

Mutual Identities: Fostering Empathy between Readers and Characters in Reading a Work of Fiction

Maha Alatawi¹, & Fawziah Harshan¹

¹ Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Fawziah Harshan, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia.

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Abstract

Empathy is often seen fostered through teaching of literature, particularly fiction, and influencing readers' behavior and emotions. This study aimed to investigate the relationship between readers' and characters' mutual identities as witnessed in the form of a literary empathy created by reading a work of fiction. A qualitative research design helped in in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, by adopting an empirical stylistic approach to conduct a thematic analysis of readers' responses, combining stylistic-narratological analysis of two sampled texts, Amy Tan's *Two Kinds* and Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. Both datasets were collected through a Literary Response Questionnaire (LRQ) and analyzed to understand how literature, particularly fiction, stimulated empathy in individual readers. The readers' responses mechanism was aptly supported by Theory of mind and Decety's and Gerdes' empathy development theories to understand how readers develop mental flexibility and experience emotional empathy to understand characters' emotions. The results revealed the intensity of readers' connection with the characters while they introspected through the text and correlated themselves with human emotions resulting in empathy with the characters of the text. The findings imply that literature equips students and readers with the capacity to cultivate empathy through an emotional appraisal of characters.

Keywords: empathy, fiction, characters, LRQ, behavior, emotion

"Stories teach us empathy. They reveal to us ourselves in the skins of others."

—Justin Simien

1. Introduction

Technological advancements have profoundly altered the way education is imparted in educational institutions. Artificial intelligence, robotics, and other sorts of technological developments have transformed the way we teach and learn. Ours is a technology-driven world; the more we have access to technology to meet our learning needs, the greater are its negative effects. The more we customize technological tools and processes to understand the material environment, the farther we go from our social and interpersonal relationships leading to isolation, anxiety and depression (McGinty et al., 2020). Technological innovations may have improved our communication media but it has mechanized our relationships (Staccioli & Virgillito, 2021). Studies have reported that in this state, human beings need to develop an empathetic cognition to understand one another's emotions and behavior (Spinrad & Eisenberg, 2014). Studies confirm that due to the over-dependence on technology and artificial intelligence, humans have compromised their empathetic capabilities (Alam, 2022; Knezek, Christensen & Gibson, 2022; Hanni-Vaara, 2022; Martingano, Herrera & Konrath, 2021; Walker & Venker Weidenbenner, 2019).

Empathy is widely viewed as a driving force to mitigate all negative concerns. It rises as a valuable life skill required comprehending and responding to different types of experiences. It also influences our capabilities to develop and maintain long-term relationships. It is both an innate tendency and a talent that can be learned. Even in technology, despite all its adverse effects on human behavior, empathy helps the innovators and engineers to create user-friendly applications or devices; which is not possible without empathy (Alam, 2022; Knezek, Christensen & Gibson, 2022). The engineers and scientists, in technological creations, need empathy to understand the behavior of the end-users. The end-user empathetically helps scientists in human trials whenever there is any technological innovation, or when technology encounters some critical situations. In the field of education, too, empathy is given a top priority since a healthy society can be built only if the youth are taught to be more empathetic towards one another. Teachers resort to empathy focused pedagogies hoping that by mingling empathy to their teaching, it would be easier to hold society together and to obliterate discrepancies despite its vast differences. Empathy can also be turned as discourse in the curriculum, and used to build the attitude to understand the learners' needs and requirements compassionately.

Studies have discovered that the study of literature can help learners develop compassion and empathy to promote their psychological and social health in addition to their academic achievement (Barton & Garvis, 2019; Hammond & Kim, 2014). This empathy can be established by exposing them to reading diverse texts (Porto & Zembylas, 2020). There are several texts that provide empathy education; however,

there is a surge in recent times to employ literary texts, particularly of fiction, to promote empathy (Lauritzen, 2019; Wagner, 2020; Monaco, 2020). In psychotherapy, examining a story's characters' moods can be a useful source of behavioral empathy training (Keen, 2007; Keen, 2006). Studies have illustrated a link between the study of fictional narratives and the development of empathy in young learners (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Junker & Jacquemin, 2017). These studies demonstrate that students' compassion and understanding levels can be improved by reading fictional narratives.

1.1 *The Link between Fiction and Empathy*

Keith Oatley, a cognitive psychologist at the University of Toronto, studied the psychological effects of fiction and concluded that when learners are engaged with stories about other people's lives, it can improve empathy and theory of mind (Oatley, 1999, 2003). Along with his colleagues, Oatley published a series of studies to establish a correlation between reading fiction and better academic performance by making use of empathy (Mar et al., 2006; Djikic, et al., 2009a; Djikic, et al., 2009b; Mar et al., 2009). In their experiments, they tested learners' ability to recall authors' and characters' names, and gauged their results in the form of Interpersonal Reactivity Index to show how much fiction they had read and the extent to which empathy was used. In a nutshell, Oatley (2016) strongly believed that a culture that promoted reading literature develops more sympathetic and compassionate individuals, since literature, particularly fiction, increases empathy in individuals. The rationale behind this is that individuals form a collaborative representational link with the characters whenever they read fiction (Oatley, 2016). When learners make conclusions about characters, it increases their empathy.

