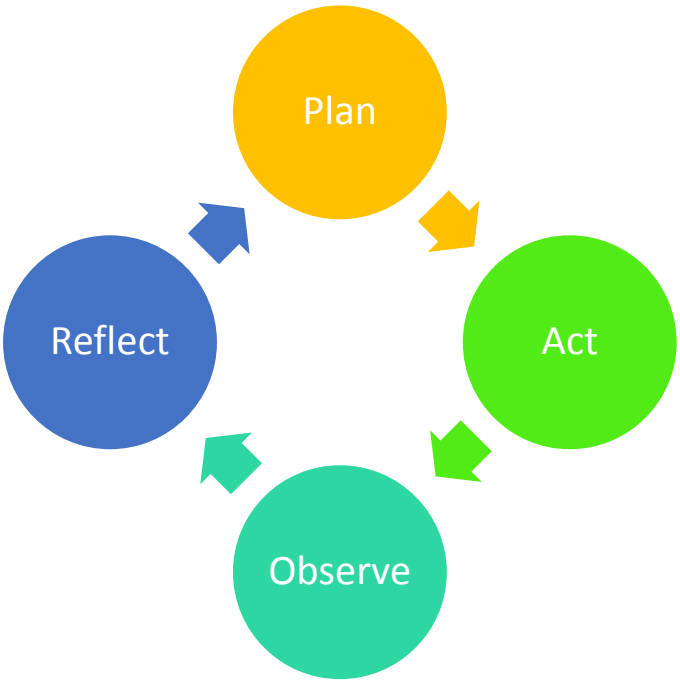


Figure 3.1 Adapted from McNiff (2013)

3.8 Methodological Choice

Bryman (2012) defines a methodological choice as the use of either qualitative or quantitative or indeed, a marriage of both, known as mixed methods. Qualitative methods are predominantly concerned with non-numerical data and methods, while its counterpart, quantitative research is largely associated with the generation of numerical data (Bryman, 2012). A mixed methods approach was adopted for the purposes of this study. As exulted by Bryman (2012), this has become a progressively more used and accepted form of conducting social research of late. Furthermore Sullivan et al (2016) detail that many forms of data are valuable when conducting action research, so the amalgamation of both was entirely appropriate for this study.

The use of qualitative research was informed by the exploratory nature of this study and the anticipation that some instances of empathy may be nuanced and unquantifiable by

numerical data (Saunders, 2009). For instance, tracking my thinking through my reflective journal, observing students and acknowledging their views provided me with rich evidence of improvements and changes in my practice that more scientific analysis would almost certainly have neglected.

Sullivan et al (2016) acknowledge that quantitative data is fruitful for the purposes of assessing the effectiveness of interventions and can imply evidence of change or indeed, a lack of change. Regarding this, quantitative data analysis allowed me to analyse responses to questionnaires relating to the efficacy of particular interventions at enhancing empathy.

3.10 Data Collection

The data collection tools employed by this study comprised of observation, reflective journal entries, questionnaires and my own, novel collection tool – *Stand in My Shoes.* I varied the research instruments used over the course of the 6 weeks, as shown in *Table 3.1:*

Week 1	**Week 2**	**Week 3**	**Week 4**	**Week 5**	**Week 6**
Unstructured Observation	Unstructured & Structured Observation	Unstructured & Structured Observation	Unstructured & Structured Observation	Unstructured & Structured Observation	Unstructured & Structured Observation
Reflective Journal	Reflective Journal	Reflective Journal	Reflective Journal	Reflective Journal	Reflective Journal
	Questionnaire		Questionnaire		Questionnaire
		Stand in My Shoes	*Stand in My Shoes*	*Stand in My Shoes*	*Stand in My Shoes*

Table 3.1 Research Instruments

- *Observation*

As a teacher, I rely heavily upon my skills of observation and find it to be an invaluable tool of assessment, frequently providing me with fruitful data. As such, it was my hope that I could use this skill for the purposes of this research too.

I used unstructured observations daily, and carried my notebook around with me to take notes. I was conscious to strengthen the validity and reliability of the observations used in this study. For instance, when performing unstructured observations, I heeded the advice of Cohen et al (2018) and made an earnest effort to ensure that I was consistently making clear distinctions between observations and intimations and collected a great number of observations in order to verify and bolster the data.

Similarly, by utilising a structured observation, drawn from the highly regarded Empathy Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents - *EmQue-CA* (Overgaauw et al, 2017, Appendix 6) I ensured that I was observing typologies of empathy. Holistically, the use of both structured and unstructured observation in tandem with one another was executed in earnest to mitigate the weaknesses of each and hence increase validity and reliability. I certainly found this to be the case; while the unstructured observations allowed me to take note of interesting phenomena, the structured ones guided me in ensuring these phenomena related to empathy.

I must concede, that at first I was overly ambitious with the structured observations, seeking to observe a large group at a time. However, this was extremely challenging and was affecting the quality of my observations, so I instead started to observe smaller groups per day. This yielded far more authentic and informative data.

Indeed, Bryman (2014) also posits that observation is perhaps best utilised in addition to other methods. This succinctly aligns with this study and its employment of a range of other tools too.

- *Reflective Journal*

Why I chose it

Reflective practice is such an integral aspect of action research – both reflection- in-action, and reflection-on-action (McNiff, 2013). As this particular research study employs action research as its methodology, it is therefore a necessity for me to use a reflective journal. However, my decision to employ this research instrument derives from more than an onus. As the purpose of this study is to improve a particular area of my own practice, my reflective journal illuminated to me whether or not I was successfully living in the direction of my values and allowed me to track the evolution of my thoughts and whether I was really improving my practice (Whitehead & McNiff, 2009). I wrote in my reflective journal daily through the medium of my laptop and I looked back on it weekly, in an effort to track my progress and address areas that required improvement. Vitally, my pseudonyms were employed and the document itself was secured by passcode.

Indeed, my relationship with my reflective journal was not always a positive one, and I often found myself a little disillusioned:

Today I am finding writing this difficult and questioning if it is futile. I sometimes wonder if I am journaling in a too anecdotal, cognitive way – not even scratching the surface of the transformative prowess Jenny Moon affirms that reflection can have (RD, 12/3/19)

Yet, with the support of Moon (2004) and Gibbs Reflective Model (1988, Figure 3.2) I was pushed from mere observation to a place that allowed me to reflect on the changes in my thoughts and practice – subsequently turning this into action.

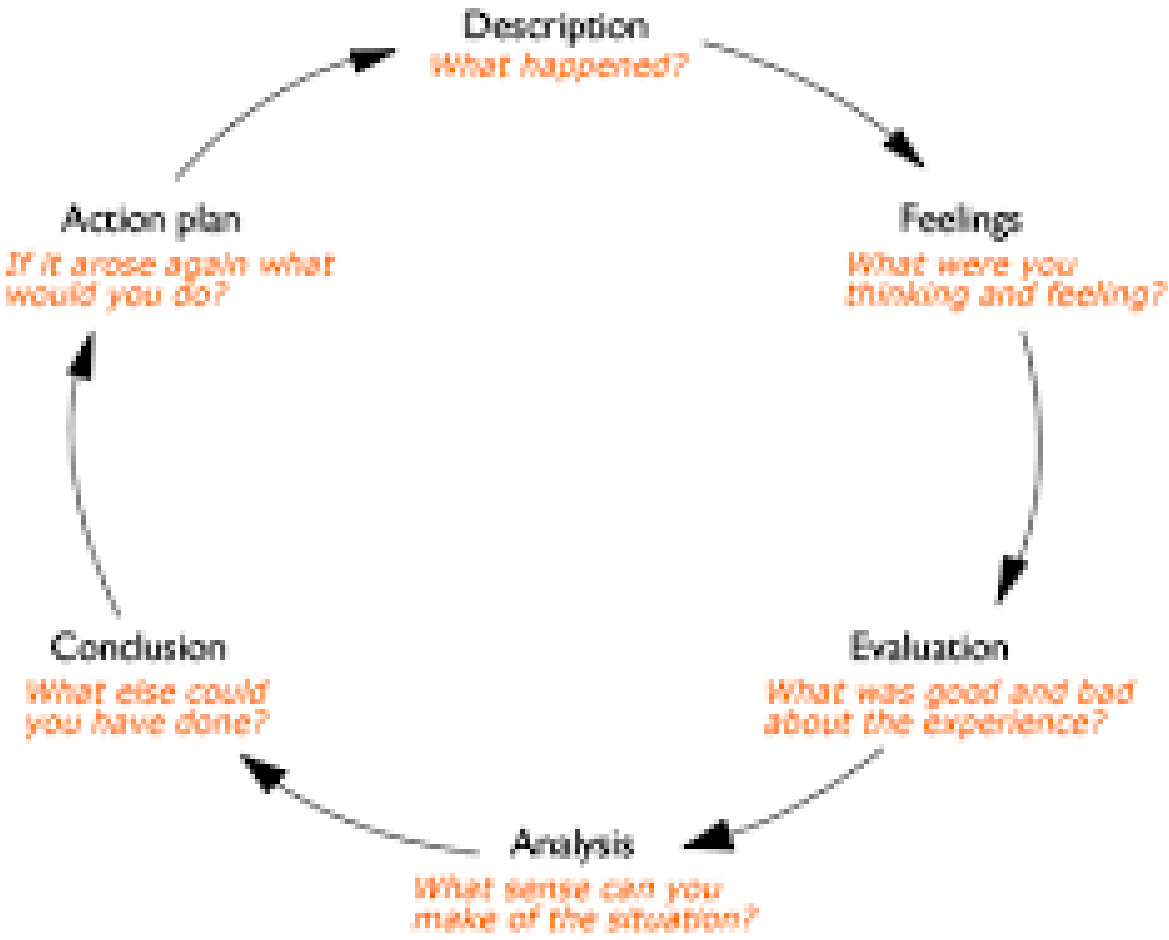


Figure 3.2 Gibb's Reflective Cycle

- *Questionnaires*

Self-completion, paper-based questionnaires were administered to the children following interventions (Appendix 6). The objective of this was for me to gather data relating to the efficacy of certain interventions at fostering empathy. Close-ended questions, based on the Empathy Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents - *EmQue-CA* (Overgauuw et al, 2017) (Appendix 6) formed the basis of the survey. I formed the questions in a clear and age-appropriate manner to ensure both reliability and validity. This is particularly salient considering the low age range of participants.

I piloted the questionnaire with a smaller group at first, in order to assess its accessibility and the children's understanding and responses to questions (Cohen et al, 2018). At first, there was slight ambiguity surrounding one of the questions – 'I never really shared the emotions of the characters' - because of its negative framing. I therefore elected to omit it. I also felt that the sentiment of the question was already covered by the other questions relating to affective empathy.

Acquiescence is another issue that researchers must be acutely aware of when administering and evaluating questionnaires. This phenomenon relates to participants failing to find the most authentic response to a question and instead selecting one that they believe will be most pleasing or satisfying – closely linking to the aforementioned issue of researcher-participant power (Cohen et. al, 2018). As this questionnaire is related to empathy – a characteristic that is considered so socially favourable - I had to be acutely aware of this anomaly of acquiescence as participants may wish to portray themselves in what they believe is an empathetic light and so their answers may not have been entirely accurate. In order to offset this, I reminded the children that the questionnaires were entirely anonymous.

- *Novel Data Collection Tool – 'Stand in my Shoes'*

I also established by own method of assessing cognitive empathy during the interventions. Following each intervention, I asked children to stand up. I then asked them to stand in the centre of the room if they could 'stand in a both shoes of the character' – meaning they could easily assume their perspective-, stand to the right of the classroom if they could 'stand in one shoe' – meaning they could take the character's perspective to a certain degree- and finally on the left hand side of the room if they 'could to stand in either of the character's shoes – illustrating that they failed to take their perspective at all, and thus that particular intervention had failed to arouse their cognitive empathy. This was a great way of easily gathering on whether an intervention had been successful or not.

3.9 Ethical Issues

As children were at the fulcrum, ensuring that this research was executed ethically was paramount. Whitehead and McNiff (2005) caution that ethics encompasses three main areas – negotiating access, the protection of participants and assuring good faith.

Negotiating Access

With regard to the former, ethical approval was obtained from the Froebel Department of Education at Maynooth University (Appendix 5). Following this, permission from the Board of Management and principal of my school was sought and granted. Finally, I explained the research to the participants, clarifying any questions that arose. In accordance with the advice of Christensen & James (2017), as children cannot freely participate in research without the permission of parents, forms of consent were distributed to parents for consideration and approval (Appendix 3). Additionally, letters of assent were written and, in keeping with Phelan

and Kinsella (2013), presented in a clear and age-appropriate manner for the children and read aloud to them prior to their distribution (Appendix 3).

Protection of Participants

This written consent was required to ensure that participants understood and were comfortable with the facets of the research and were aware of its confidentiality, anonymity and their right to withdraw at any stage. In keeping with best practice, I continued to remind the children of this right regularly throughout the course of the research (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013). I used pseudonyms for each child and all information was stored either in a locked cabinet or a password locked document on my laptop.

Assuring Good Faith

Furthermore, ensuring that I presented myself as a trustworthy practitioner with a high degree of personal integrity was central to the assurance of good faith. This was of utmost importance when one considers the unavoidable imbalance of power between me, a teacher, and my students. I want my influence to be educational, rather than coercive. Thus, in order to achieve this and achieve a more equitable model, I learned that action researchers must be reflexive, ethically reflective and be willing to critically examine their values (Sullivan et al, 2016).

3.12 Research Design

This research study involved 2 main cycles:

Cycle 1

The first stage of the research involved explaining the elements of the study to the children. It was paramount that the children absolutely understood the concept of empathy and were meta-cognitive of what the research was endeavouring to achieve (Hoffman, 2000). I gathered them and modelled examples of cognitive and affective empathy. They were then given role-plays to simulate both branches of the construct. Following this, they each created small art pieces that illustrated *'Empathy is…' (Figure 3.3).*

Figure 3.3 Children's Understanding of Empathy

After children were familiar with the concept, I began to implement the interventions I would use, as identified in *Figure 3.4* below:

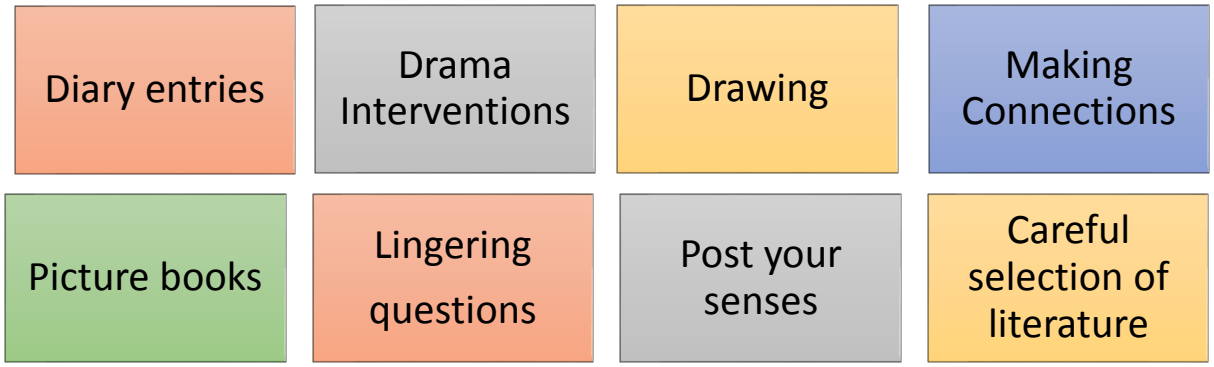


Figure 3.4 Interventions Used

I explained the learning objectives and how to achieve them so that they were sufficiently supported (Alexander et. al, 2001) (Figure 3.5):

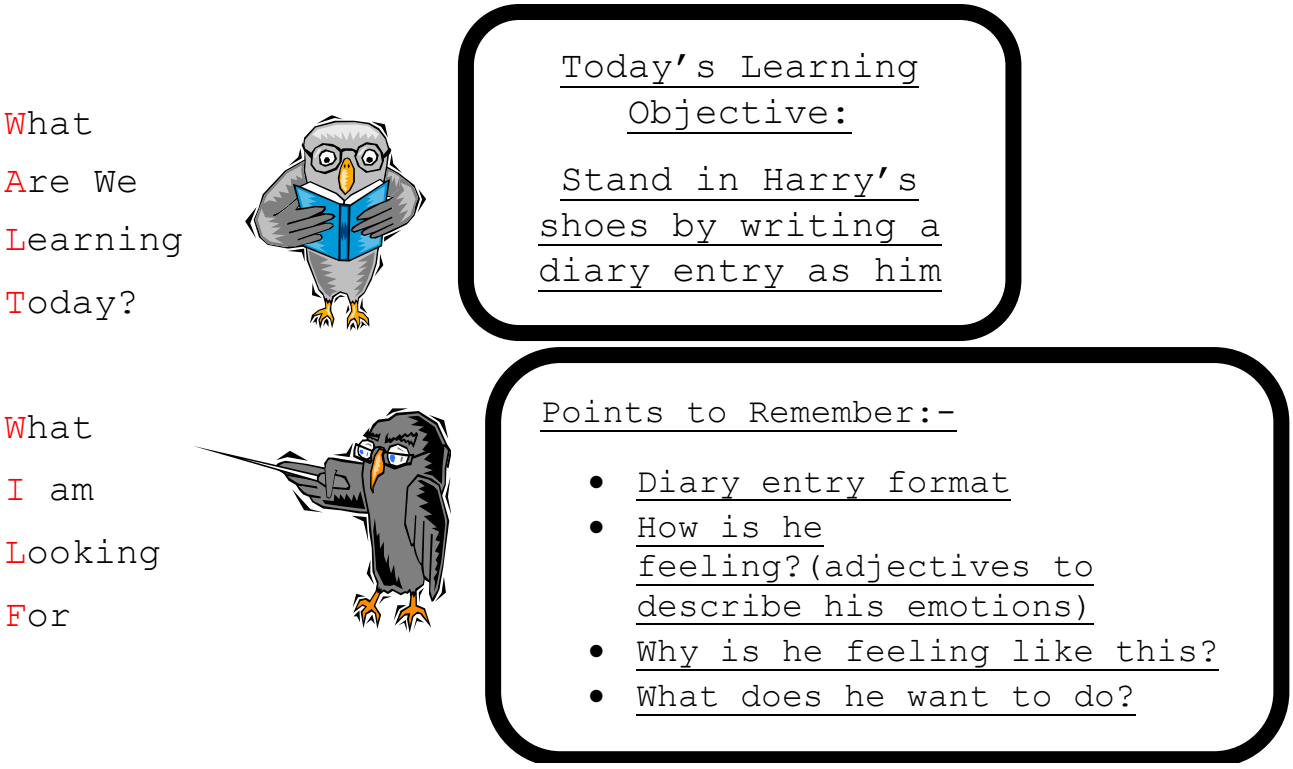


Figure 3.5 Learning Objectives

I used my structured observations to observe 7 randomised children per day as I found this the optimal number to ensure that I could give my full attention. Naturally, unstructured observations were significantly more impromptu and I instead gathered this data sporadically from observations from a range of children daily. Children also completed questionnaires at the close of every intervention (Appendix 6).

Analysis of Cycle 1:

Following this first cycle, I reflected on the data and noticed that results began to intimate a number of shortcomings. In order to redress this, I implemented a number of changes for cycle 2, as documented below in *Figure 3.6:*

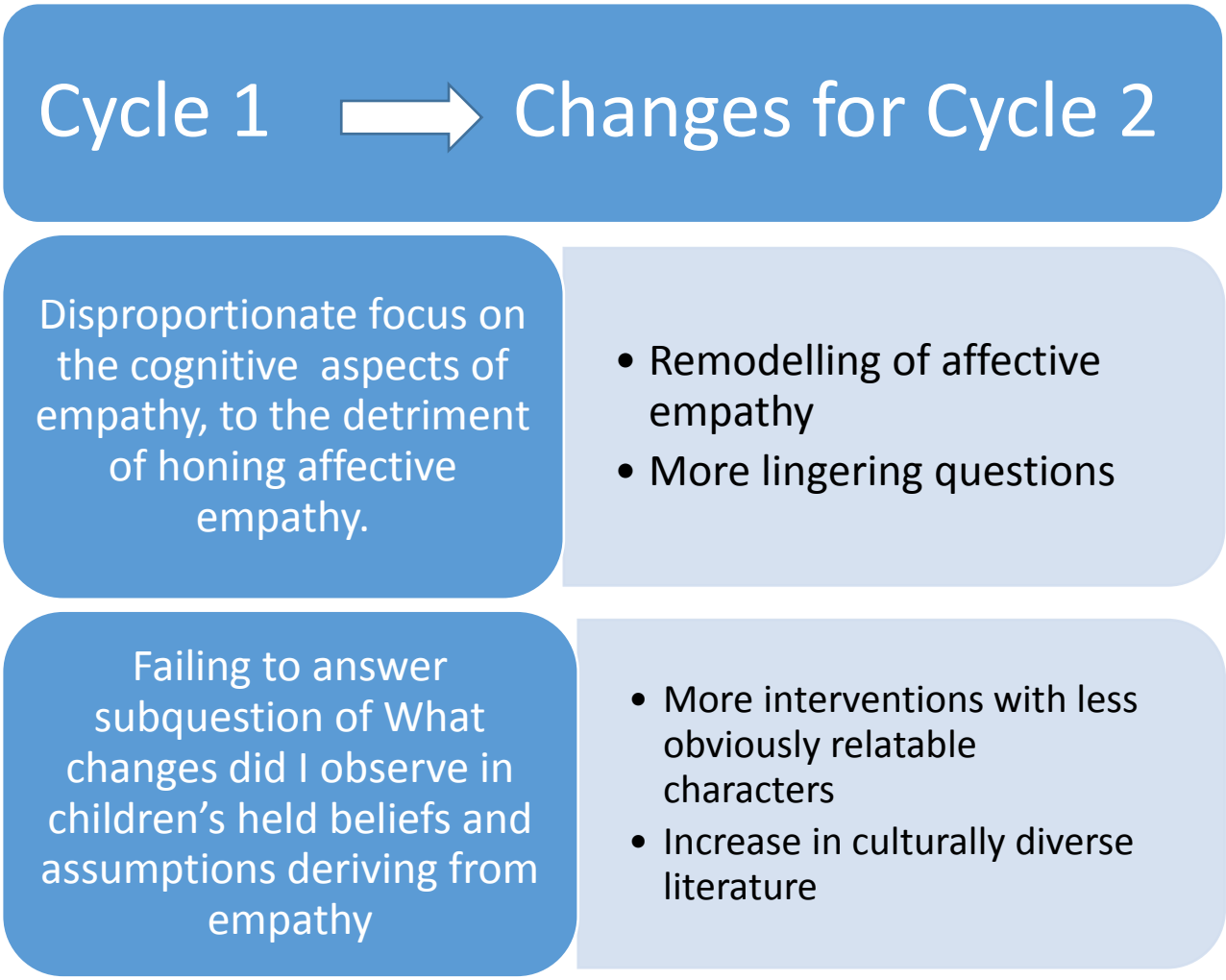


Figure 3.6 Changes Implemented for Cycle 2

During cycle 2, I gave an increased focus to culturally diverse literature in an effort to challenge the children's beliefs and assumptions (Simms-Bishop, 1990). I also used an increased number of lingering questions in order to tease out the children's views and assess whether they were changing (Rosenblatt, 1994). Furthermore, I also focussed diary entries and drama activities on more complex characters who did not immediately seem likeable to challenge beliefs and assumptions in the hopes of honing a greater sense of empathy.

Having felt that I was not transparent enough in my explanation of affective empathy and what it meant to feel *with* a character in Cycle 1, I again consulted with the literature and followed Harvey and Goudvvis' (2017) advise to deliberately model examples of it, like performing 'Think Alouds' for Cycle 2.

3.13 Thematic Analysis of Data

In May, after completing both research cycles I began to analyse qualitative data thematically, in accordance with Braun and Clark (2006). This method identifies, analyses and subsequently reports themes and patterns within the data. I chose it as it is considered a flexible method of analysis for the novice researcher, making it a suitable approach for my first experience with a research study. Furthermore, it is perfectly suited to small sets of data, as were gathered in this study (Braun and Clark, 2006).

I closely adhered to the six-step procedure developed by Braun and Clark (2006) (Figure 3.7) by at first generating 16 initial codes, which I subsequently collapsed into 3 main themes. This was at first challenging, as thematic analysis promotes that the significance of a theme is not always correlated to the quantity, but instead is linked to meaningful concepts.

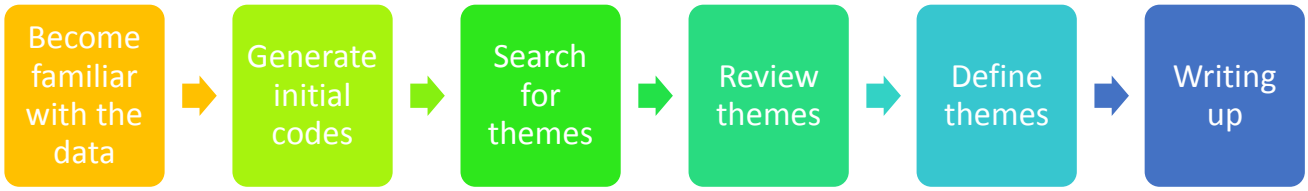


Figure 3.7 six stages of thematic analysis - adapted from Braun & Clark, 2006

3.14 Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data from questionnaires was analysed by means of exploratory data analysis. This process involves the use of visual methods of data analysis (Cohen et al, 2018). For instance, I used tally charts to analyse the frequency of answers and subsequently represented these quantitative findings on bar charts and bar line graphs, as will be illustrated in the *Findings* chapter.

3.15 Limitations

With retrospect, I would address the time scale of this research study. Despite managing to engage in cyclical action research, the limited time frame affected a number of areas. For instance, it meant that I was a confined to a limited number of books. This was particularly pertinent with regard to diverse literature as I could not heed the calls of Boyd and Causey (2012) to sufficiently enhance the children's empathy for cohorts with physical and mental disabilities, nor challenge gender roles as this limited time meant that I was forced to focus on one group, in this case that of refugees.

Additionally, I do not feel that I had ample opportunity to meet with my critical friend and validation groups. I felt that our meetings were only really beginning to come to fruition and additional time would have embedded them into a weekly routine. That said, I must remember that there are limitations to what can be expected of professionals who are already consumed by the demands of a classroom.

3.16 Conclusion

The contextual, action research study design was considered the most appropriate paradigm and approach in exploring the research question relating to how I can foster empathy through literature. Its reliability and validity was explicated through Habermas' Social Validity (1976 in Sullivan et al, 2016). In order to evaluate my practice, I employed observation, questionnaires and a reflective diary as my data collection instruments and I also explicated my experiences with them. The next chapter will depict the findings garnered from embarking upon this study.

Findings and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter serves to detail the findings that have been garnered from the data and the subsequent rigorous analysis of this data. The prime endeavour of this study seeks to understand how I can enhance children's empathy through the implementation of a fictional literature programme. This main research question is subsumed by 3 sub-questions:

1. What characteristics of empathy can I foster in the children?
2. Which strategies are most effective at enhancing empathy?
3. What changes did I observe in children's held beliefs and assumptions deriving from empathy?

This chapter will now detail the findings through the three themes that arose from the analysis of data; **characteristics of empathy, effective interventions** and **changes in beliefs deriving from empathy.**

4.2 Theme 1: Characteristics of Empathy

Through analysis of the data collected, aspects of both cognitive and affective empathy were identified in the children, as illustrated in *Figure 4.1:*

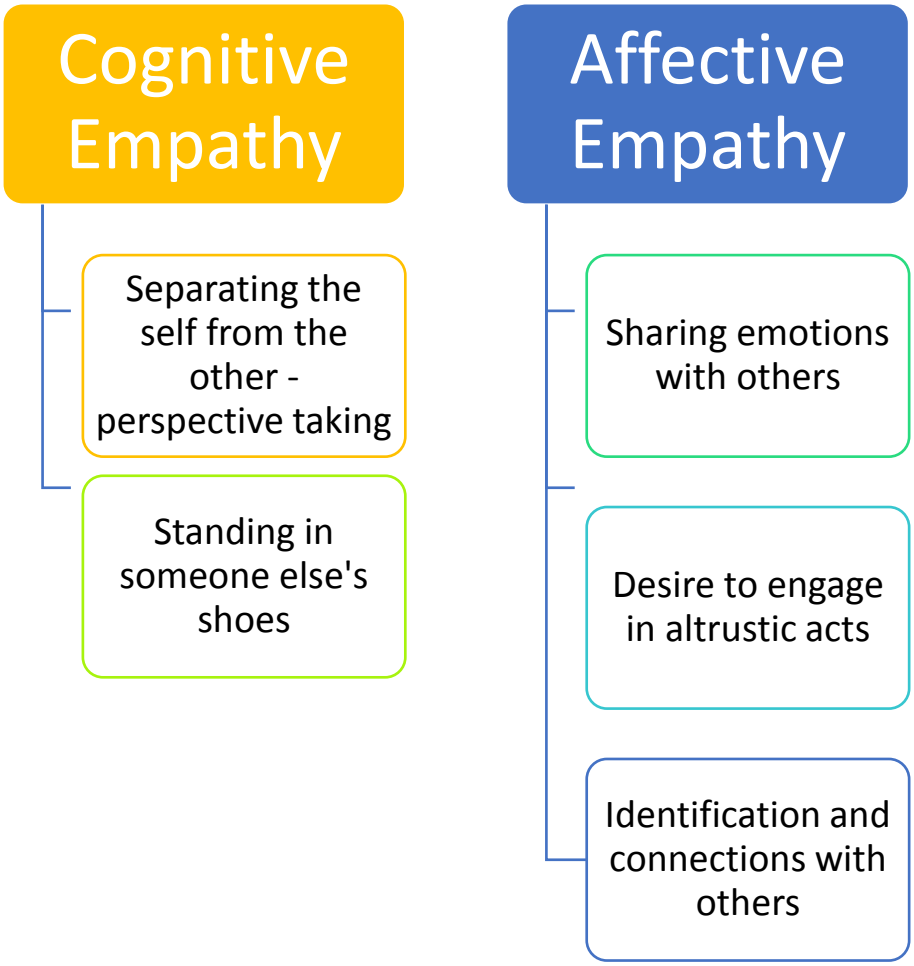


Figure 4.1 Characteristics of cognitive and affective empathy identified

These will now be explicated in the first part of this chapter.

➢ Cognitive empathy

1. Separating the self from the other – Perspective Taking

Instances of cognitive empathy were found throughout the data. Decety and Jackson (2004) explain that cognitive empathy involves the ability to separate the self from the other and is realised when single-mindedness is suspended in favour of a double-mindedness, wherein we think beyond ourselves. Indeed, from my own vantage point, data from questionnaires indicate high levels of cognitive empathy across the majority of children as shown in Figure 4.2:

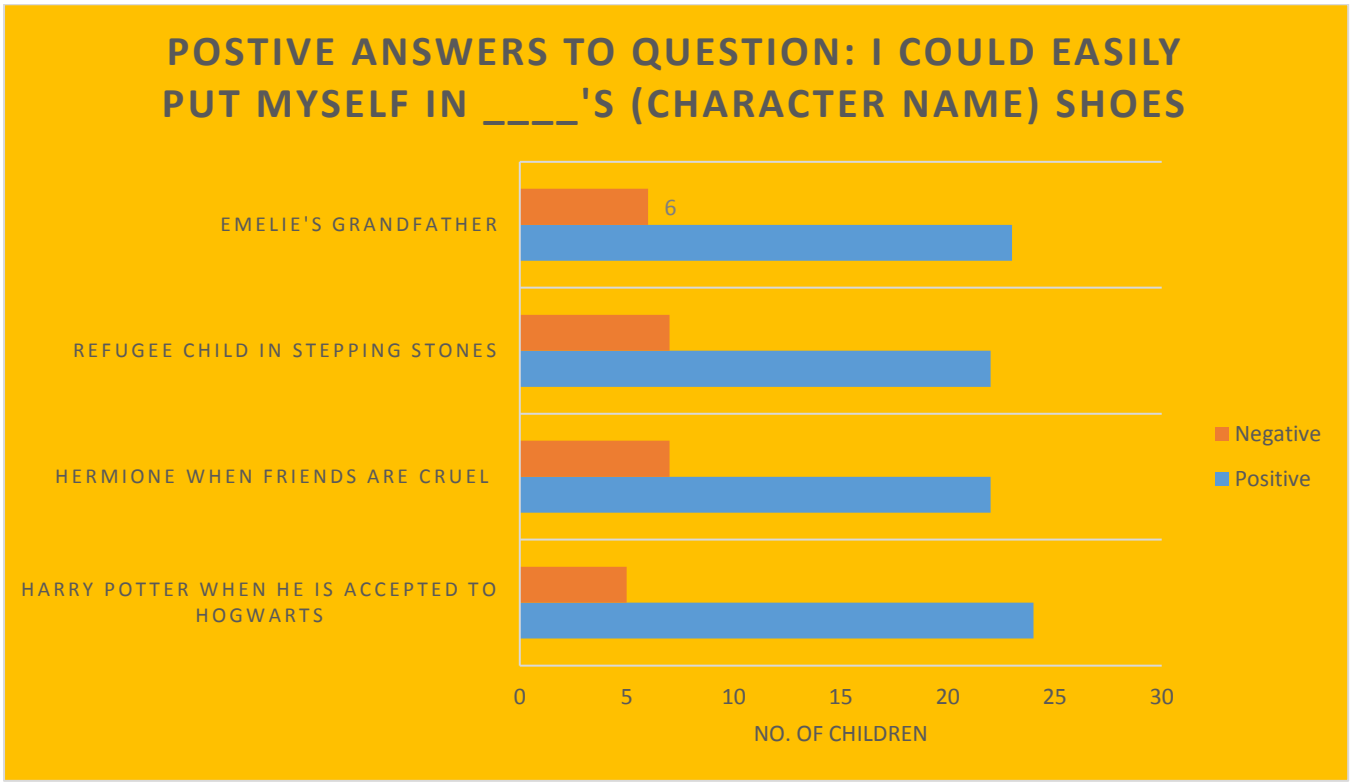


Figure 4.2 Indicator of Cognitive Empathy

Moreover, my reflective journal is punctuated by instances of children assuming this state of double mindedness, becoming so utterly engrossed by a character and their world that they really stood in their shoes. I also noticed that the perspectives the children were taking

were true to character and in congruence with the authors' portrayals. Naturally, such authenticity is of utmost importance, especially with an awareness of the caveat by Harvey and Goudvis (2017), who caution that children may often be so enthusiastic about assuming another character that they falsely attribute capacities to them.

During hot seating, most of the children really stepped into Hermione's shoes and answered the questions in the sensible way she would have and that showed perspective (RD 2, 29/01/2019)

Additionally, excerpts from one particular intervention to hone cognitive empathy, wherein children were asked to write what particular characters from *Harry Potter* would see if they looked into the *Mirror of Erise* - a mirror that allows one to see their deepest wishes - further illuminated this accurate double-minded perspective taking and the ability to separate the self from another.