This is consistent with Gallese (2001) who believed that while reading fiction, readers make a less self-versus-other distinction. They experience a more similarity in their neural mechanisms which helps them to grasp the sentiments of others as well as of their own individual self. Bal (2013) also observed that fiction elicits an emotive reaction; wherein the writers expect their readers to experience a common mental relationship with the characters. Due to that emotive reaction, the readers are able to empathize with characters and can deduce whatever characters are experiencing. Mar et al (2009), too, asserted that empathy is built up in individuals by reading literature as it builds a theory of mind which enables them to understand others' intentions and to respond most empathetically. In short, these studies believed that fiction has the ability to transport readers into the characters' mind, allowing them to see and feel what they do, and understand the perspectives of others in an empathetic fashion.

Other recent studies that support this view of empathy engaging readers with characters of fiction include Lauritzen (2019), Wagner (2020) and Monaco (2020). These studies found the empathetic perspective as the major psychological mechanism by which readers relate themselves to fictional characters. Studies like Fernandez-Quintanilla (2020) even went a step ahead and asserted that certain textual strategies can also engage readers to empathize with characters.

1.2 *Empathy through Diversity of Narrative voices*

Readers can often experience empathy with characters from a stylistic perspective, termed as narrative empathy, defined as "the psychological process whereby recipients of narrative texts grasp and vicariously experience what they perceive are characters' mental states" (Keen, 2006; Keen, 2010). Narrative empathy thus highlights the psychological processes in which the readers are engrossed during reading. There are several approaches that instructors can adopt on their part to stimulate narrative empathy in their students within their classrooms. It does not need to be constricted in terms of a prescribed curriculum but rather the teachers themselves can adopt certain approaches on their behalf to instigate the feeling of empathy within their students. For instance, teachers can identify such literary texts from diverse cultural backgrounds that contain multiple characters in new landscapes. Many students may not have frequent interaction with people from other cultures. Hence, reading such texts gives students an opportunity to witness a lifestyle and discourse significantly diverse from theirs. Teachers need to make efforts in terms of introducing students to diverse literary texts about other nations and cultures, to bring in diversity that would develop them into empathetic personalities. The students can empathize with anything that the characters and the narrative share. Ultimately, this exposure can help them see life from a broader perspective (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014).

The narrative diversity has another advantage for the readers who read novels featuring characters not similar to them. The readers develop mental flexibility as they attempt to adopt perspective and thought processes of characters in these narratives diverse from their own. This broadens their mindsets as well and they acquire a lot of information about diverse cultures through characters (Adichie, 2009). This is the beginning of empathy, because, despite the diversity in these narratives, readers correlate themselves with the characters, assuming them to be similar to themselves, the ones who act and behave similarly (Boyd, Causey, & Galda, 2015). In such a state, readers are unwilling to alienate themselves from the narrative, which Bal (2013) termed as "adverse mirrored reaction," wherein individual readers become increasingly self-centered to safeguard their sense of self-identity.

There are several instances in literature that can be cited in favor of teaching the element of multicultural diversity in a classroom. The more readers are exposed to the life of characters in literature, the more empathetic they will become to comprehend the differences and challenges of real life. When students correlate themselves with the characters in fiction or in a short story, they also understand all the elements of the plot of the story, the themes, and the motifs that the writer aimed to convey. For instance, *Annie John*, a novel written by Jamaica Kincaid in 1985, is a story of a child as she moves from puberty to womanhood and matures emotionally and physically. As she strives for her independence from her mother, the readers' empathy broadens their understanding of her world and they realize how the young female protagonist faces the issues of racism and colonialism. Likewise, in a short story "Barn Burning" by William Faulkner, the main character Sarty raises a voice against inequality and social injustice in the post-Civil War south. Readers might feel the empathy in Sarty's act of defiance when he sets fire to the barns as his own view of justice. The readers feel the rebelliousness in him and might justify

his acts of defiance and barn burning.

These stories are all examples of universal emotions, feelings of compassion, self-understanding and act of correlation of the self with the other. The readers correlate themselves with characters, while each story significantly influences their self-perception because literature has the power to induce readers physiologically to perceive another person's actions as their own, and critically emphasize self-consciousness. Readers reflect on the personalities of the characters in the same way as they are projected since masterfully crafted literature sabotages readers' brain connections and sends intense sensations into their minds, making it difficult to emotionally control the effect on their minds. It is therefore critically essential for instructors to strike a balance during reading sessions and take breaks to check on and reinforce emotional control abilities. Such checks and balances might help to regulate the readers' empathy and enable them to think critically about the literary approach (Martinez, Temple, & Yokota, 2017).