For instance, for Hermione, ***a character who is demonstrably academic and learned***, children answered:

> *'I see myself holding the 'Best Hogwarts Student' trophy' (Joseph)*
> *'I see myself with a big library of books' (Lizzy)*

Indeed, for Neville, a ***character renowned for his apparent cowardice and faintheartedness who wishes to be brave:***

> *'I see me on my broomstick and landing the best landing ever' (Aisling)*
> *'I am heroic and bravely standing up to Malfoy' (Clodagh)*

Furthermore, for Hagrid, a ***character who was expelled from Hogwarts as a boy and who keeps strange creatures***:

> *'In front of me is a big red dragon' (John)*
> *'I see me being a student of Hogwarts again' (Claire)*

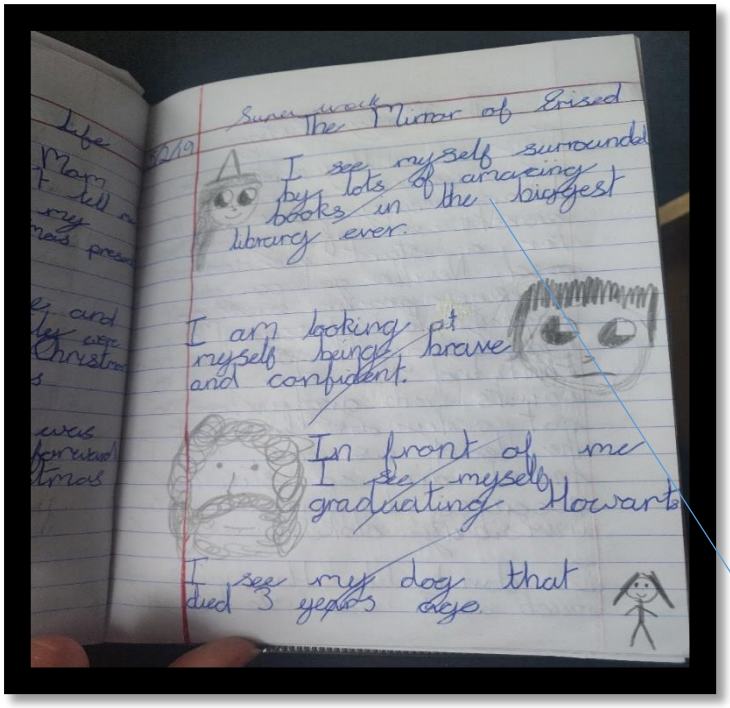


Figure 4.3: Diary Entry 1

I see myself surrounded by lots of amazing books

Perspective taking (cognitive empathy) is in congruence with the personality of the character

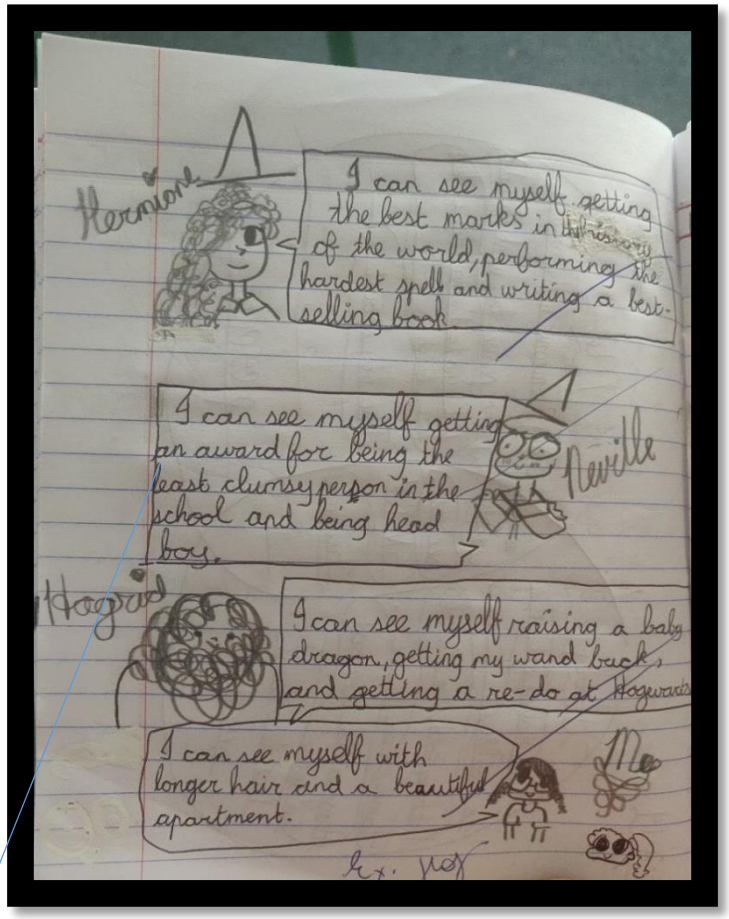


Figure 4.4: Diary Entry 2

I see myself being the clumsiest and being head boy

Again, showing accurate perspective taking.

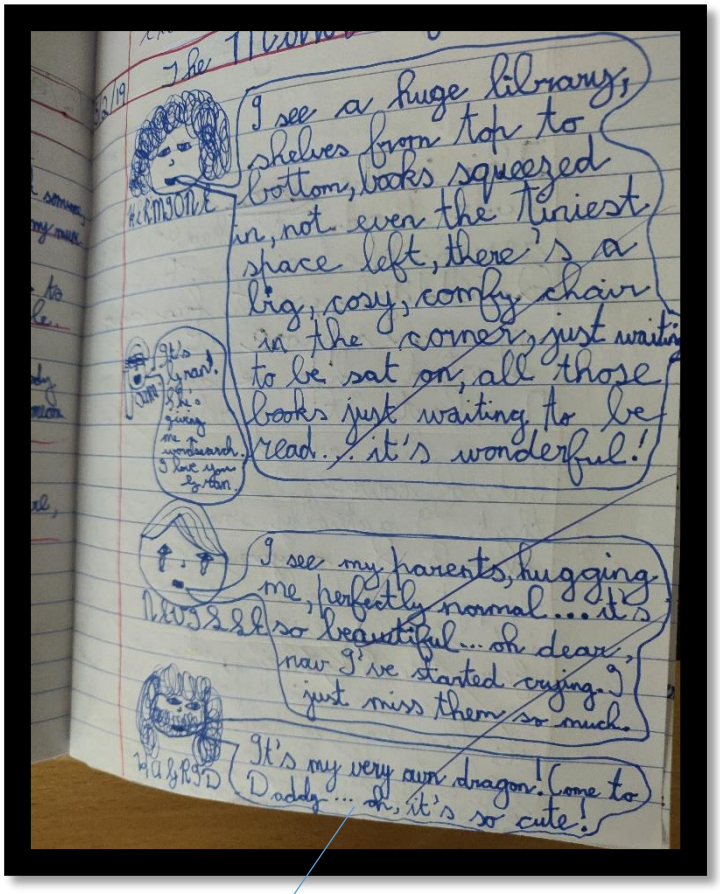


Figure 4.5 Diary Entry 3

It's my very own dragon! Come to Daddy!

Demonstrating the double-mindedness deemed a major component of empathy (Baron-Cohen, 2011)

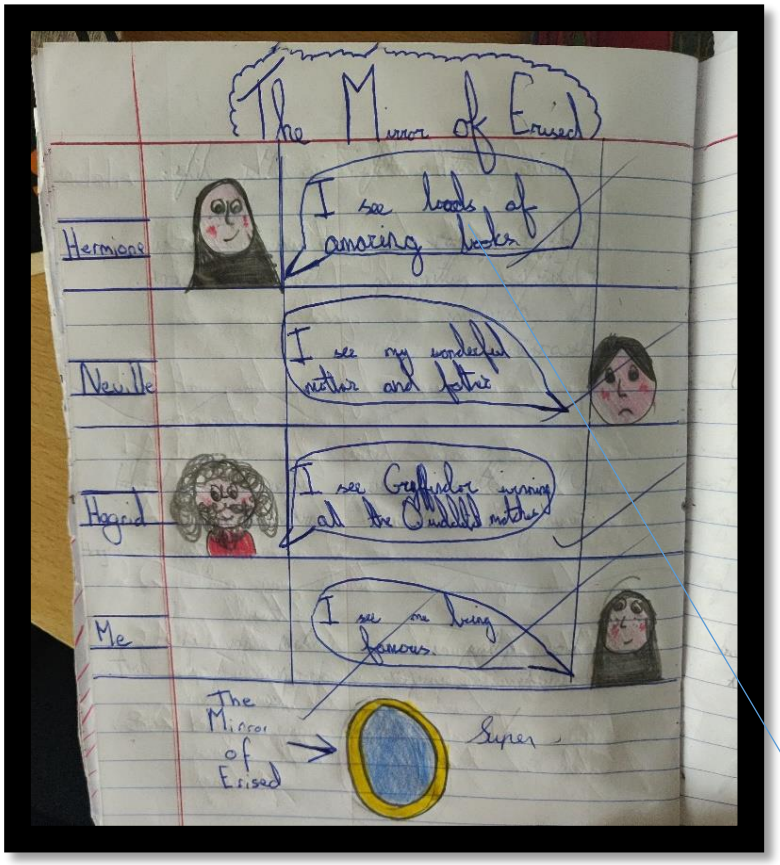


Figure 4.6 Diary Entry 4

I see loads of amazing books

Hermione is a character who loves books – again accurate perspective taking

Similarly, when engaging with the story, *The Selfish Giant*, a tale of a cantankerous giant, the children took the giant's perspective and demonstrated an understanding of why he did not want children in his garden. They gave answers like:

'Maybe he didn't want company' (Matthew)

'He thought the children would trample his garden' (Stephen)

'It was his property' (Shauna)

'He wanted to be alone' (Rebecca)

The children show real perspective taking here, with their cognitive empathy actually even metamorphosing to a deeper level, wherein they feel the urge to almost defend the giant, a character whom they likely feel is misunderstood. Interestingly, while the giant is indeed a character with whom the children have little in common, offering few parallels to their own lives, the majority of children's responses illustrated an ability to take his perspective. This serves as a small, yet interesting rebuff to Bloom's (2017) contention that empathy circulates a bias within us where we only feel for coequals and those with whom we share parallels.

Moreover, data gathering questionnaires given at the close of many interventions (Appendix 6) further attest to the ability of the majority of children to assume the viewpoint of others. For instance, it became evident that the majority of children could take the perspectives of Harry Potter, when he discovers he has been accepted to Hogwarts and understand why Emilie in *War Horse* reacted the way she did when her horse was taken away from her, as is evident from Figure 4.3 below:

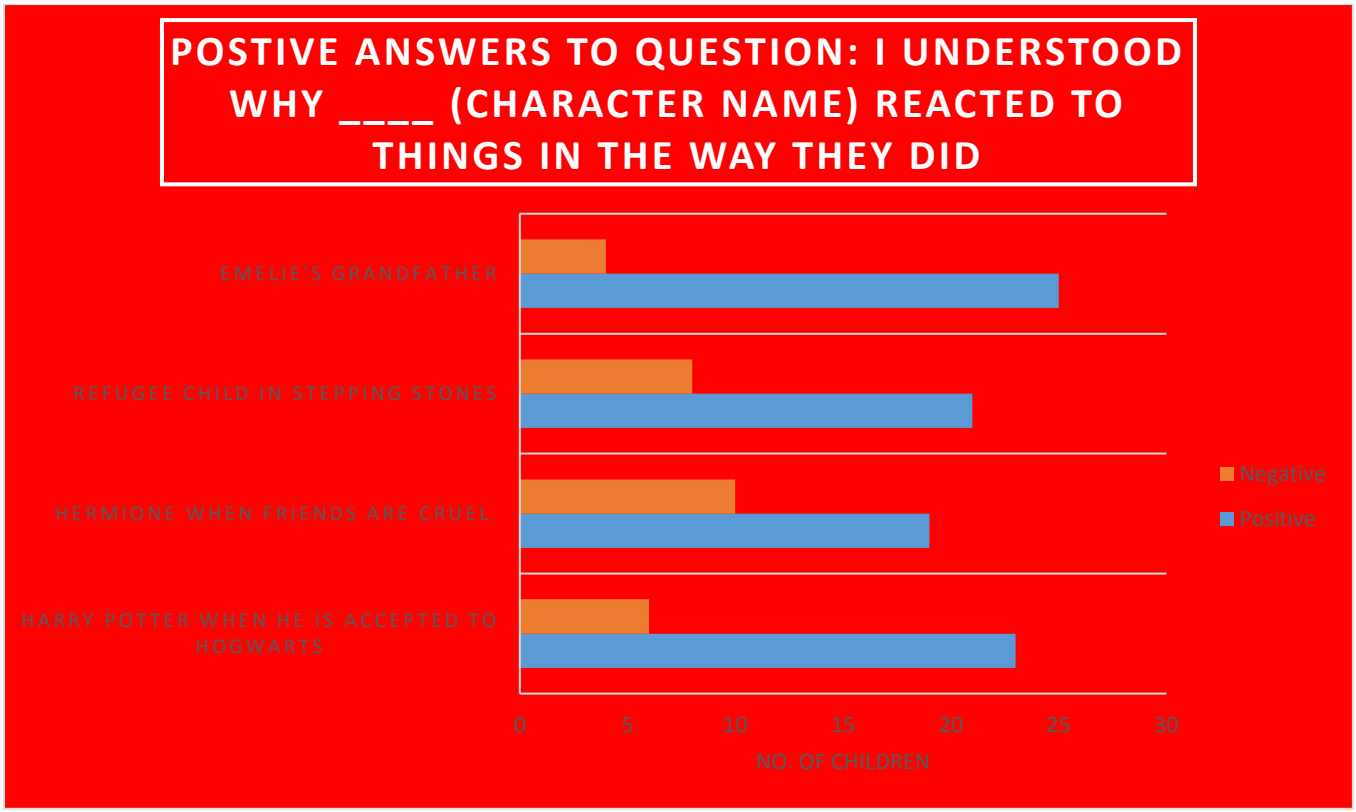


Figure 4.7 Questionnaire Response: I understood why ___ reacted as they did

This is in keeping with research to suggest that at around the age of the children, they usually understand how a person's feelings are dictated by recent events (Gnepp & Gould, 1985).

2. Standing in Someone Else's Shoes

Interestingly, the statement from the questionnaire, 'I could easily put myself in the main character's shoes' was the one to which children most positively responded (Figure 4.4). This was likely as a result of the creation and subsequent establishment of my own methodology wherein at certain points in books and stories, I would stop the children and ask them if they could '**stand in the character's 2 shoe**s' – meaning they really understood their thoughts, feeling and motivations, '**stand in 1 shoe'** – indicating a partial understanding of the

character's perspective and **finally, 'no shoes' –** serving to mean that the child was unable to take a character's perspective at all. This methodology really crystallised perspective taking.

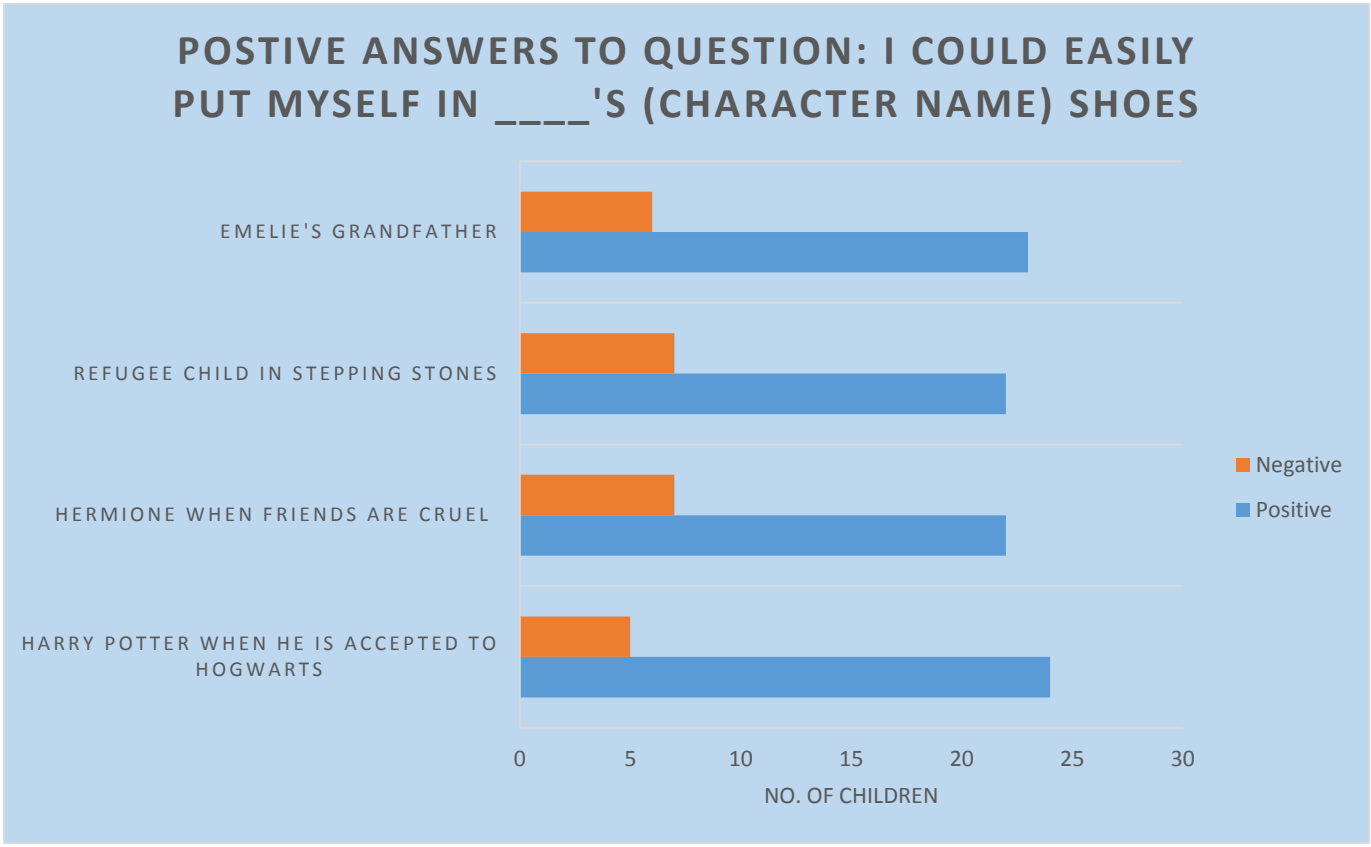


Figure 4.8 Questionnaire Response: I could easily stand in ___'s shoes

Importantly, I was keen to establish whether or not my initial interpretations were echoed from the outside. Supportively, the positive results garnered from both me and the children were further bolstered by observations from my Critical Friend. In one particular lesson, he observed that the children were even assuming the perspective of anthromorphic creatures, namely the bird from the Oscar Wilde story, *The Happy Prince*. This is in keeping with Keen (2007) who affirms that children can extend their capacity for empathy to non-human creatures. In notes written after such a visit, he wrote:

‘*The children were discussing how the swallow must have felt lonely at first when his friends migrated to Africa but he was happy when a found a friend in the Happy Prince. They even had a heated discussion over the gait of the swallow -NO, he wouldn’t walk like that. He would move like this.’ (Notes from Critical Friend, 06/03/19)*

Affective Empathy

1. Sharing Emotions and Connecting with Characters

Sharing the emotional states of others and feeling with them is a major component of affective empathy (Liddle, 2015). In fact, it has been identified as a major stimulant to empathy induced altruism which is linked to a variety of prosocial behaviours, like compassion and kindness (Alam et. al, 2018). As these empathetic behaviours are such strong components of my values, it was heartening to see them so evident in the children.

Firstly, data garnered from questionnaires after interventions showed that the majority of children attested that they could feel the emotions a particular character felt, demonstrating a kind of emotional contagion – a pillar of affective empathy (Figure 4.9):

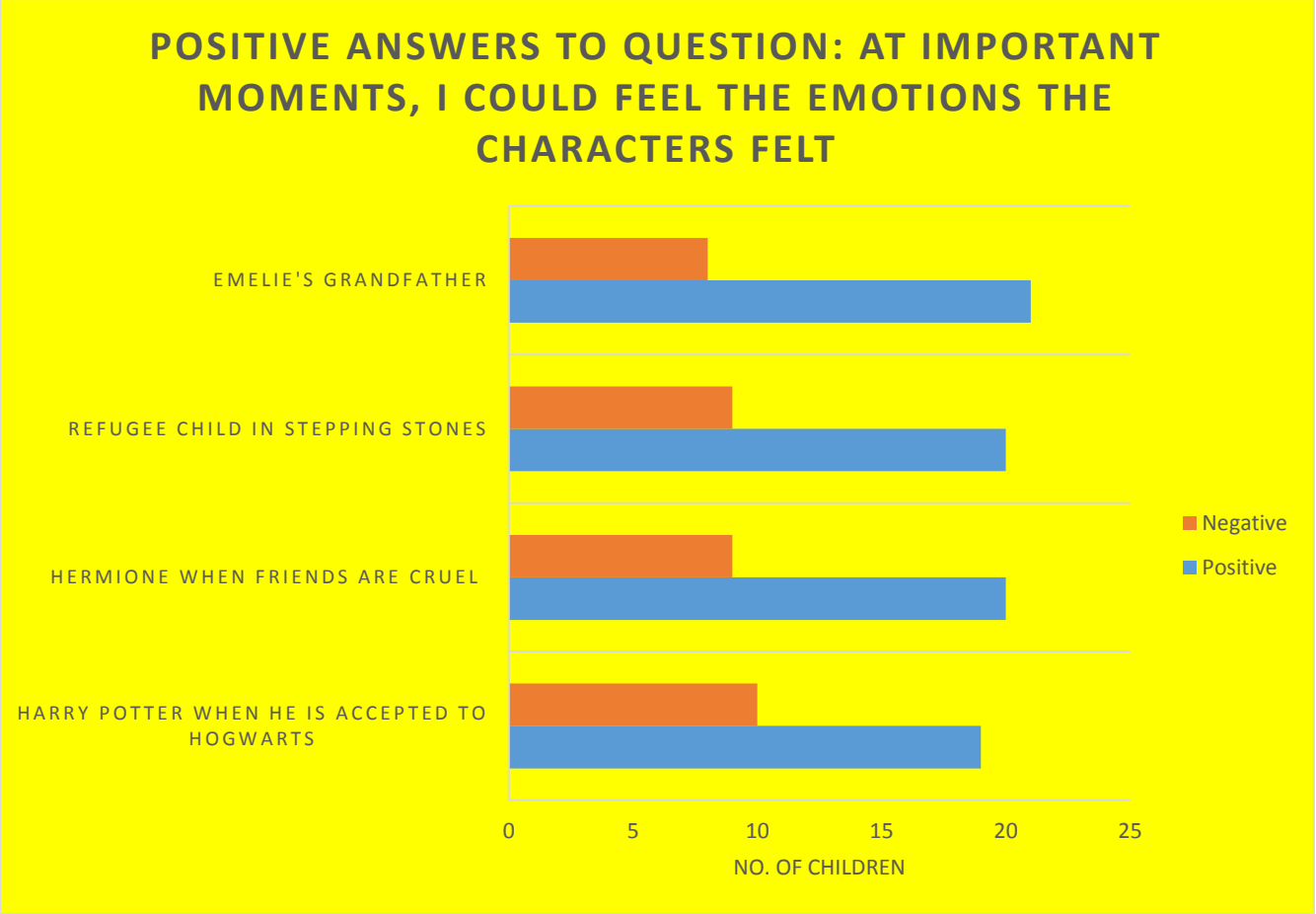


Figure 4.9 Questionnaire Response: I could feel the emotions of characters

Similarly, the majority of children agreed that when a character succeeded, they felt happy and when they suffered in some manner, they felt sad (Figure 4.10):

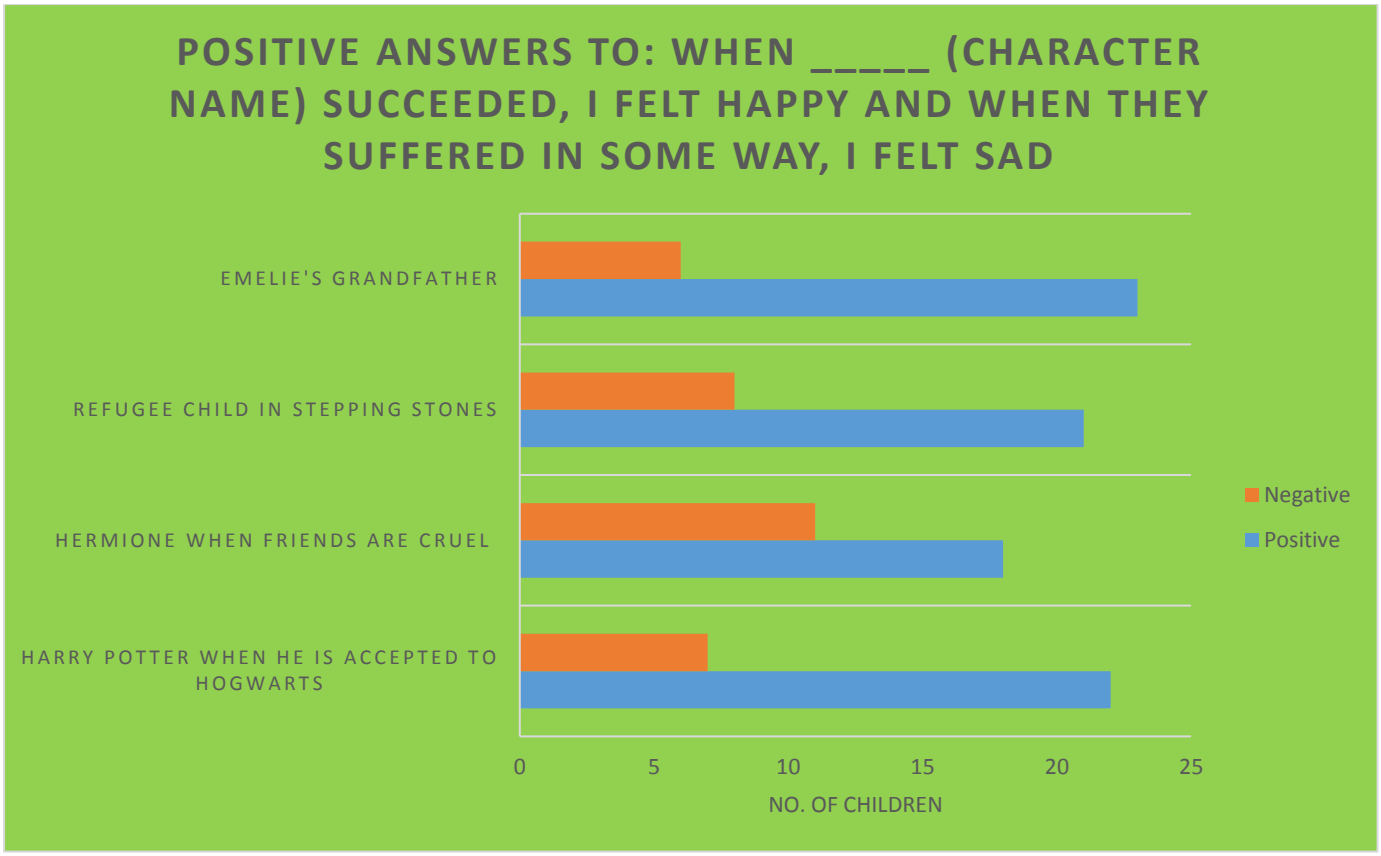


Figure 4.10 Questionnaire Response: Feeling with a Character

This finding closely corresponds with field notes, in which I noticed many of the children 'rooting' for characters who were experiencing struggle and turmoil*:*

> *'I want Harry to move out of the Dursleys' so he can be happier' Rachel*
>
> *'I prefer if Joey goes back to live with Albert because he'd be the happiest there' John*

Indeed, in one particular case, I could feel a palpable sense of sadness and anguish in the room as the children shared the feelings of Joey from *War Horse* upon the death of his friend:

> *'The children and I had a discussion about how sad Joey must have felt when Topthorn died. However, it moved away from them just putting themselves in Joey's shoes to many of them stating how sad they felt for Joey at the loss of his friend. I felt a definite air of sadness in the classroom following the reading of this chapter. The children moved from the cognitive to the affective totally autonomously' (RD 3, 05/03/2019).*

This is echoic of Maiborn (2017) who details that affective empathy is the sharing of emotions and feelings with another. Thus, by the children feeling sad *with* and *for* Joey at the loss of his friend, they are exercising their skills of affective empathy.

Additionally, Maiborn (2017) and Decety and Jackson (2004) illustrate that the desire to unconsciously respond to situations with an appropriate emotion is another paramount feature of affective empathy. Relatedly, this type of response was patent during one particular intervention. After reading the picture book *Arrival*, about a child the same age as the children who must flee their home country and become a refugee, I asked the children:

1. **How they felt for the character?**
2. **What would they do to help him?**

Again, it moved away from the children solely stating how the character must feel but instead graduated to the affective, wherein the plight of the character appeared to trigger their own emotions and galvanise the desire to act on these feelings:

'I feel sad for him and his family' (Kate)
'I would ask the government to help his family' (Laura)
'I feel worried for him and wish I could give him a new house' (Conor)

1 The Desire to Engage in Altruistic Acts

Undoubtedly, this corresponds with studies that show empathy to be a large predictor of altruistic behaviours (Bethleham et al, 2016). It is important to acknowledge that while such

a scenario was entirely hypothetical, it is perhaps an adage to Greene's (1980, 1995) Pedagogy of Social Imagination, which substantiates that an encounter with a piece of literature can illuminate alternative realities and catalyse the prosocial behaviours related to empathy, such as compassion and kindness, and ultimately lead to the creation of a better and more just society. In short, perhaps the unreality of this story can transpose to the real world wherein the empathy the children feel can be directed towards altruistic acts for marginalised and displaced groups in society.

However, I observed one child in particular, Sally, did not find it easy to share the emotions with characters and failed to experience the almost ubiquitous emotional contagion felt by her peers, saying *'I wasn't sad for him (Emilie's Grandfather) when the horses left because I wasn't really attached to him.*' Indeed, while this is naturally in opposition to what I would idealise, it serves to remind me of two facets. The first is that, as exulted by Hoffman (2000), the development of empathy varies from child to child and does not follow the specific milestones that characterise other faculties. The second, bolstered by Alexander, Miller and Hengst (2001) is that some children may require further exposure to characters who have parallels with their own lives before progressing to those more abstract.

3 Identifying and Connecting with Others

Additionally, the majority of children were also eager to connect characters' lives and emotions to their own. This desire to identify with others is another established facet of affective empathy and is usually present from the beginning of life, where children possess the facility to connect the feelings of others with their own (Liddle, 2015). Subsequently, when we feel that someone is like us, we are more likely to feel empathy towards them and want to act more charitably towards them (Hoffman, 2000).

Furthermore when reading *Stepping Stones*, depicting the journey of a refugee child similar in age to the children, musings from my Reflective Journal succinctly elucidate a desire for connectivity and affinity:

> *Today I noticed that everything the children shared/connected with were all to do with feelings, with only a few citing experiences. I analyse this as they went one step further – in their head the connection was first related to an experience they had had and they then went beyond the descriptions of this to the deeper levels – their feelings and emotions (RD 4, 23/01/2019).*

Moreover, this feeling of connectedness was also evident in discussions with the children around the main character in *Stepping Stones:*

'I was really sad when we had to move house before so I understand a bit how he feels' (Laura)

'He likes playing games and drinking tea, just like me' Clodagh

In these instances, the children connected their lives to that of the character.

4.2 Theme 2: Effective Interventions

While the previous theme dissected the elements of empathy evident in the children, this one endeavours to illustrate how their ubiquity was catalysed. Through the analysis of data, a number of interventions were found to best foster empathy - Drama, Making Connections, Lingering Questions, Post your Senses and Diary entries (Figure 4.7) – with the choice of literature paramount in each:

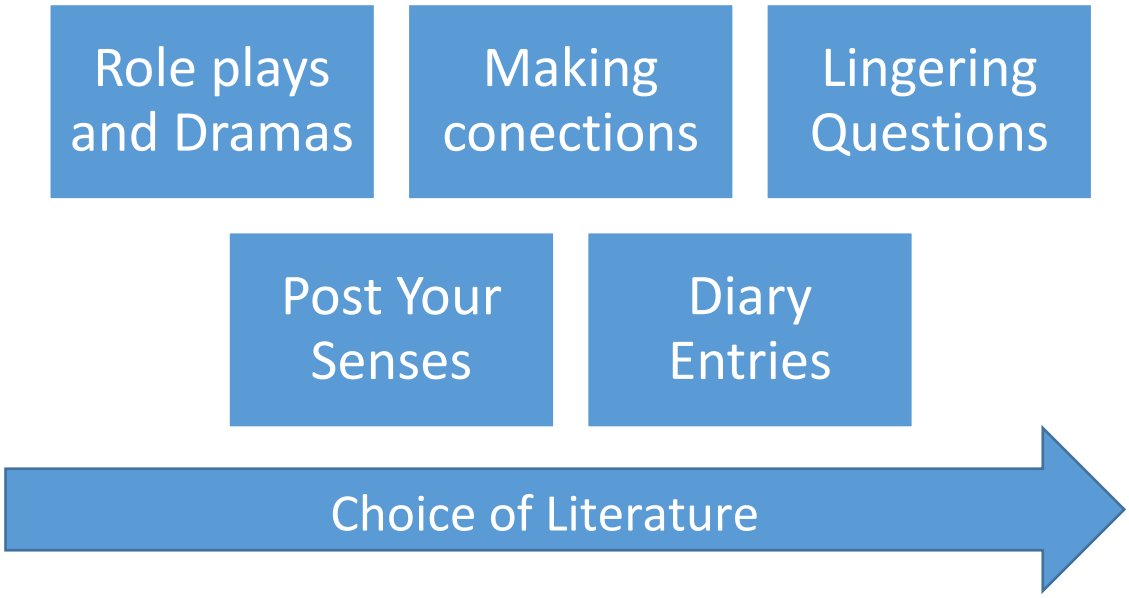


Figure 4.11 Most effective interventions

Indeed, as each intervention was unique and of itself, so too were the aspects of empathy that each fostered.

Intervention 1: Drama

Hurley et al (2014) testify that drama activities centred on a piece of literature can pay dividends in terms of fostering empathy. Such a hypothesis finds deep resonance in the findings of this study, where role-play, conscience alleys and hot seating were highly successful.

a. Role-play activities

Results garnered from questionnaires completed after ***role-play activities*** identify that the majority of children found that they could easily take the character's perspective, attesting that they could stand in their shoes- thus indicting a kindling of cognitive empathy, as depicted in *Figure 4.12:*

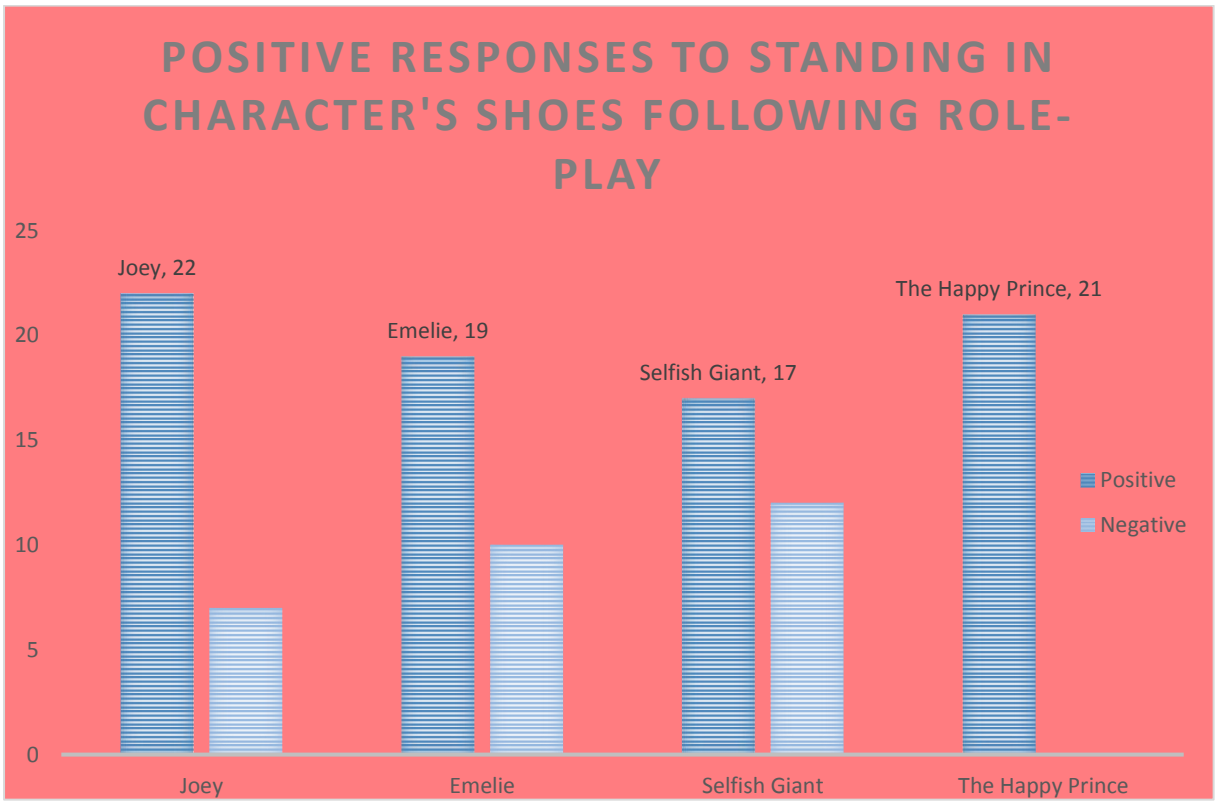


Figure 4.12 Questionnaire response: standing in a character's shoes

Musings from my *Critical Friend* also echo the feelings of the children, pointing to the arousal of high levels of perspective taking:

> *'I observed that all of the children really took on a new character and stood in their shoes. They were really enjoying themselves and that was clear to see' (03/02/2019).*

b. Thought Tunnels (*Conscience Alleys*)

Another drama intervention that encountered success were ***Thought Tunnels*, often called *Conscience Alleys*.** Again, the theme of taking the perspective of another helping to catalyse a greater understanding of someone's thoughts, beliefs and motivations came to the fore through the analysis of questionnaires, with the majority of children confirming that they could understand why characters reacted to things in the way they did (Figure 4.13):