A teacher-led dialogue during the literature reading session may also give readers the opportunity for independent reflection, to negotiate a logical thinking strategy, and to better grasp the topic (Tschida, Ryan, & Anne, 2014). Caution should also be taken to put in terms of selecting books for this sort of approach because books with varied protagonists may include unpleasant attitudes and stereotypes about particular cultures. As a result, it is critical for instructors to select novels that will neither harm an individual's self nor promote negative views toward another culture. Studies have demonstrated that reading literature naturally fosters empathy (Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1990; Oatley, 2016); hence it is important to make students read literature that they might find inherently engaging. Such reading of literature develops empathy (Mar, et al, 2006), irrespective of age, gender, intellect, and personality variables as literature readers outperform non-readers on tests of empathy and theory of mind (Tamir et al., 2016). The individuals who are readers have superior social-cognitive abilities compared to those who do not read. An increasing body of recent literature backs up the contention that reading fiction is the only way to teach empathy via literature (Petraschka, 2021; Monaco, 2020; Turner, 2020; Alam, 2022).

There are several techniques to gauge students' reaction and responses about the text, including pre-reading sessions of fiction or offering them a Literary Response Questionnaire (LRQ) to participate and debate about plot, characterization, and other events in the narrative. Students find these techniques intriguing as they get the opportunity to integrate into a dialogue with just another person, a character or anything else that takes away their attention. The purpose of this study was to present practical techniques for promoting empathy in institutions, and propose certain measures that could be adopted both at the instructor or organizational level as something that would fit within the existing curriculum. To accomplish this, the present study thoroughly examined readers' responses on two sampled texts, Amy Tan's *Two Kinds* and Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, to understand how far the reading of fiction stimulated empathy in students. The study also emphasized the significance of fostering empathy through teaching of fiction and considering the influence that it made on human behavior and emotions.

2. Theoretical Framework

The argument of empathy in fictional narratives lies on grounds of transcending the mental as well as physical boundaries and accepting the feelings and perceptions of others (Martinez, Yokota & Temple, 2017; Lauritzen, 2019; Kidd, & Castana, 2013). To understand this phenomenon, this study used two theoretical underpinnings: Theory of mind and Decety's and Gerdes' conceptual frameworks (Gerdes & Segal, 2009; Decety, 2007). Both these theories accentuate how literature fosters empathy in individuals and allows them to tune in on the feelings of others as well. The Theory of Mind, for instance, is predominantly the capacity to comprehend one's own and everyone else's mental states and, predict psychological variables (Gao, 2019). It assigns oneself as well as others, psychological state values, intents, wishes, and so much more. Because consciousness is indeed not directly visible, the Theory of Mind is regarded as a theory, which postulates that in this mental state it is very difficult to pinpoint what others are thinking. All one can do is create judgments based on individual assumptions, feelings, and observations; it defines our interpersonal relationships, as well as assesses, interprets, and draws conclusions about others' conduct (Gao, 2019).

Oatley (2016) observes a direct effect of the reading of fictional narratives on the human mind through the theory of mind which believes in accentuating the understanding of the reality that people might not share the same thoughts and feelings. The theory of mind also postulates that reading fiction exposes us to new experiences, imparting cultural perspectives and reducing our sense of unfamiliarity with others (Kidd, 2013). The theory of mind thus defines the extent to which an individual can comprehend and attribute a specific psychological condition without needing to align oneself with that state of mind. However, when the theory of mind is applied to empathy, empathy is easily recognizable, because it holds the notion that our beliefs might be substantially different from others. To put it in another way, empathy refers to the capability to discern the psychological response of other people or to feel what some other individuals are feeling.

The second theoretical underpinning that guided the current study was Decety's and Gerdes' frameworks. The Decety's framework comprises four parts: emotional exchange involving self and others; the individual's consciousness of the self; cognitive flexibility; and emotional control (Decety, 2007). Gerdes' paradigm comprises three parts: an emotive reaction; cognitive processing of the emotional reactions and the other person's perception; and deliberate decision-making to engage in sympathetic behavior (Gerdes & Segal, 2009). Both Decety's and Gerdes' frameworks were utilized to accentuate how literature in general fosters empathy in individuals (Gerdes et al., 2011; Decety & Michalska, 2012).