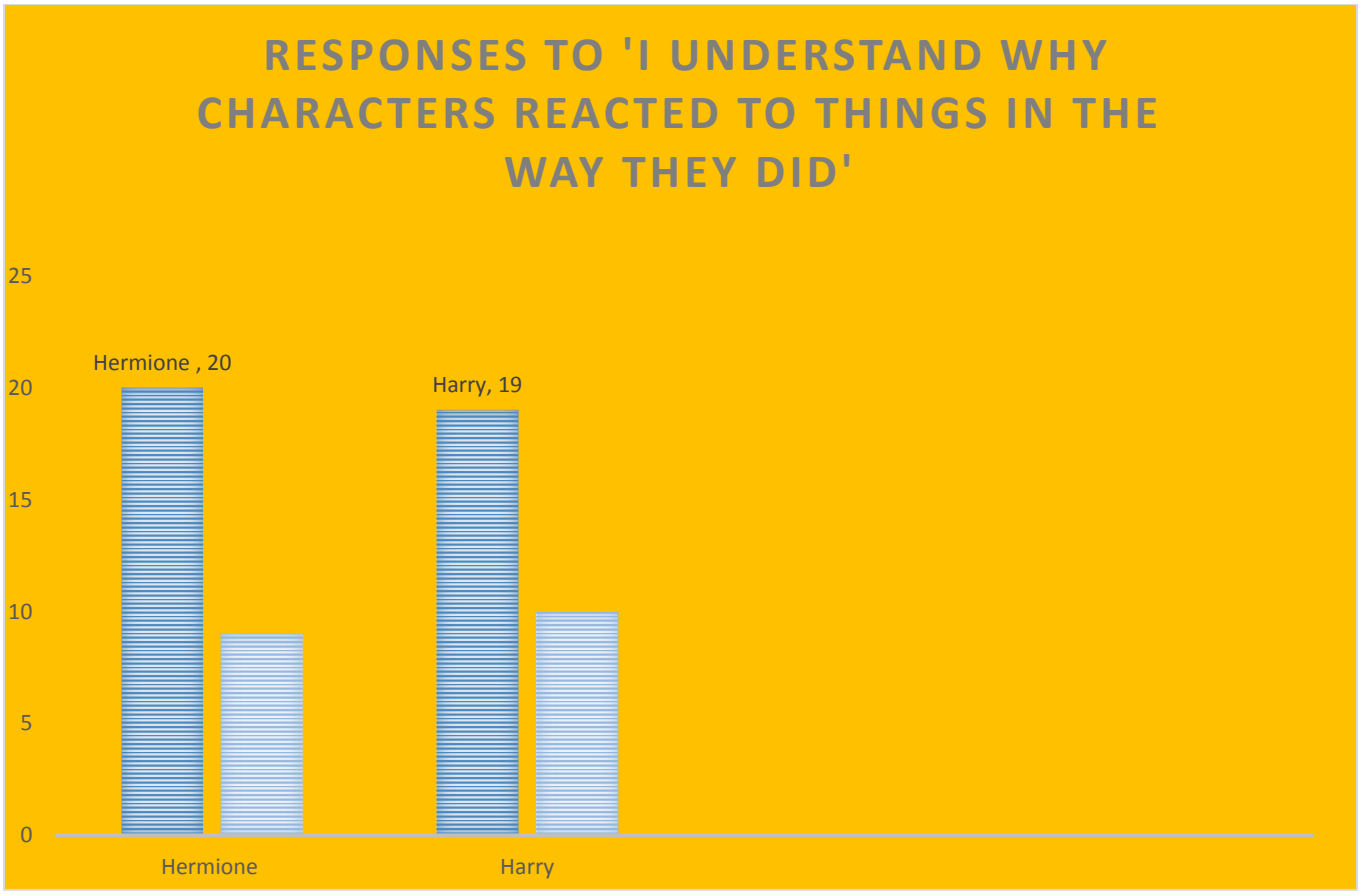


Figure 4.13 Responses to 'I understand why characters reacted to things in the way they did'

This was echoic of my own contemplations too:

> *'After Conscience Alley, I asked the children how easy it was for them to take the character's perspective and was it easy to feel empathy for them. Interestingly, the 2 children who played the character said it was excellent and they really felt they were Harry and Hermione. The children who voiced their thoughts/conscience had mixed reactions. Some said that it was really good for getting into the character, but others said the hot seating was much better for getting into character' (RD 6 30/01/2019)*

As my Reflective Diary suggests, while such a methodology is successful in exercising the perspective taking of a small number of children, it may be sensible for practitioners to execute such an intervention in smaller groups so that its fruits may be shared by a larger proportion of children.

*c. **Hot Seating***

Finally, the third drama-centred intervention was that of *Hot Seating*. Akin to the others, the data furnishes persuasive evidence to suggest that this was also highly successful in stimulating the children's empathy, as evidenced by my Reflective Diary:

> *'During hot seating, most of the children really stepped into Hermione's shoes and answered the questions in a sensible way that showed perspective. Actually, as soon as I told them we would be doing hot seating, I heard a lot of children getting excited at the prospect. This was really encouraging and reminded me how much joy it gives me to see the children enjoying while they are learning. I think this a big success.' (RD 7, 29/01/2019)*

While each of the aforementioned interventions were executed in isolation from one another, they each share a common philosophy and the rationale behind their efficacy is largely homogenous. Firstly, as affirmed by Hurley et al (2014) the very act of playing another character through *improvisation, Thought Tunnel* or *Hot Seat*, forces children to take on a new perspective and hence helps them to understand the thoughts, beliefs and motivations of somebody else. This in turn catalyses cognitive empathy. Additionally, drama also calls on children to ignite their imagination. As exulted by Greene (1994), imagination has the unique ability to disarm any semblance of doubt and incredulity and thus allows one to completely surrender to the sights and sounds of the fictional world of the character, as though they were them. This in turn mobilises a sense of both cognitive empathy – wherein they stand in the shoes of someone else – and subsequently activates affective empathy, as they share the emotions of the character. I also cannot ignore my Froebelian roots in this instance - the very fact that play and enjoyment appeared to permeate each dalliance with drama is again another reminder of how well children learn though play (Bruce et al, 2018). This is evidenced through my observations too:

'That was the 'funnest' lesson we had in ages' John

'I loved the drama we did today. I really felt like Hermione' Clodagh

Collaterally, I feel compelled to divulge that in interventions focused on drama, I noticed, within myself, an ignition of passion that I feel had been somewhat quelled by the demands of an unbalanced approach to reading that Concannon Gibney (2011) attests penetrates the Irish context. Through my reconciliation with drama, the cognitive dissonance and sense of existing as a Living Contradiction I felt seemed to dissipate, my values became clearer and my efficacy as a teacher was consequently enhanced:

> *'When I left college, I was determined that I would teach drama regularly to my class, that I would be known as 'the teacher who loves drama', but the pressure of the curriculum has curtailed those ambitions. Today's lesson has made me realise that I have to break out of this cycle and make sure that I create the time to place drama back on my list of priorities.' (RD 08/02/19)*

Strategy 2: Making Connections

Both Freire (1985) and Rosenblatt (1994) were zealous in their assertion that children should be enabled to relate the fictional world of literature to their own lives in order to form affinities with characters and their lives, subsequently creating a climate for greater empathy. Indeed, this is a succinct part of affective empathy. Fittingly, the analysis of data enunciates that the intervention *Making Connections,* an aesthetic response to literature – with background knowledge, oneself and the wider world - was highly successful in honing skills of empathy. This is illuminated through unstructured observations, rating scales and children's work to show them connecting with a range of characters, both with and without obvious similarities to their own lives:

'Harry felt bored and it reminded me when I feel bored last weekend. It was raining and I couldn't go out' (James)

Harry was nervous the first time he held a broomstick and I was nervous the first time I held a guitar (David)

Hermione was eavesdropping and people have listened in on my conversations before too (Aisling)

Furthermore, *Figure 4.14* shows a Venn Diagram, wherein the centre shows the connections identified by the child between themselves and a character:

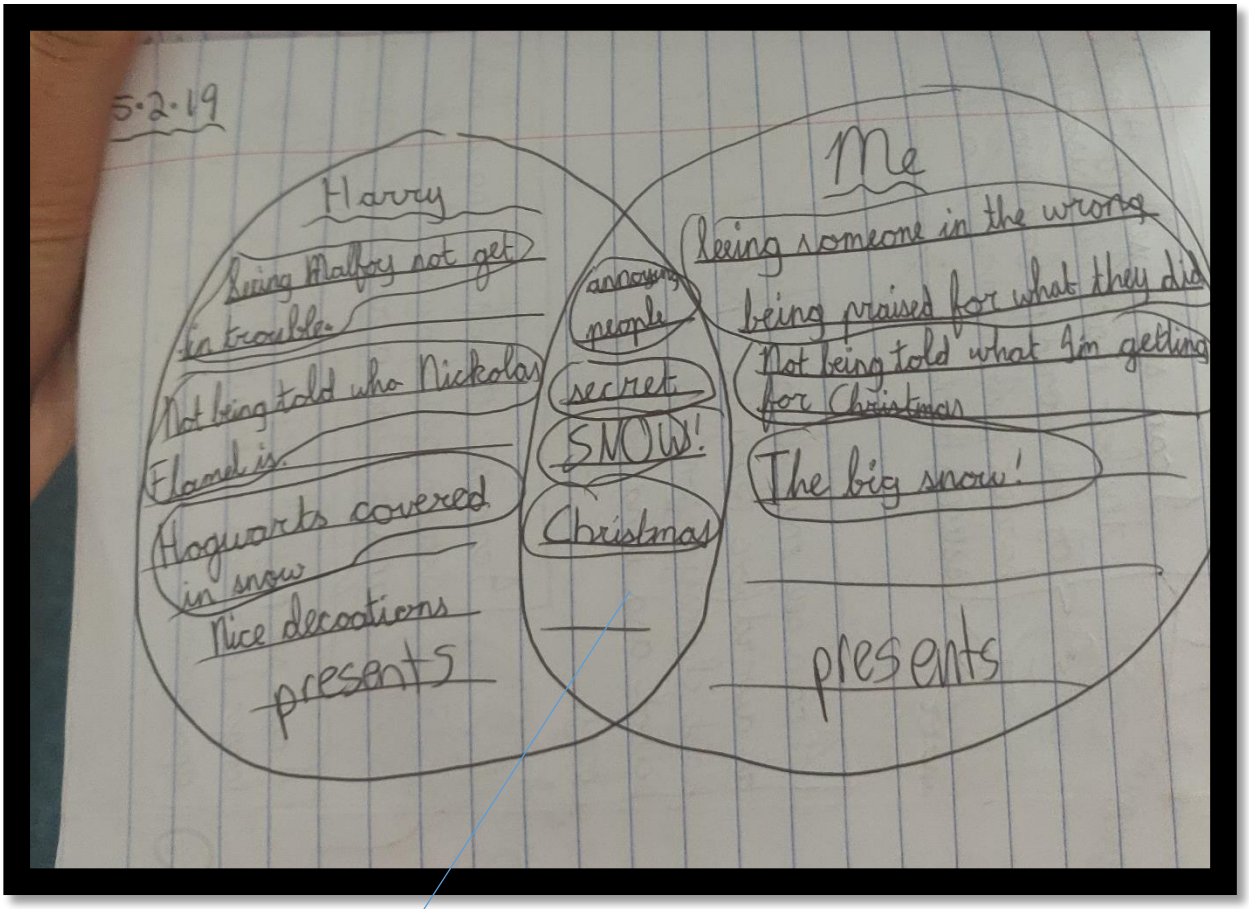


Figure 4.14 Making Connections 1

Connecting feelings, like enjoying 'Christmas' and 'Snow'

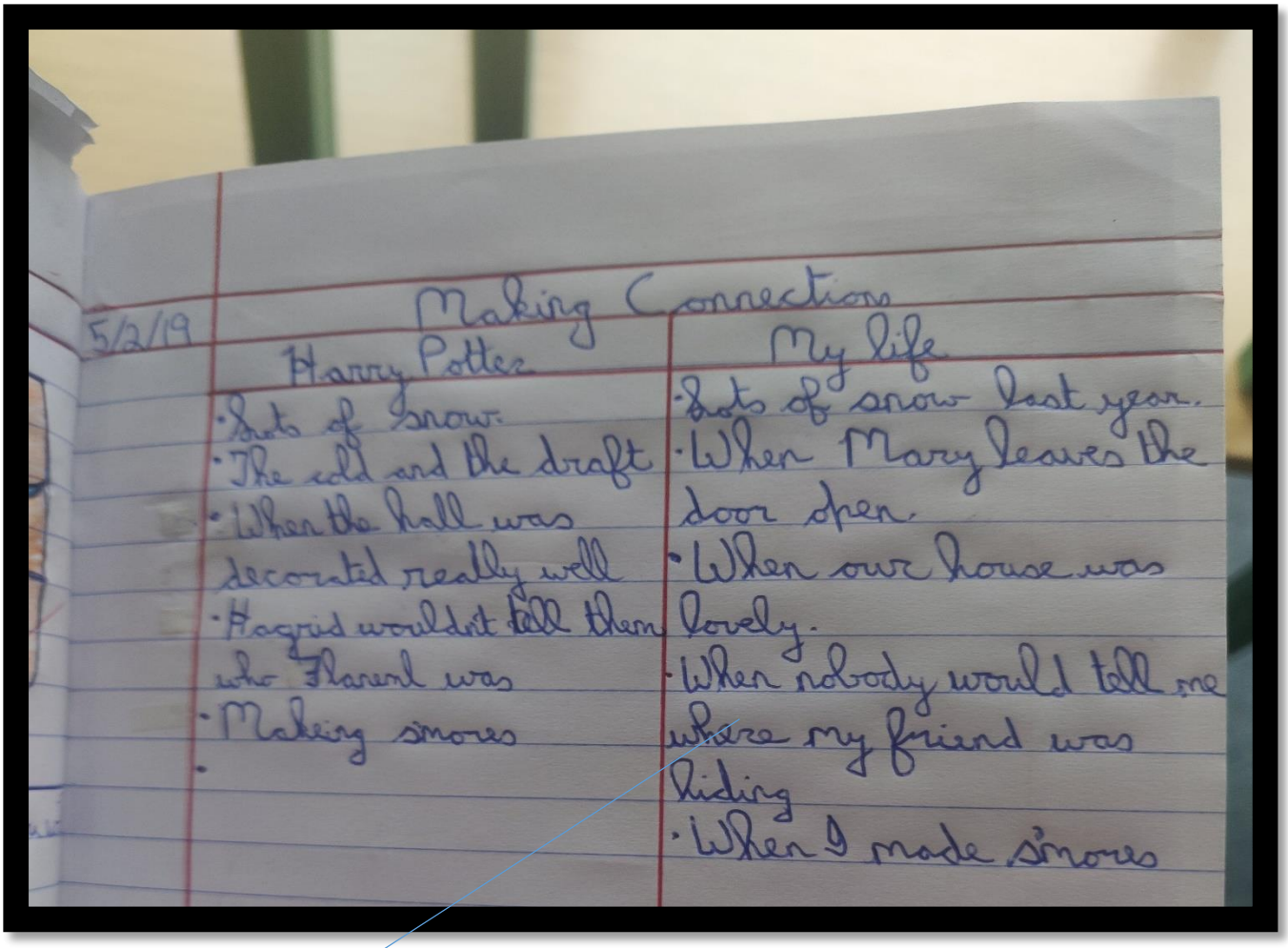


Figure 4.15 Making Connections 2

When nobody would tell me where my friend was hiding
Forming affinities with experiences of another character and connecting them to their own.

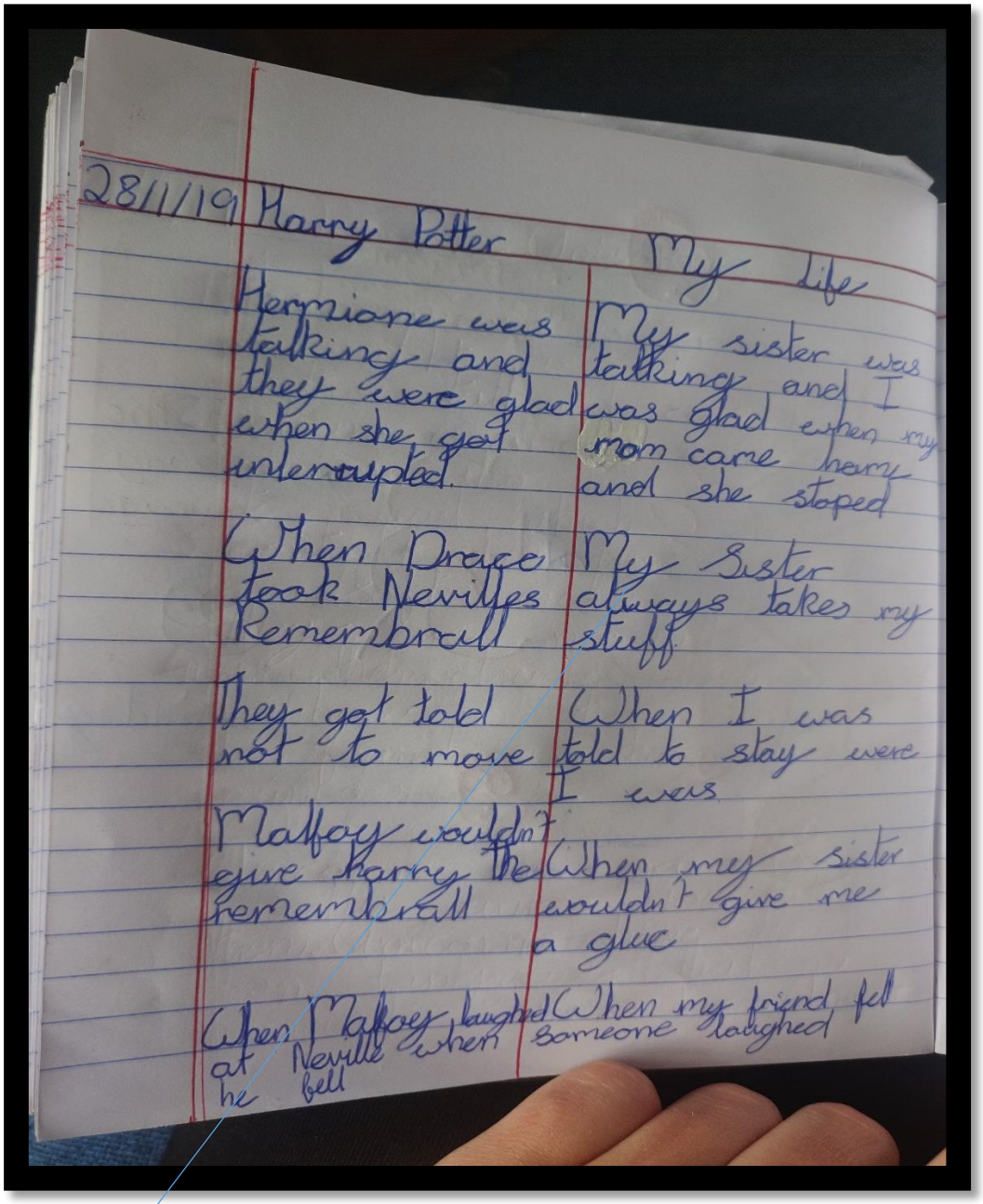


Figure 4.16 Making Connections 3

My sister always takes my stuff

Connecting family life of the character to their own life at home

Each of these examples show a willingness and ability to connect with the feelings and experiences of others. While instances like ‘My sister wouldn’t give me a glue’ or ‘We got lots of snow last year’, may at first sound banal and quotidian, each plays a part in opening doors to connectivity and galvanising feelings of empathy and affinity.

Supportively, Alexander, Miller and Hengst (2001) also direct that children are at first drawn to stories and characters that have correlations with their own lives. The characters from Harry Potter are of the same age as the children, making it an appropriate novel with which to begin. Further to this, as the children became more adept at this skill, they were able to empathise with characters from texts dealing with marginalised groups, such as refugees – characters with whom the children may not have automatically connected:

> *They made links to other people who have had to leave their own country – like Syria and those from World War Two. In fact, they even made connections to what is happening on the U.S. Mexico border today (RD 31/01/2019)*

The potency of this intervention is perhaps best explained by the power of context. As exulted by Rosenblatt (1990), *making connections* allows the children to use their identity and cultural capital to connect and identify with a text. By calling on background, self and world knowledge, the children could create links between their world and the world of the character thus opening the passages to empathy. Moreover, Keen (2007) details that most readers indicate character identification as a pillar of empathy. Additionally, my *Critical Friend* also observed that as result of this increased identification with a text, children’s enjoyment of reading increased:

> *It was wonderful to see how enthusiastic the children were about the play and the ownership they took of their own productions (18/03/19).*

This is also identified in *Figure 4.17* below:

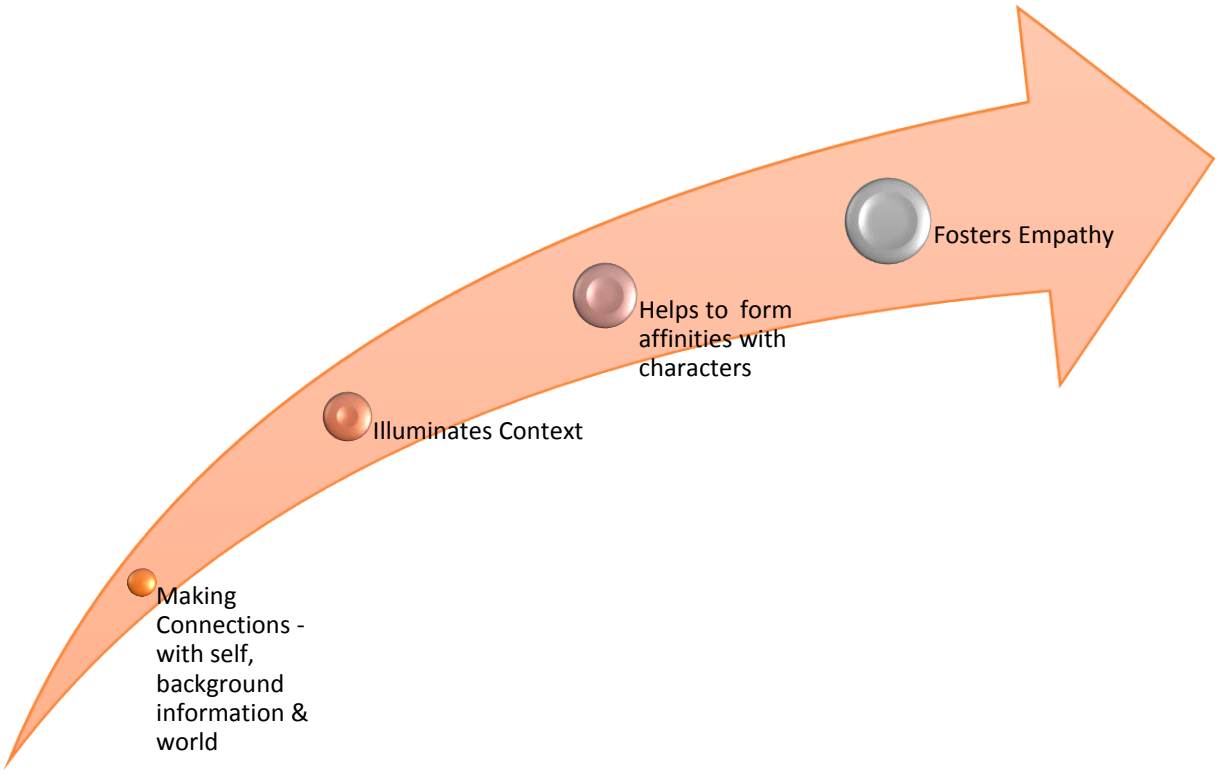


Figure 4.17 Rationale for Effectiveness of Making Connections

It is my hope that this pleasure will now align with the Theory of Transportation, explained by Green, Brock and Kaufman (2004), which attests that this newfound connection and enjoyment with a text can serve to increase children's desire to read and consequently influence their future relationship with the activity. In this manner, I have observed first-hand the symbiotic and synergic relationship between reading and empathy.

INTERVENTION 4: Lingering Questions

The research data implies that posing lingering, open-ended questions centred on a text is another highly effective mode of fostering empathy. The data supports Rosenblatt's (1994) hypothesis that such questions lead children towards the emotive, aesthetic elements of reading which align with empathy. Lingering questions, relating to the themes, feelings and hidden messages of a text paid the most dividends in terms of honing empathy. When asked questions of this nature, children gave answers that were deep and altruistic, belying their age and often even verging on the philosophical:

'You can have all the riches in the world but a heart of stone' John

'You should give to charity as much as possible' Sally

'If you're lonely you'll be miserable but if you help people you'll be happier' Lizzy

'The message was just that we all need to help refugees more' Mary

This also complements the observations of my critical friend:

> *I agree that you are trying to evoke empathy in the children and your questions were open and lingering, without ever leading or pushing the children into a false claim to empathy. The children were giving extremely insightful and emotionally deep answers (Critical friend, 31/01/2019)*

The efficacy of this intervention is perhaps best summarised by Harvey and Goudvis (2007) who claim that higher order, lingering questions pushed the children towards the deeper tiers of a text, catalysing inferences and perspective taking – thus honing their skills of empathy. In addition, it may also be explained by Greene's supposition (1980) that encounters with literature that are permeated by questioning surrender the children to their imaginations - a space where empathy feels safe, nurtured and feelings of incredulity are suspended.

It is perhaps meaningful that the type of questioning used in this intervention was in utter opposition to the efferent, interrogative and superficial questioning that so often monopolises the teaching of English (Concannon-Gibney, 2011). Instead, lingering questions enabled the children to interrogate aspects of the text and see things from a new perspective and foster empathy (Roche, 2014). Simultaneously, this way of teaching again allowed me to live more closely in the direction of my values:

> *Finally, when I think about it, I realise that the insightful answers the children gave to me could never have happened had I stuck to the way I have been teaching English previously – with comprehension and grammar at the helm. Again, it reminds me that I am finding a new way – a way that aligns with my values (RD 08/03/2019)*

INTERVENTION 5: Post your senses

Results demonstrate that following engagement with a ***Post Your Senses*** activity (Figure 4.18) – an intervention wherein children identify senses that have been activated by a text – the majority of them reported high levels of both cognitive and affective empathy. For instance, following engagement with this intervention for a week - wherein the children jotted the senses activated by the book onto a post-it as we read - results from my Observational Checklist (Appendix 6) showed:

Indicator or Empathy	**Number of Children**
At least 1 aspect of Cognitive Empathy	25
At least one aspect of Affective Empathy	22

Table 4.18 Post Your Senses

Testament to the efficacy of this intervention also comes from observations:

> *'This helped me smell what Emilie would have smelled with the horses' Claire*
>
> *'I could really picture what was going on' James*

These findings concur with Rosenblatt's aesthetic teaching of literature (1990), which attests that the efficacy of such a technique can be explained by the manner in which it activates the reader's physical senses, allowing them to experience the sights and sounds of a character, hence fomenting feelings of empathy. By hearing the same sounds as Harry Potter and seeing the scenes of war through the eyes of Joey, the gateways to empathy were opened. In these

instances, their imagination becomes uninhibited, providing the optimal environment for empathy to flourish. Furthermore, such questions left unanswered questions, which percolated in the children's minds and catalysed deep thought and feelings of empathy (Harvey & Goudvis, 2017).

INTERVENTION 6: Diary Entries

A further intervention that was shown to foster empathy - both affective and cognitive – was ***diary writing*** from the perspective of a character. Through a dissection of the children's written work, I have observed clear and demonstrative examples of empathy:

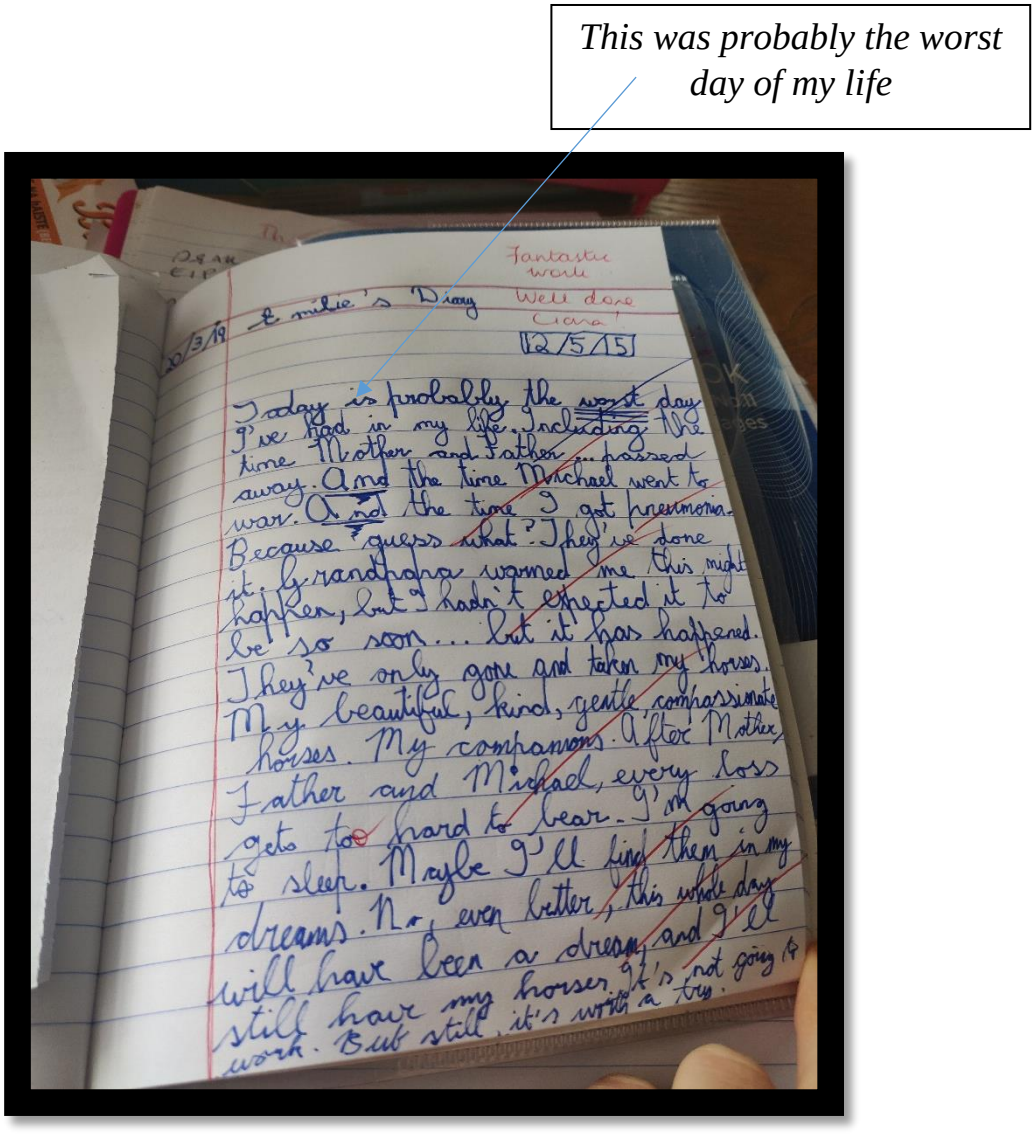


Figure 4.18 Diary Entry 1

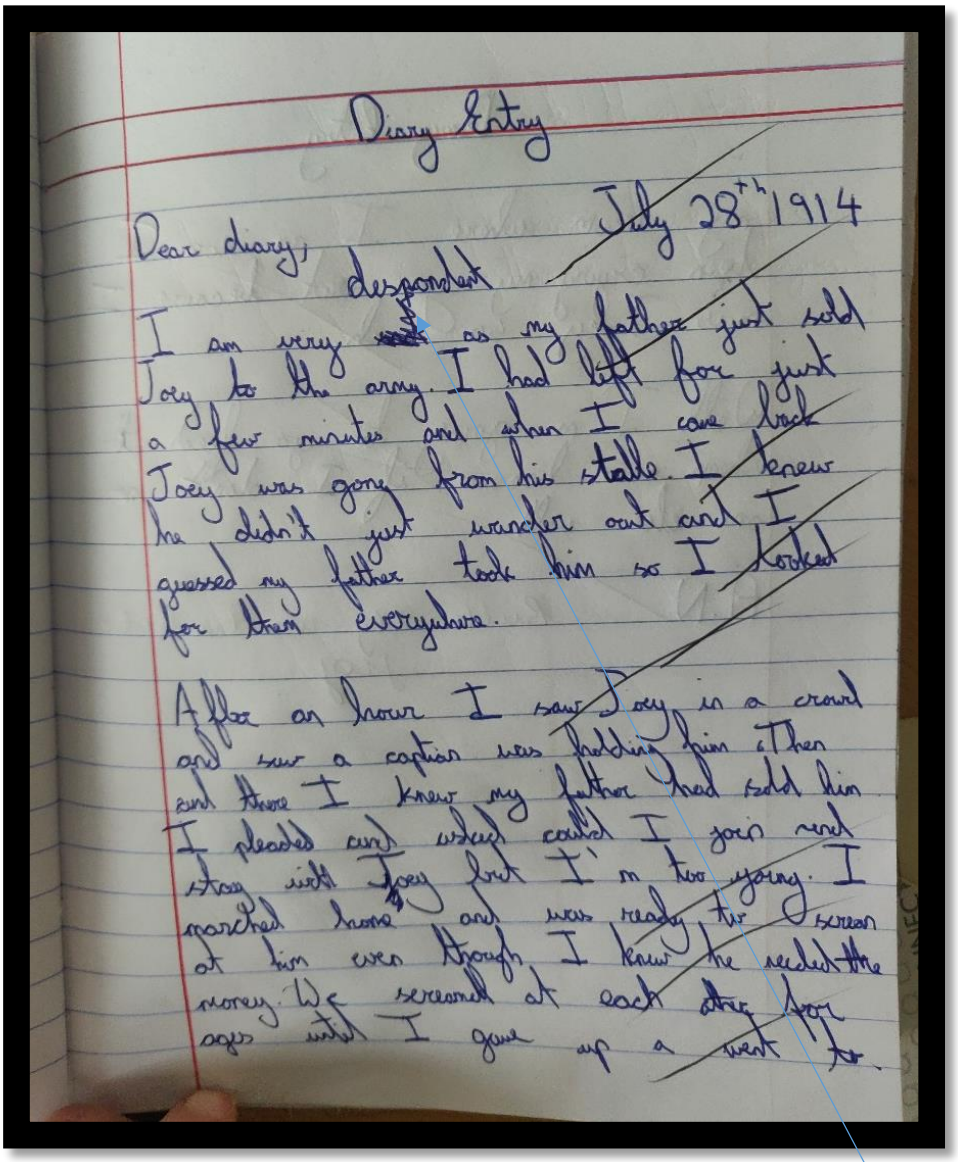


Figure 4.19 Diary Entry 2

Today I am very despondent as my father just sold Joey to the army

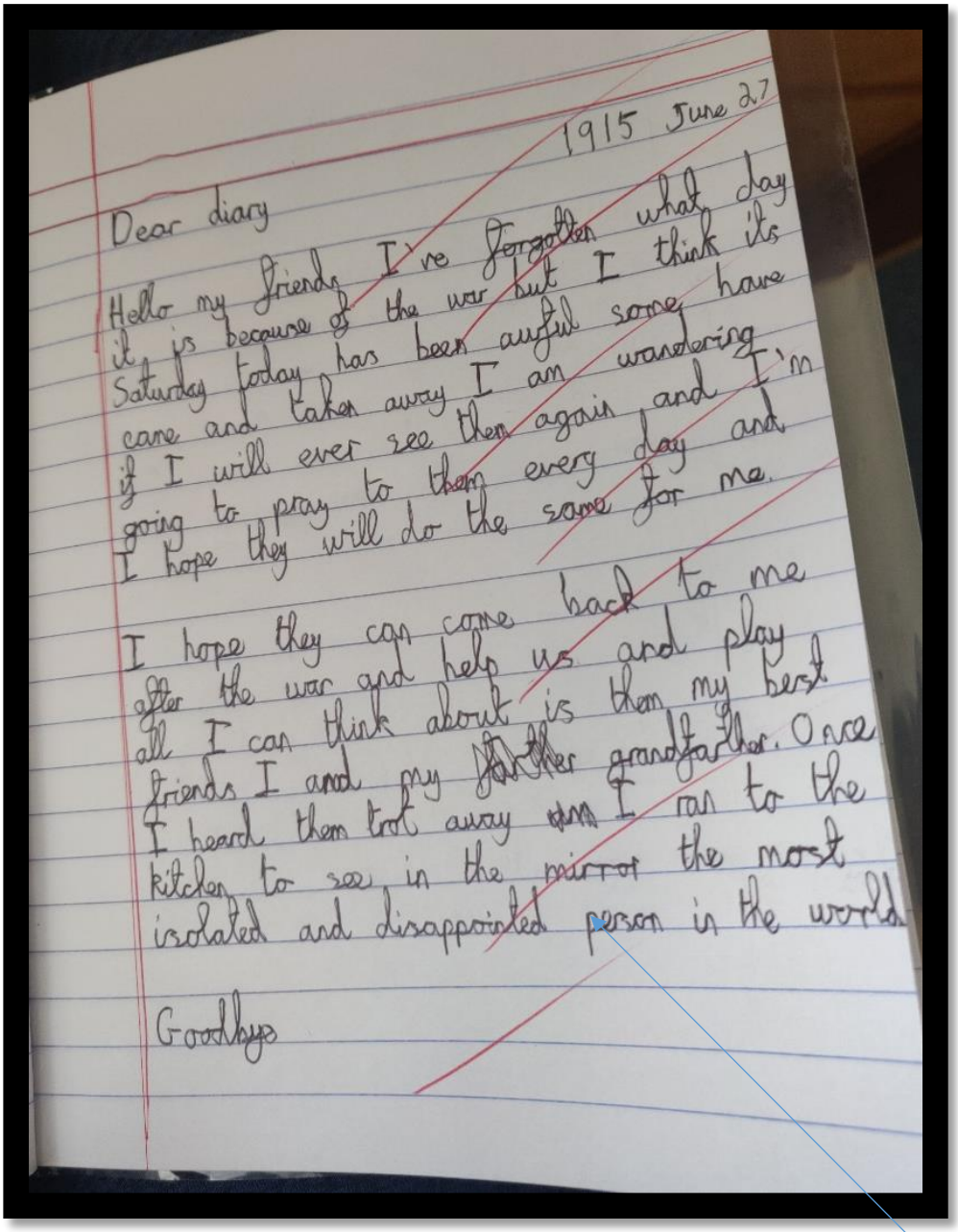


Figure 4.20 Diary Entry 3

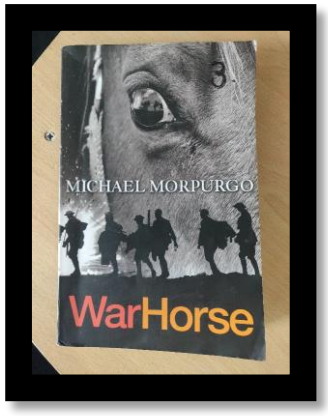
In the mirror I see the most isolated and disappointed person in the world

Each of these examples – ‘I feel terrible’, ‘Each loss gets too hard to bear’, ‘I feel despondent’, ‘My beautiful, kind, compassionate horses’ – shows accurate perspective taking and the attribution of mental capacities to others – a prime element of cognitive empathy (Baron Cohen, 2001). Yet, even more than that, these diary excerpts also demonstrate affective empathy too as the children are so evidently feeling *with* and *for* the characters from whose perspectives they are writing.