Decety's and Gerdes's frameworks were used to ascertain the stimulating empathy within students' minds. Affective empathy includes Decety's affective sharing and Gerdes' effective response. In this, the text includes instructions for eliciting an emotive response; this component is completed by instructors. However, it is their responsibility to assist students in developing that emotive response and working

to prevent any emotional imbalance. This is possible with an emphasis on a control over emotions and empathetic skills. Empathic skills from Decety's framework include self-awareness, mental flexibility, and emotion regulation. While cognitive empathy from Gerdes's framework includes both forms of cognitive processing and conscious decision-making. These methodological approaches are chosen for their capacity to reframe thinking and promote perspective-taking. Cognitive distortions are frequently what limit sympathetic cognitive processing, therefore by understanding those barriers, students may better acquire the skill of having sympathetic cognitive reactions free of bias or prejudice. The ability to ask proper questions is critical for boosting development across situations. When it comes to encouraging learners' empathy growth, instructors have no greater tool in their armory than questions since posing questions drives reflection in the student's minds. Mindfulness and awareness are both rooted in the present moment in dealing with what is instead of what should or could be (Chapman, 2006).

Delving deeper into the role of literature in empathy, emotional reactions are elicited through literature (Oatley, 1999, 2003). It is critical to use literature with high emotionally evocative effects when teaching affective empathy via literature. This entails examining literature with which students may empathize and, in a sense, forget themselves. If this is not a possibility, instructional strategies such as the ones previously suggested can be used to make texts more interesting. However, a text should not be so emotionally evocative that it turns psychologically painful, because emotional suffering promotes adverse instead of altruistic action. This is beyond the instructor's control. The remedy is to assist students in developing the empathetic abilities necessary for coping with this situation.

According to Oatley (2016), general research exhibits that correlative effects have been identified in tests among lifelong reading and theory-of-mind, and reading stimulates neural networks in our brains conducive to responding to others empathetically. This is achieved via pathways in the brain which correspond with the systems used to process the self's emotions. This is predominantly the way how literature teaches emotional empathy to individuals. Psychological empathy is established when individuals learn how or when to react to the sentiments of everyone else. Individuals who enjoy reading fiction not only acquire human cognition, but also learn how to participate in interpersonal circumstances (Bal, 2013).

Educating and empowering students with compassion is crucial as it enables them to cultivate empathy towards others throughout their lives. The research indicates that before they reach the age of two, children demonstrate empathetic concern, as compared to their own anguish, and before forming a theory of mind, or the capacity to identify intentions (Decety & Michalska, 2012; Jensen, Vaish, & Schmidt, 2014; Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1990). It is still vital to an individual's entire existence for a variety of reasons. Surviving in a diverse society necessitates the development of intellectual capacity, enabling individuals to perceive, understand, and appropriately respond to the actions of others (Gallese, 2001).

3. Methods and Materials

3.1 Design

A qualitative research design was used to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences. The present study adopted an empirical stylistic approach to conduct a thematic analysis of readers' responses, combining stylistic-narratological analysis of two sampled texts, Amy Tan's *Two Kinds* and Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. Both datasets were collected and analyzed to understand how literature, particularly fiction, stimulated empathy in individual readers. Though the study specifically aimed to collect specimens of empathy in the narrative fiction, it ultimately focused on the effects which each sampled text made on readers to examine the extent of readers' empathetic engagement with characters.

With a scientific and experimental approach, this study further extrapolated the stimulation of empathy through literature to understand how the brain gets affected when readers imbibe the emotions and feelings of the characters. The study also attempted to link this reader-character dichotomy with the Theory of mind and Decety's and Gerdes' empathy development theories to understand how empathy can be fostered through teaching of literature (Gerdes & Segal, 2009; Decety, 2007), and investigated how readers develop mental flexibility by reading literature and experience the emotional empathy, and how they understand characters' intentions and ascribe their emotions to their personal lives by responding empathetically.

3.2 Procedure

For this research, the students were given two texts: Amy Tan's *Two Kinds* and Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. The instructors conducted the reading sessions of each text, and the students were asked to reflect on the characters they encountered in each fictional narrative. For this purpose, a Literary Response Questionnaire (LRQ) was adapted, derived from Miall and Kuiken (1995), and given to the participants to give their responses. The LRQ comprised a set of questions which prompted students' thoughtful reaction, evidently showing signs of developing an empathetic connection with characters in the text. While the students reflected deeply through each text and its characters, the researchers observed their empathic responses, which helped them in understanding the unique reflections of each student in general. This reflection also helped them in taking into account various human emotions felt by each student.

A reader's response mechanism was used as a tool in this study which enabled the researchers to summarize readers' views. The objective of using the reader response mechanism was to give students the opportunity to articulate their profound and empathetic experiences with the reading of texts. In reading literary texts, teachers should assume the role of facilitators rather than instructors, which encourages students to actively associate themselves with the text and link each word of the text meaningfully with their daily lives. The benefit of the reader response is also to enable the teacher to understand the level of students' comprehension and literary engagement. Moreover,

among several methods to implement reader response underpinnings in text-reading sessions, the LRQ method was found to be the most useful tool to stimulate the understanding of the students and analyze the way they engaged themselves with their texts and symbolically perceived themselves with characterization of each text.