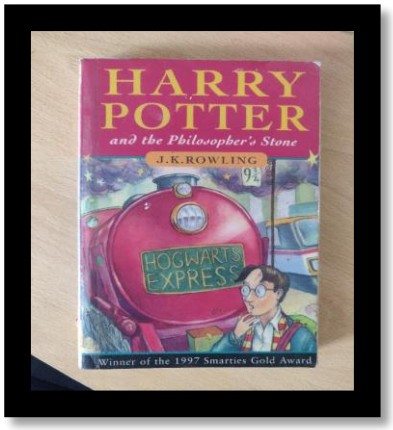
I believe that the writing of diaries provided the children with opportunities to examine literature on a deeper level and is once again a rebuke to the basal, surface level reading that they have come to know (Giouroukakis, 2014). Akin to *making connections*, diary entries allowed the reader’s experiences to come to the fore, which subsequently ignited their empathetic capacities (Ryan, 2011). Moreover, I also hold that the diary entries afforded the children creativity, freedom and imagination – elements closely linked to Rosenblatt’s (1978, 1994) aesthetic component of Transactional Theory. This aestheticism allowed the children to focus on the emotive and personal aspects of the text, which in turn activated empathy.

THE ENTANGLEMENT OF LITERATURE

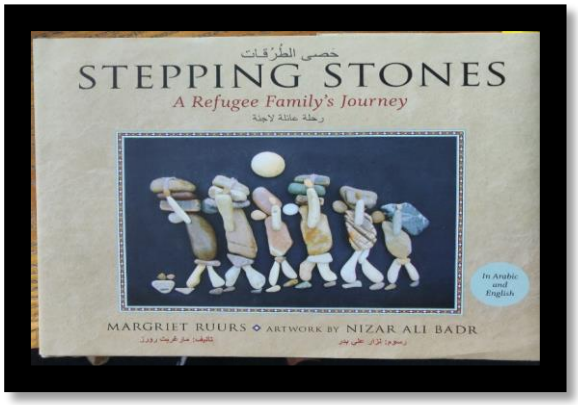
While each of the aforementioned interventions were evidently successful, it would be disingenuous to suggest that their success was not largely entangled with the books from which they sprung. I had been conscious for a long time that the children were utterly overwhelmed with English text books that usually only demanded efferent and basal responses. Thus, I was determined to select texts that would awaken them to the aesthetic and consequently arouse empathy. Consequently, the following publications were chosen:



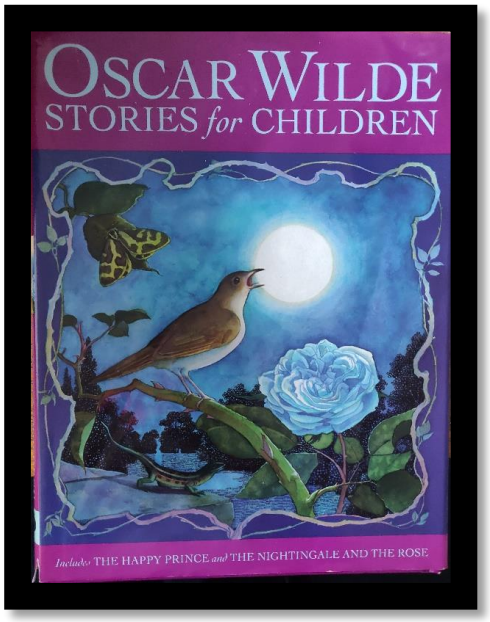
War Horse, Michael Murpurgo



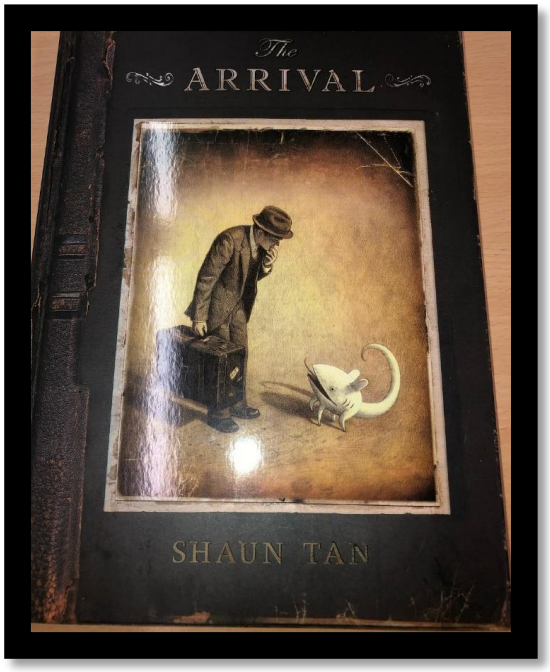
Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, J.K. Rowling



Stepping Stones – A Refugee Family's Journey, Margriet Ruurs



Oscar Wilde Stories for Children, Oscar Wilde



The Arrival, Shaun Tan.

At first, I was careful to adhere to Alexander, Miller and Hengst (2001) who found that children are most attracted to literature and prose that draws parallels with their own lives and context. I believed that *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, where characters are school-going and of the same age as the children, was a good starting point. Indeed, I must admit that having been an ardent fan of the books as a child and to the present day, it was a passionate, albeit biased decision. Nevertheless, the results were fruitful and as evidenced from the research, Harry Potter proved to be effective at fostering empathy in the children, with even the most complex of characters. This was in part due to the ease with which the children could form affinities with the characters and also perhaps as a result of my own passion towards it and the children's newfound love for the book too.

> *I think the likeness that Harry Potter and his friends have with the children – age, sense of humour etc. – actually, although nuanced, really allows the children to step into their shoes (RD, 29/01/2019).*

It was only after the children had formed empathetic links with characters with whom they shared a multitude of commonalities that I graduated to the more abstract. In selecting stories like *Stepping Stones* and *War Horse,* I was taking children away from the familiar and enabling them to live vicariously through completely different characters than themselves. This was in keeping with Keen's (2007) advice that this type of fiction allows the child to grasp feelings of care and empathy without inhibition, as evidenced from my critical friend:

> *'I think War Horse was an excellent choice of book because the children could share in the joy and pain of Joey, so it was a great way to bring about empathy (Critical Friend, 25/03/2019)*

The use of and selection of culturally diverse picture books as a tool to create empathy was also a fruitful endeavour. Having not used picture books with a senior class before, I must admit that I was somewhat apprehensive, with part of me feeling the children may find them too simple and subsequently disengage. However, upon discovering that high-quality picture books have the potential to build socio-emotional skills, like empathy (Harper, 2016), I knew I must indulge. I was careful to select books that had realistic plots and believable characters with whom the children shared emotions (Bland, 2016). Furthermore, as the picture books dealt with culturally diverse characters, I followed Bland's (2016) selection process to ensure that the characters were accurately and respectfully portrayed. It was only from following such criteria that the authentic discussions Roche (2014) details picture-books catalyse, could blossom:

> *Yet today, I think the use of this picture book was the most effective vehicle I have ever used to effectively convey the message of a social justice issue and have the children empathise and understand it. (RD, 23/01/2019)*

4.3 Theme 3 – Changes in Beliefs and Assumptions

This third and final theme – a change in held beliefs and assumptions - is perhaps the most succinct reflection of my value for social justice and my desire to teach to Greene's Pedagogy of Hope (1980) and incorporate Noddings' (1995) themes of care into my practice. Through exposure to a range of literature I witnessed a change in attitudes and assumptions, with empathy at the helm each time. Indeed, I bore witness to a shift in the children's world views through the medium of literature –akin to how Boyd Causey and Galda (2015) attested that books play such a fundamental role in shaping perceptions.

Through exposure to literature that focused on diverse groups, attitudes of negativity and perceived impenetrable difference were eroded by a paradigm shift fuelled by empathy and connectedness. The majority of children began to see the many similarities they shared with minority groups, realising that though they are different, they share fundamental commonalities:

'I always thought refugees were just looking for another country to live in because they didn't like their own' Paul

'I never realised they leave their country because it is a matter of life and death' Clíona

'I never realised they would play the same games we played and even that they drink tea was the same as me because I love tea' James

'He just wanted to be happy like everyone else' Clodagh

This draws strong parallels with Simms- Bishop's (1990) pioneering hypothesis, attesting that it is paramount for children to be exposed to culturally diverse literature in order to expand their world views so that empathy can be fostered and they may develop an understanding of other groups. Due to the homogeneity of the class, and the books to which they had previously been exposed, I was eager to provide diverse literature and 'windows' into

other worlds. Crucially, I was fastidious in following advice from Bland (2016) who contends that when selecting culturally diverse literature, the teacher must ensure that characters are accurately portrayed and not portrayed as stereotypical and one-dimensional. I believe that it was in strictly adhering to these directives, that affinities and parallels could be best illuminated.

Moreover, another of the most lucid of these changes was the rejection of the binary – the characterisation of a character or group as all 'good' or all 'bad' - black or white. Children began to understand and contemplate the complexity of characters and interrogate the depiction that is ubiquitous in much children's literature - some characters are 'all good' and others are just 'evil'. For instance, when faced with a perceived adverse character, like Malfoy in *Harry* Potter and the Giant in *The Selfish Giant*, literature allowed a new understanding to blossom and children began to feel *with* characters and take their perspective at various points, showing an empathy for another person's feelings and motives.

'I could relate to Malfoy because I like being assertive like him and telling people what to do' Claire

'I feel sad for Malfoy because he doesn't have a nice family' Kate

'Maybe the giant just didn't want company' Matthew

'He thought the children would trample his garden so he didn't want them there' Stephen

Furthermore, children also equated such characters with real life people, like those who engage in bullying behaviours. Whereas previously, the children may have perceived bullies to be one-dimensional and beyond their understanding and forgiveness, discussions around the literature arrested such judgments and they began to see them as more complicated, with shades

of both good and bad. As indicated by Simon and Nail (2013) empathy has the power to infiltrate bullying and other anti-social behaviours, helping to reduce them. Perhaps an increased understanding of the one who bullies may further complement this phenomenon too:

> *'If someone was bullying you, and if you knew they were just jealous then you wouldn't hate them you'd just feel sorry for them' Lizzy*

A succinct description of the fruits that are borne of a change in attitudes and assumptions is illustrated in *Figure 4.22* below:

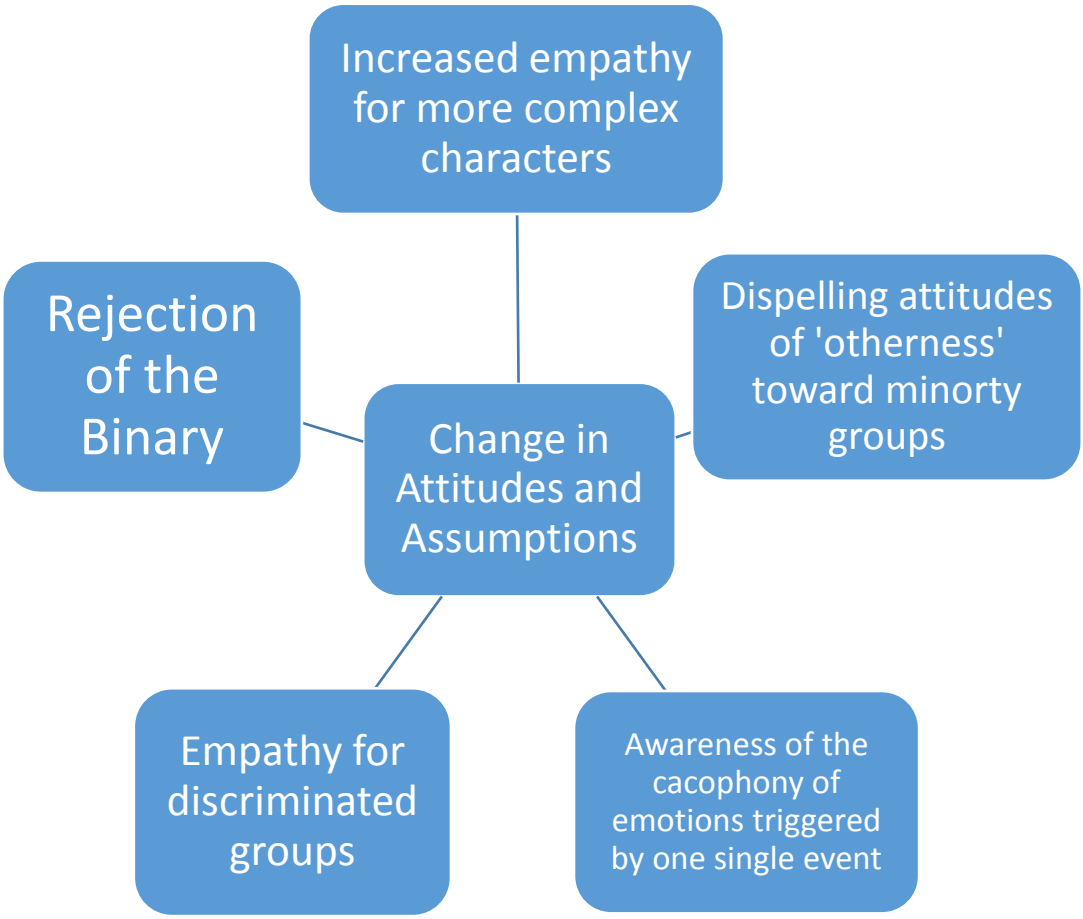


Figure 4.22 Change in attitudes and assumptions catalysed by empathy

I also witnessed the children equating inequalities from the realm of Harry Potter - for instance the discrimination and subordination of 'mudbloods' by pure blooded wizards - with injustice in the real world

I asked the children what they thought of the inequality between pure bloods, half-bloods and mud bloods. I was really surprised by the answers the children gave and their deep, insightful nature. They compared it to issues of racism between black and white people in our world today and how black people are often badly treated because of the colour of their skin, just like mudbloods are mistreated by purebloods. Paul described it akin to Hitler's treatment of Jewish people during World War 2. For me, this meant everything. I did not have to describe the inequalities to the children. Instead they themselves told them to me. I feel like this means they are really in tune with what we are doing and are thinking deeply (RD 02/01/2019)

This is echoic of Vezalli et al (2014), who discovered that Harry Potter, though predominantly set in a magical realm, was found to increase empathy towards stigmatised groups and characters.

Moreover, this effect is also substantiated by notes from my critical friend which demonstrate deep levels of both cognitive and affective empathy in relation to a 'mudblood's' persecution by their purist counterparts:

'The children were getting into some really deep conversations and showed real empathy and understanding for marginalised groups in our own society today' (Critical Friend, 12/2/2019)

Importantly, as I attest in my Reflective Diary, I found literature alone to be a far more powerful tool in fostering empathy and subsequently altering assumptions than my own unintentional dogmatism had been in the past. Such a finding reflects Hunte and Golembiewski (2014) who assert that literature is a powerful tool in shifting views.

As I look back, I don't think I was as preachy as I have been in the past when I have spoken to the children about issues. I also think that the use of story to illustrate the plight of the refugee was a great vehicle – particularly a child of the same age as the children (RD 18/02/2019)

Another illustration of this paradigm shift catalysed by empathy is that the children began to understand that oftentimes, we experience a cacophony of emotions in response to an experience, rather than simply one. Many of the children began to use terms like 'bittersweet' and 'conflicted' on an ongoing basis to describe how a character may feel and showed true

perspective taking. Indeed, this complements the trajectory illustrated by Hoffman (2000) who details that while most children the age of this cohort will already comprehend that one event may generate opposed feelings, milestones of empathy are oftentimes disordered. Thus, perhaps literature was the catalyst to bring this to the consciousness of many of the children who had not yet accomplished this level:

'I think Joey felt bittersweet about going to live with Emilie's Granddad. He would rather be with Albert but knows he could be happy with her Grandad too' Paula

'I don't think Hermione wanted to lie but she knew she had to for her best friends' Katie

'He didn't want to leave his home but knew he had to' John

However, despite this transformation of attitudes and assumptions, I also found evidence to suggest that empathy could not penetrate all barriers. Using characters whose multi-dimensionality had been realised by the children, I posed a question– *if you understand someone, can you hate them?* While the evidence thus far patently attests that empathy certainly heightened an understanding of more complicated characters, it appeared that to the children at least, some characters are beyond reproach.

> *'However, they also spoke of incidents like World War Two, specifically the Holocaust, where people do inhumane, cruel things. While we might be able to cognitively understand their rationale – like the Nazis hating the Jews for being 'rich' and so wanting to get rid of them all– we cannot understand it enough to forgive them and not hate them. I suppose this is a representation of how cognitive empathy can be easy to access for many of us, but affective empathy is perhaps harder to conjure in such heinous situations. Maybe empathy cannot soften our attitudes to some situations.' (RD 07/04/2019)*

Such an anomaly aligns with the phenomenon of *empathetic over arousal* (Hoffman, 2000, Figure, 4.23). This concept maintains that some events or characters are so unsettling

and disturbing to the psyche, that our sense of empathy becomes overly fomented, thus rendering it futile. Through my observation of this in the children, I am reminded that, while as teachers we must endeavour to alter beliefs and assumptions and teach to a Pedagogy of Hope (Greene, 1980), it is paramount that we carefully tread the line between presenting appropriate literature to dispel notions of the alien and purveying worlds that may so overwhelm the children that the objective is ultimately defeated.