3.3 Tool: Literary Response Questionnaire

The Literary Response Questionnaire (LRQ), developed by Miall and Kuiken (1995), was adapted for this study to administer to a group of undergraduate students studying “literature” as a major. The LRQ was originally designed to examine readers’ response to a literary text and to provide scales to measure different aspects of readers’ orientation towards a literary text, including empathy, the subject of the current study. The LRQ also aimed to help teachers of literature to review their classroom practices and teaching techniques as the questionnaire reflected how readers negotiated with the meaning of a text in terms of its setting, plot and characterization. Since the original questionnaire along with its subscales had measured internal consistency and in its multiple usage in a number of studies (Osanaï & Okada, 2011; van Schooten & de Glopper, 2003; van Schooten, Oostdam & De Glopper, 2001) and had also proved its reliability and factorial validity, the focus in the current study was only on the qualitative characteristics. Table 1 lists 18 questions adapted and utilized for the current study.

As mentioned in the previous section, the participants were provided two literary texts: Amy Tan’s (1989) *Two Kinds*, a 20th century short story and Charles Dickens’ (1868) *Oliver Twist*, a 19th century novel. The responses collected from students articulated this study's greater relevance for an expressive reaction about the relationship between fiction and empathy. The findings as discussed in the later sections, presented readers' and characters' group identities as specimens of literary empathy; however, students' opinions ranged substantially from one another because of differences in their perspectives. Their responses were provided subsequent to the designated readings.

Table 1. Literary Response Questionnaire

Questionnaire: Answer the following questions based on your reading of the texts.	
1.	What is the most intriguing fact about the book’s main character?
2.	Which character do you relate to most in this book/text? Why?
3.	Which character do you relate to least in this book/text? Why?
4.	Identify the range of emotions which the character felt at certain point of time in the story. Can you think of a time when you also felt like this?
5.	Assume you have the opportunity to create a new character for this book. What role would your new character play in the story?
6.	What advice would you give to the main character in your novel if you could?
7.	List six adjectives that define the book’s main character.
8.	After reading the novel, considering all the actions and decisions made by some characters towards the end, which one stood out to you the most? What do you think they might do next as a result of that particular decision or action? If you were in their position and had to make a choice based on that specific action, what would you do differently, if at all?"
9.	Do you enjoy your book’s main character? What is your reasoning?
10.	Consider a crucial occurrence in your novel. What would have happened if this incident had not occurred?
11.	How did the actions of certain characters’ influence or shape the behavior or fate of another? Can you identify specific moments or sequences that exemplify this impact?
12.	Think of pivotal situations or moments the main characters might have faced in the stories you read. Can you describe some of the situations and explain why you believe the characters made the choices they did during those particular moments?
13.	What three questions would you ask the main character of the novel if you could?
14.	Recall any experience that the main character had in the story. Do you think you can understand why he/she made that choice?
15.	Referring to the pivotal situations or moments you just described from the stories, how would you react if you were faced with those same circumstances?
16.	What do you think might have been the biggest conflict that the main character in your story faced?
17.	Considering the main characters and central plot of the novel, which relationships do you believe were most crucial to the story's development and outcome?
18.	Choose a specific supporting character from the novel that you found impactful. If this character were removed from the narrative, how do you believe the story's progression and the dynamics between the main characters would change?

Source: adapted from Miall and Kuiken (1995)

The instructors reflected on the students' responses following their submission. The instructors identified the challenges that students faced, specifically, their level of involvement with the text when prompted to think about a character’s emotions, motivations, and behaviors. To gauge the empathy from the students’ responses, it was important to know how students related the character’s emotions, motivations, and behaviors to their own lives.

3.4 Method of Analysis

Being a qualitative study, the major findings of this study concentrated on the relationship between specific narrative themes and ethical appraisal of characters. The readers’ responses to the LRQ provided useful insights of the textual impacts on readers' empathy. Upon a thorough content analysis of these responses, readers' empathy emerged as a highly adaptable and situational phenomenon. This underscores the necessity for a pragmatic approach that takes into account the intricate interplay between the text and the reader. Hence, this study chose to adopt an analytical approach that addressed the individual and context-specific components of literary reading. This strategy required an emphasis on close reading and recording students' reading experiences (Beach, 1993).

Most importantly, this study recognized the shift in the reader-centered approach in recent decades (Fish, 1970) which required stressing more on the connection of the readers with the text rather than mere responses or the feedback. This study, therefore, aimed at analyzing readers' transaction or interaction with the text to elucidate a more empathetic response and a greater eliciting effect. The readers' responses to the LRQ questions were therefore analyzed with the view to examine the cohesive links between readers' and characters' group identities which emanated literary empathy felt by the students upon reading two literary texts sampled for the study, namely *Two Kinds* by Amy Tan, a short story, and *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, a novel. The difference in the opinion of the students differed greatly from each other based on the difference in their perceptions.

4. Results and Discussion

The Literary Reaction Questionnaire (LRQ) was adapted for this study to record readers' personality characteristics as specifically exhibited from the LRQ-identified responses to literary texts. Each of the items of the LRQ aimed at examining the factors from readers' educational and social backgrounds that affected their reading methods. These factors not only provided readers the experiential and textual orientations to reading of the texts, but also gave the empirical support to the researchers to understand readers' capabilities, beliefs and reasons, and an evidenced oriented understanding of how they visualized the environment portrayed in the narrative, how they empathized with the characters and reflected on the storyline or the actual narrative reality.

From the responses received from the participants of the study, it could be inferred that their observations were their personal opinions rather than literary reactions, which clearly indicated that they empathized with the characters. As humans, they also had emotions and perceptions which they encountered in the characters of the text. These experiences were their actual reactions after they were asked to engage with the two literary texts sampled for the study, Amy Tan's *Two Kinds* and Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. Their responses were based on the LRQ adapted for this study from Miall and Kuiken (1995) and summarized to highlight the element of empathy felt by most respondents.

In Dickens' novel, Oliver is not so haunting as child protagonists like Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, and characters in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*; he is rather passive, innocent, gentle, and kind (Fitriani, 2016). His innocence and kindness remain unaffected throughout the novel, which was noticed by most participants of the study, who were also stunned to see such a consistent behavior and steadfastness in a child. Many of them also said that Oliver was too good to believe as he never reacted to the bad experiences around him. They were empathetic for him when he was surrounded by coffins and corpses at Mr Sowerberry's or when amidst vicious criminals such as Sikes, Fagin, Mr. Bumble, and Monks. Such a response is merely based on the similarity of human emotions between the self and the other which illustrates the subjectivity of their responses.

Dickens portrayed Oliver as a kind and honest child who is full of compassion and other good qualities, which was a most common response from the participants of the study. This empathetic response was strongly felt when Oliver was captured by the gang and he was begging to return the books he was carrying for Mr. Brownlow. Though he was amidst thieves, Oliver was full of compassion and spotless conscience. He was persistent with his honesty and morality: "They belong to the old gentleman," said Oliver, wringing his hands; "to the good, kind, old gentleman who took me into his house, and had me nursed, when I was near dying of the fever. Oh, pray send them back; send him back the books and money. Keep me here all my life long; but pray, pray send them back. He'll think I stole them; and the old lady; all of them who were so kind to me: will think I stole them. Oh, do have mercy upon me, and send them back!" Such an outburst of goodness made a participant comment, 'Oliver's personality is so engaging; he is not aggressive; he is so affectionate. I like his compassion and love him for his kindness'.

Students also showed their creativity by comparing Oliver to a ball being tossed between two teams, a good and a bad one. Their empathy was in Oliver being treated like an object. Their compassion stemmed in seeing Oliver as an orphan, an abandoned child, who was starving and yet not grumbling. Even his name 'Twist' was noticed by some respondents as the "twist at the end of a rope on the gallows", very empathetically expressed. It is not difficult to understand where this expression of empathy was coming from. One of the participants put it very simply: 'His mother died. One day he asks for more food, but the sir in Workhouse hit him with a scoop. And they treat him like a criminal because he asks for more food.' Such a naivety and simplicity was the result of indifference or apathy that Oliver was subjected to, and which could not escape the attention of the readers. This naivety was also seen when a few respondents sympathized with the evil characters as well and commented: 'The evil characters in the novel such as Fagin and Sikes could be better people if they were raised in a better society and given the chance to be in good condition'.

The second text given to the students was a short story, Amy Tan's *Two Kinds*. The story is about a young American girl, Jing-Mei, born to Chinese parents; her mother pushes her to become a child prodigy like the child star Shirley Temple or turn into an academic genius surpassing knowledge and expertise of other children, but she resists. She often sees her own reflection in the mirror and realizes how strong she is, which makes her defy her mother. The main conflict in the story is therefore between Jing-Mei and her mother, which is external. However, there is the daughter's internal conflict too as she is torn between her wish to please her mother and her own unwillingness to change. After her mother's death, however, Jing-Mei begins to realize what her mother had wanted for her. She looks back over the music and discovers something that she hadn't noticed before.

After reading the short story, the students were expected to express their response and critically examine the expository remarks of the two characters, the mother and the daughter. In their very first reading, students called it a "powerful tale" about pushy parents and their children. One student expressed 'I must admit that I couldn't control my tears as she shouted in her mother's face. That is not what mothers deserve. Even if they sometimes use harsh language, they always have the best intentions for their kids, whatever means they choose. Furthermore, I

was very saddened by the daughter's statement that she hoped to pass away with her sisters. Little girls never consider how their words may affect their parents'. A few other students felt badly for Jing-Mei when her mother forced her to follow the American dream: 'Jing-Mei doesn't have to follow her mother's dream'. The ending was also sad and the mother's need for perfection and the daughter's need for independence created a huge conflict in the story.