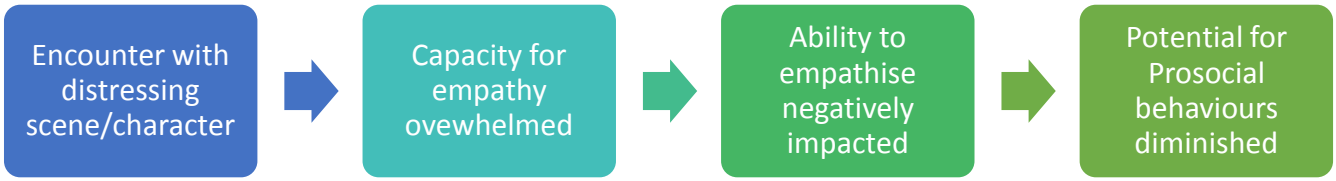


Figure 4.23 Effect of Empathetic Over Arousal

4.4 Conclusion

Findings from this study have suggested that facets of both cognitive and affective empathy were cultivated. The most successful stimulants to this were interventions such as Drama, Post Your Senses, Diary Entries, Making Connections and Lingering Questions. The effect that literature had on catalysing altruism by way of empathy was also explicated. The next chapter will take these findings into account as it describes the impact they have had on me and the contribution this study can make to the practice of others, theory and policy.

Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This self-study action research project had the overall aim of exploring how I could enhance children's empathy through the implementation of a fictional literature programme. The findings, as emergent from the themes identified, conclude that I - through the use of a literature programme inspired by a number of theories, philosophies and personal values – can make a claim to knowledge and have thus created my own living-theory. This transformation of practice and challenging of my own hitherto status-quo has a number of ramifications for me, my fellow teachers, future policy and theory.

5.2 Personal Implications and Reflection

As I come to the close of this research, I am struck by the immeasurable learning experience it has been for me and the way in which it has positively affected both my personal and professional growth. As I have previously documented, hitherto this project, my practice was at an impasse. While my desire live out my values of empathy, care and social justice was alive, it was quelled by the demands of a laden curriculum and a distinct lack of knowledge of how to go about it. I found myself talking to the children about 'how lucky' we all are, allowing myself and them to fall victim to jaded platitudes, clichés and 'the passive gaze that is the hallmark of our time' (Greene, 1995; 13). Yet, through my encounters with the works of scholars like Freire (1985), Greene (1980) and Rosenblatt (1978, 1994) I came to learn of the prowess literature has to make meaningful change and move pupils to see things in new ways so that they can ultimately become more 'wide-awake' (Greene, 1980) and create a more just

society. I no longer feel the same pressure to subscribe to the surface-layer, basal types of literacy instruction that used to characterise my teaching. Through the action research process and the prowess of reflective practice, I have connected with my values and improved my classroom practices (Kemmis, 2009).

Additionally, I have a newfound resolve to incorporate themes like power and critique into my teaching and in doing so marks the beginnings of what Greene (1995) describes as a change in consciousness and a new awareness of possibility, towards a *Pedagogy of Democratisation* (Giroux, 2011) where children can begin to create change. This drive to foster critical thinking and interrogate what is deemed acceptable in our society simultaneously aligns with my epistemology too and my view that knowledge is constructed through experience and dialogue.

The pressures of teaching in the primary school classroom dictate that we, as teachers, place a disproportionate emphasis on the more academic subjects, to the detriment of incorporating themes of care and empathy. For a long time, I did not believe that I was assuming the identity of a 'good' teacher unless if I was not teaching the 'core' subjects daily. Indeed, from conversations with fellow teachers, this sentiment is ubiquitous. However, the fruits I have borne both personally and professionally, in addition to the gains experienced by the children through my deviation from the norm have been liberating.

It is my hope that other teachers, by way of fostering some of the effective interventions I used in this study - for instance *Post Your Senses* and *Drama Activities* - can also experience a transformation in their practice and become agents of change both in terms of education and indeed, society.

5.3 Policy

Firstly, in order to remedy the imbalanced approach to literature that pervades the Irish context while simultaneously creating more empathetic pupils, policy should acknowledge the sentiments of my action research study, that empathy can be enhanced through the medium of literature in addition to other established subjects with which it is already associated, such as S.P.H.E and History (NCCA, 1999). My findings suggest that it would be judicious for curricula and syllabi to draw inspiration from Greene's *Pedagogy of Social Imagination* (1980) and Rosenblatt's (1994) *Transactional Theory* by ensuring that they incorporate aesthetic approaches to literature and propone relevant interventions– such as *making connections* and *drama*. Indeed, the 2019 Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2019) appears to appreciate this need for the aesthetic and imaginative aspects of a text. It is my hope that this will continue to be encouraged.

Additionally, my action research study also intimates that policy should make provisions to increase the amount of culturally diverse books with which children encounter so that they may better empathise with a broad range of people and stereotypes may be transformed. This is particularly pertinent in an ever diversifying, modern Ireland. Indeed, the new Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2019) also appreciates this need for different voices and cultures. However, it is paramount that teachers are supported in their selection of books, so that characters are appropriately represented and thus empathy can be developed (Bland, 2016). For instance, booklists could be prepared and disseminated to schools and parents alike detailing appropriate texts that may be used to foster empathy and promote deep interactions with literature.

5.4 Theory

My action research study has a number of implications with regard to theory surrounding empathy and literature. Firstly, it largely concurs with research to intimate that a palpable, seismic shift in held beliefs, along with instances of a willingness to engage in altruism occur as by-products of empathy. Indeed, while much has been documented of the power literature has to destigmatise minority groups and increase empathy towards them, I found that fiction catalysed the children to take this sentiment further - to a place wherein they felt compelled to act and engage in helping behaviours in the real world. This could add substantially to theory surrounding how best to develop social activism and altruism among young people.

Secondly, while some theories (Bloom, 2017) would contend that the weakness of empathy lies in the bias it ignites within us, wherein we only feel it for those who we are like, findings from this study dispute this. Instead, my conclusions draw that when appropriate literature is selected and a full, complex portrayal of characters is provided, children can empathise with a range of characters, regardless of differences.

Similarly, this study found that opportunities to empathise do not have to be pronounced and overt. In actuality, children appear to be capable of using the microcosmic world of fiction and relating it to the real world, where they can relate practices like fictional persecution to real world scenarios. This is echoic of Vezzali et al (2014) who observed similar results regarding Harry Potter.

5.5 Conclusion

As discussed, the action research in my context may have transferable messages for policy, theory and the practice of other teachers in its identification that a fictional literature programme can catalyse the development of empathy and associated behaviours. Moreover, and perhaps most prolifically when one remembers that the objective of self-study action research is to improve one's own practice, I have succeeded in dichotomising two of my passions – literature and empathy – and curated a practice of which I am proud.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

OLLSCOIL NA HÉIREANN MÁ NUAD

THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND MAYNOOTH

Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

M.Ed. (Research in Practice)
2018 - 2019

Different but the Same?

How can I Develop Children's Empathy through the Implementation of a Fictional Literature Programme?

Helen O'Farrell

A Research Dissertation submitted to the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, Maynooth University, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (Research in Practice)

August, 2019

Supervised by: Professor Marie McLoughlin

Appendix 2

Plagiarism - Declaration of Authenticity

Declaration of Authenticity

"Plagiarism involves an attempt to use an element of another person's work, without appropriate acknowledgement in order to gain academic credit. It may include the unacknowledged verbatim reproduction of material, unsanctioned collusion, but is not limited to these matters; it may also include the unacknowledged adoption of an argumentative structure, or the unacknowledged use of a source or of research materials, including computer code or elements of mathematical formulae in an inappropriate manner."

Maynooth University Plagiarism Policy

I hereby declare that this project, which I now submit in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (Research in Practice) is entirely my own work; that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: _____

Appendix 3

Information Sheet and Letters of Consent and Assent

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s),

I am currently a student on the Master of Education programme at Maynooth University. This degree involves completing a research study on an area of interest. The focus of my research is *to investigate how I can foster empathy in children through reading.* In order to do this, I intend to engage the children with a range of literature, such as novels and poems, and employ various strategies and activities that are supported by both theory and practice alike.

The research data will be collected through assessment of the pupils' performances on various speaking and written activities, using interviews, conferences, surveys and a daily teacher journal. Children will be asked their opinions throughout the study and there will be discussions about the activities and strategies they think work well and those that could be improved.

The child's name, class and the name of the school will remain anonymous and confidential both during and after the research. Furthermore, participation is voluntary and your child will be allowed to withdraw from the research process at any stage. All information will be confidential and information will be destroyed in a stated timeframe in accordance with the University guidelines. The correct ethical and child protection guidelines will be complied with when carrying out this research. The study will not be carried out until approval is granted by the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education in Maynooth University.

I would like to invite you and your child to give permission for him/her to take part in this project.

If you have any queries on any part of this research project please do not hesitate to contact me by email at helen.ofarrell.2019@mumail.ie.

Thank you for taking the time to read and consider this,

Yours faithfully,

Helen O'Farrell.

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

I have read the information provided in the attached letter and all of my questions have been answered. I voluntarily agree to the participation of my child in this study. I am aware that I will receive a copy of this consent form for my information.

Parent / Guardian Signature_____

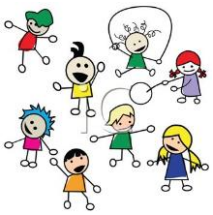
Parent / Guardian Signature_____

Date: _____

Name of Child _____

Child's signature: _____

Date: _____



Child's name …….

I am doing a project in college. I would like to find out the best ways to help you understand how other people feel. We will do this through reading books and poems. I would like you to help me with it. I will teach you some new things, you try them out and we will talk about what you think of them and if they help. I will write down some notes about you too to see how you are doing and share the results with you when the project is over.

Would you be ok with that? Pick a box **Yes** **No**

I have asked your Mum, Dad or Guardian to talk to you about this. If you have any questions I would be happy to answer them. If you are happy with that could you sign the form that I have sent home? If you change your mind after we start, that's ok too

Appendix 4

Letter to the Board of Management of my School

Dear Members of the Board of Management,

I am a student on the Master of Education programme at Maynooth University. As part of my degree I am doing a research project. The focus of my research is *to investigate how I can foster empathy in children through reading.* In order to do this, I intend to engage the children with a range of literature, such as novels and poems, and employ various strategies and activities that are supported by both theory and practice alike.

The research data will be collected through assessment of the pupils' performances on various speaking and written activities, using interviews, conferences, surveys and a daily teacher journal. Children will be asked their opinions throughout the study and there will be discussions about the activities and strategies they think work well and those that could be improved.

The child's name, class and the name of the school will remain anonymous and confidential both during and after the research. Furthermore, participation is voluntary and each child will be allowed to withdraw from the research process at any stage. All information will be confidential and will be destroyed in a stated timeframe in accordance with the University guidelines. The correct ethical and child protection guidelines will be complied with when carrying out this research. The study will not be carried out until approval is granted by the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education in Maynooth University.

I hope that you will deem this to be a worthwhile endeavour and give approval for me to undertake the research in Bishop Galvin National School.

If you have any queries on any part of this research project feel free to contact me by email at helen.ofarrell.2019@mumail.ie.

Thank you for taking the time to read and consider this,

Yours faithfully,

Helen O’Farrell.

Appendix 5

Ethical Approval

Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education
Master of Education (Research in practice) (MEd)

Ethics Approval for Master of Education (Research in Practice)

Student name:	Helen O'Farrell
Student Number:	12273872
Supervisor:	Marie McLoughlin
Programme:	Master of Education (Research in Practice)
Thesis title:	
Research Question(s):	Can empathy be caught/taught? How do I teach empathy through reading and literature? How do I foster children's affinities with characters and their lives through reading? How do I better teach reading for meaning in my class?
Intended start date of data collection:	January 2019
Professional Ethical Codes or Guidelines used:	Maynooth University Ethics Policy, Children First Act 2015, Childen First: National Guidance for the Protection & Welfare of Children 2017, School Child Protection Procedures.

1(a) Research Participants: Who will be involved in this research? *(Tick all that apply)*

Early years / pre-school	
Primary school students	✓
Secondary school students	
Young people (aged 16 – 18 years)	
Adults	

Provide a brief description of the individuals and their proposed role in your research below [Max 50 words]:

The participants in my research are 5th class pupils, both boys and girls, aged 10 and 11 years old. Their role will be to engage with the reading material and associated strategies and tasks I set them in an effort to foster empathy through reading and literature. This will be through both writing and dialogue. I will present the results to them when the study is completed.

1(b) Recruitment and Participation/sampling approach:

Participants in the research will be the children from my 5th class in school. The recruitment process will involve sending a letter detailing my research and the process to the Board of Management, principal, colleagues, parents and children. I will talk to the children about what the study will entail and what they will be asked to do in a way that is appropriate to their age and comprehension. All of the children, who, along with parental consent, agree to participate in the study will become participants The gatekeepers to the research are the principal, Board of Management of my school, partner teacher, stream teachers and team teacher who teaches literacy and mathematics with me.

2. Summary of Planned Research

The research site is a mainstream senior national school, catering for pupils from 3rd to 6th class. There are 486 pupils in the school; 255 boys and 231 girls. It is a mainly middle class school, with a most pupils having a relatively high socio-economic status. The purpose of the research is to discover the best ways to teach empathy through reading/literature. My questions are: Can empathy be caught/taught? How do I teach empathy through reading and literature? How do I foster children's affinities with characters and their lives through reading? How do I better teach reading for meaning in my class? I will consult with a combination of established theory and practice in order to develop a systematic and effective way of extracting empathy through reading. This will also cross over to deep reading – transactional reading.
The research design is centred on self-study action research. It will be mainly qualitative, using observation, informal assessments and interviews. I will begin my data gathering in January for 2 months. Following data collection, I will begin the process of analysis which will involve reflecting on observations, analysing interviews with participants, assessment of learning and comparing scores pre and post research. I will then disseminate the results to participants and other stakeholders.

3. Ethical Issues: Please outline the main ethical issues which may arise in the course of undertaking this research. *Outline the nature of consent and assent pertaining to participants. (You should discuss these concerns and outline the responses/supports you will provide in the boxes below)*

Vulnerability*:* As the group of participants are children, they are automatically a vulnerable group. I am committed to the well-being of all participants. I will ensure that each participant understands their role in the study and is as actively involved as possible. I will minimise risk by ensuring each participant remains anonymous and use pseudonyms for each when documenting any of the research. I will adhere to all GDPR, child safe-keeping and other legal policies that exist in my school and nationally to ensure maximum protection. Each part of the research will be explained to the participants in an age appropriate and comprehendible way. Children and parents will be made aware that they can leave the study at any point they wish.

Power dynamics

I will try to redress the obvious power imbalance between me and the participants by by engaging in lots of dialogue with them and taking on board their ideas and suggestions throughout the process. I will continuously self-monitor and reflect to make sure the children's voices and opinions are heard. I will also be flexible in my approaches. As I work closely with an SET teacher for team teaching, it will be important that they are aware of and involved with planning lessons relating to my topic of research as it will feed into literacy lessons.

Informed consent and assent

I will explain the study to the children in a clear, comprehendible and child friendly way. Then, the children will be given a letter of assent that explains, in simple and understandable terms, what the research is about and what they will be doing as participants in it. They will read through it with their parents/guardians and decide whether or not they agree to participate. Similarly, a letter of consent will be given to the children's parents or guardians, detailing the research and their children's role in it. It will be stressed that they may withdraw from the process during the research. The Board of Management of my school will also need to approve my research and I have a letter (attached) that I will submit to them describing the nature of the study.

Sensitivity

As always, I will ensure that all material and texts that I provide to the children will be age appropriate and sensitive to the various backgrounds/ situations of the participants to minimise stress and discomfort. I am familiar with and will follow all Child Protection policies of the school should there be a sensitive disclosure and alert the designated liaison person immediately.

Data storage

Findings from the study will be stored in both hard and soft copy format (where it will be locked away). With regard to the soft copies, children's work and my comments on it will not be labelled with their names but instead with pseudonyms. It will be stored in a locked cabinet when I am not present. Similarly, any data I store on my computer will be anonymised and comply with all GDPR regulations. Children, the school or any other staff involved will not be named in interviews, again using anonymised pseudonyms.

Attachments
Please attach, where available and applicable, information letters, consent forms and other materials that will be used to inform potential participants about this research.

Declaration *(Please sign and date)*

'I confirm that to the best of my knowledge this is a full description of the ethical issues that may arise in the course of undertaking this research.' If any of the conditions of this proposed research change, I confirm that I will re-negotiate ethical clearance with my supervisor.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Appendix 6

Structured Observations and Questionnaires (adapted from EmQue Ca (Overgaauw et al, 2017)

Strutured Observations

Key: 1 = not at all 2 = very little 3 = a little 4 = a lot 5 = a very great deal

	1	2	3	4	5
Cognitive traits Does the participant:					
Take character's perspective in and out of role					
Able to talk about the character's emotions/ label what they might feel					
Agree they can 'walk in their shoes'					
Affective traits Does the participant:					
Share emotion with character, i.e. is happy when they are happy etc.					
Offers advice and help to the character					
Make connections to their own life events - I remember when...					
State a change in their attitudes/ beliefs					
Connects with character above a 7 on a scale of 1 – 10?					

Questionnaire

	Not really	Some times	Most of the time
I felt like I knew the emotions the characters were going through			
At important moments in the film, I could feel the emotions the characters felt			
When a main character succeeded, I felt happy, and when they suffered in some way, I felt sad.			
I could easily put myself in the main characters' shoes			
I understand why characters reacted to things in the way they did			

EmQue-CA

Below you will find 18 short sentences. Every sentence is a statement about how you can react to other people's feelings. You can mark each sentence if this is often true, sometimes true or not true for you. Choose the answer that best fits you. You can only mark one answer. Please remember that there are no wrong or right answers.

1. When another child cries, my child gets upset too.
2. When I make clear that I want some peace and quiet, my child tries not to bother me.
3. When my child sees other children laughing, he/she starts laughing too.
4. My child also needs to be comforted when another child is in pain.
5. When another child starts to cry, my child tries to comfort him/her.
6. When an adult gets angry with another child, my child watches attentively.
7. When another child makes a bad fall, shortly after my child pretends to fall too.
8. When another child gets upset, my child tries to cheer him/her up.
9. My child looks up when another child laughs.
10. When another child is upset, my child needs to be comforted too.
11. When I make clear that I want to do something by myself (e.g. read), my child leaves me
alone for a while.
12. When adults laugh, my child tries to get near them.
13. When another child gets frightened, my child freezes or starts to cry.
14. When two children are quarrelling, my child tries to stop them.
15. My child looks up when another child cries.
16. When other children argue, my child gets upset.
17. When another child gets frightened, my child tries to help
18. When another child is angry, my child stops his own play to watch.
19. When another child cries, my child looks away.
20. When other children quarrel, my child wants to see what is going on.