The students also shared that their perceptions changed as they progressed the reading of the short story: 'it started with the first page when I noticed that she had taken the magazine from the homes she cleaned. It seemed like a sign that the mother had a good reason for her dream to make her child become a prodigy. The mother has difficulties in her life and does not want her daughter to inherit these difficulties. Even with all my sympathy, there is one point where I didn't like what she did since nothing could possibly explain it. In these lines "Her chest was heaving even more and her mouth was open, smiling crazily as if she was pleased that she was crying"'. The students also said that their initial thoughts changed when they first encountered Jing-Mei. She was obliged to perform numerous things, so they felt so sorry for her. One student said that 'When the story started, Jing-Mei was overly enthusiastic, but as it grew more complicated and her mother became uncertain about what her daughter might turn out to be, Jing-Mei started to feel depressed and dull because she was merely a person who was inspired by her mother's wishes during their extended journey for the prodigy, I felt sorry for the young girl who had to play several roles in order to be an obedient girl. From a Chinese Shirley Temple to a pianist, she begins to discover herself.' One student even responded that she felt herself related to Jing-Mei as it was easy to put her in the shoes of the characters and feel where they were coming from.

The account of readers' responses to the two texts reveals that there can be a multitude of feelings and psychological processes that determine responses to literature. The findings suggest that while readers reflect the feelings of fictional characters and feel empathy for their trials and tribulations, in fact, the readers are actually attempting to relate to their own experiences and expertise. Their reactions to literary reading have commonalities based on inherent human emotions. This is how responsive readers interpret a literary text by linking its events, characters and setting to their own lives. These findings also reveal that literature, particularly fiction, may also be used to challenge students' ideas, to stimulate critical thinking, and spark debate and controversy. Narrative tales frequently address contemporary issues and experiences that speak to readers of many backgrounds, cultures, and ages. These stories involve love, sorrow, betrayal, or redemption, for example, and might elicit similar emotions and reactions in various readers. This is perhaps the reason why students exhibit emotions that are known to human beings.

The current findings revealed that, regardless of the type of literary text being analyzed, students are often more likely to empathize with fictional characters than a real person, while responding to a survey questionnaire. Individual literary responses also varied based on the two texts read in the classroom, thus showing how empathy could vary between fictional characters and real persons. This echoes the findings of Petraschka (2021), who highlighted this phenomenon of variance between cognitive empathies between characters in fictional narratives and the real persons. This could be seen as a limitation of the LRQ, which although evaluates this variation but focuses only on the text and its contents, and not the real persons. It is important that LRQ should have a wider scope to include items related to real life, so that while respondents react to fictional narrative, they also are aware of their own emotions and those of the peers. This may be achieved by including in LRQ statements that indicate conceptions, attitudes, preferences, and behavioral descriptions, which may gauge readers' self-perception as well as facilitate the understanding of other easily comprehended variables. Recent studies, like the one by Deane (2020), suggest that readers appreciate literature because it enables them to empathize with the characters. Similarly, Turner (2020) also supports the idea that engaging with fiction enhances cognitive empathic abilities among its audience.

It is crucial to recognize that students' responses to literature can be varied and complicated, reflecting their own experiences, viewpoints, and identities. Students may connect with diverse viewpoints without self-criticism by practicing the non-judgment component of mindfulness. Educators must provide a safe and inclusive learning atmosphere that values student diversity and promotes conversation and reflection. Acceptance of students' learning would encourage them to tolerate opposing viewpoints before jumping for an alternative solution. This connects to cognitive empathy because these abilities allow students to interact with one another and with texts without conflict since they understand that different points of view may be held on a topic. The teacher can help students improve cognitive empathy by asking questions that focus on the facts of what happened and encourage them to take notes.

It is easier for readers to adopt a particular perspective once a pragmatic approach is embraced since readers do not feel ambiguity when asked to examine their own and others' views at the same time. Moreover, building a perspective is essential for empathizing with others. Instructors should encourage students to ask questions in order to comprehend and embody the viewpoints of others rather than dispute them. This might give rise to cognitive biases on the side of the student or the other person, but this is necessary for establishing a dialogue within thoughts and fostering cognitive empathy. Such factors like cognitive versatility, perspective-taking, emotion management, and self-reflection are important components of Decety's and Gerdes's paradigms. Each of them can be used to accentuate how fiction promotes empathetic responses in the students.

The rationale behind the use of the Literary Response Questionnaire (LRQ) in this study was that the tool considered literary reaction as being autonomous of the individual text being studied and the precise reading circumstances at disposal (Miall & Kuiken, 1995). This concept is limited to reading with an artistic bent (Rosenblatt, 1995). Similarly, the level of empathy is felt when reading can be changed by the content or reading scenarios. In contrast, one can easily picture readers' choices for specific texts being impacted by their literary reactions. Yet, research backs up the notion that individuals may be categorized as possessing a proclivity for certain types of literary reactions (Bunbury, 1985; Purves, 1973). A contemporary objective of literature is to enhance individuals' reading habits and attitudes about literature. An empirical study on literary response as well as the evaluation of student achievement towards literary responsiveness aims

needs the presence of precise and valid literary response measures (Goetz & Sadoski, 1996). Reader reaction studies some of which are centered on the evaluation of literary think-aloud procedures show that almost all readers are cognizant of their independent reading and can offer accurate accounts of their experiences.

The Literary Response Questionnaire (LRQ) is designed to assess the literary responsiveness as a feature or attribute mirroring an individual's psychological response when interpreting fiction texts. It also predominantly measures variance between many readers who have a very well-developed understanding of literature. Some of the readers might choose to read to escape the knowledge of their everyday issues while others normally approach fiction to follow the growing storyline and few others describe reading to acquire information regarding their own and many others' emotions. The LRQ also supports the notion of literary reaction as a consistent individual attribute (Purves, 1973) as it gives an opportunity to students to respond similarly to multiple narratives. Similarly, Bunbury (1985) observes that students react to a text in the same way as for an independent of genre. Students may also benefit from employing an LRQ because they are not simply instructed how to think about a text, but also how to defend their different readings of a text employing textual evidence and support. The LRQ not only stimulates instructors' literary instruction, but it also reignites students' enthusiasm in reading since the attention is split between the reader and the text, rather than exclusively on the text as a self-contained entity.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between readers' and characters' group identities as witnessed in the form of a literary empathy among students. The study sampled two literary texts, Amy Tan's *Two Kinds* and Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. A Literary Response Questionnaire was adapted to collect responses from the students after they had read the text, to examine how far its characters had triggered expressive reaction in them. The students' responses varied substantially from one another due to differences in their perspectives. These responses also helped in determining the intensity of their connection with the characters of the texts. Students also introspected as they read the text, which assisted them in considering the basic human emotions and define the empathy in relation to the characters of the text.

The Theory of mind and the frameworks of Decety and Gerdes helped in understanding how and why students' minds got stimulated by empathy. Decety's emotional sharing and Gerdes' effective reaction were kept as examples of affective empathy. These concepts offered directions for understanding the emotional reaction as it evoked in the readers and served as an aid to prevent emotional contagion. These theoretical underpinnings further guide in emotion management and understanding the readers' conscience that permitted some transient characterization and an empathetic relationship between self and others (Gerdes et al., 2011).

One of the revelations of the study was that while using literary texts, teachers need to act as facilitators rather than instructors, and that students should actively interact with texts by integrating the words into meaningful linkages to their daily lives. Such interactive reactions can help students improve their understanding and literary engagement. Although there are several tactics that support the fundamentals of the reader response approach, the literary response questionnaire is one of the most beneficial exercises that enhance students' knowledge and the way they connect with their readings. The teachers should do their very best to enhance the cognitive capability of their students within the classrooms to take someone else's viewpoint through a set of questions. This makes students move beyond the egocentrism of infancy and obtain the competence to deal with cognitive empathy. The capacity to manage one's emotions is something that is normally gained in the early years, but this fact should be normalized that this is still an ongoing process and that it should always be viewed as a critical talent to continuously improve.

Another method to classify these activities from a methodological standpoint is by instructional methods: writing, discussion, conversation, performance, craft, and so on. It is critical for educators to use a variety of instructional methods to motivate as many students as appropriate. For instance, students might benefit from brainstorming ideas with their friends in discussions. Discussions stimulate students to acquire relatively high intellectual capabilities including such complex reasoning, decentralized thinking, and constructive thinking, and can also teach empathy. It also enables students to communicate their viewpoints, which allows for interpersonal, as well as self-reflection and emotional control when their own viewpoints are challenged. This is a constructive technique that enables individuals to exhibit their own knowledge and assimilate alternative ideas in language, making their cognition more exact, coherent, and insightful (Greenlaw, 2003).

Writing is another important technique to help students learn how to react critically and build arguments backed by evidence and reasoning for self-reflection (Greenlaw & Deloach, 2003). Writing also allows them to properly construct their thoughts and effectively participate in self-reflection. Writing can be blended with an empathy development program when instructors can offer different perspectives to students vis-à-vis self-reflection. The instructors could intervene at certain points to assist their students in being more perceptive toward their surroundings as well as the feelings of the people they encounter on day-to-day basis. It ought to be reiterated that the goal of the intervention is not intended to teach a specific perspective, but rather to entertain and engage them in reading a text.

Whether reading or writing, or reader response or discussion forums, it should be beneficial in helping students flesh out their ideas, both creatively and empathetically. Institutions can stimulate creativity, igniting the youthful imagination with the flame of knowledge, which could result out in empathy. Such initiatives in the reiterative mode can sharpen students' minds and help them attain a higher level via transformation.

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