



# Teaching Character: A Practical Guide

Reading the Pictures: Using Picture Books to  
Motivate Empathy and Compassion in Young  
Readers

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**Abstract:** *Motivated by the belief that empathy forms the bedrock for our compassion, elementary teacher and MA graduate Claire Bourne shares her recent classroom project. Drawing from the findings of the Knightly Virtues Project, and from recent research into the links between empathy and reading, the project explored how picture books can be harnessed to encourage and motivate empathy in younger readers. Key to the approach was creating opportunities for imaginative engagement, perspective taking and reflection.*

### **Reading the Pictures: Using Picture Books to Motivate Empathy and Compassion in Young Readers**

Empathy, our ‘spark of human concern for others’ (Hoffman, 2000), is the moral emotion which, when nurtured, motivates our compassion and also provides a building block for developing our principles of justice and care (Noddings, 2013). As an educator, I’ve often witnessed the power of picture books to enthrall young children. But can picture books do more than captivate and entertain, could their power be harnessed to help students experience, practice and value empathy?

This project explored the potential for picture books to provide a context for young children to experience and practice empathy. The intention was not only to identify what worked with younger readers, but why it worked. During the project, four different stories were shared, sometimes requiring two sessions per story. Each story featured a protagonist who experienced feelings of empathy and had to make a decision about how to act. Details of the books chosen for the project are included below (Fig.1). The successful features of the project included utilizing illustrative content to help imaginatively engage students, focusing on perspective taking, and a letter writing component where students responded to a character.

Book Title	Author	Synopsis
How to Heal a Broken Wing	Bob Graham	Walking through the streets of a busy city, only young Will notices an injured bird lying hurt on the ground. Unable to walk away, he gently wraps the injured bird in a scarf and takes it home. After nursing it back to health, Will eventually has to release his new friend.
I Walk with Vanessa	Kerascoët	Explores the feelings of an unnamed protagonist as she witnesses a new classmate, Vanessa, being bullied and has to decide what action to take.
Those Shoes	Maribeth Boelts	Jeremy is desperate for a pair of sneakers, the ones that every kid in his school seems to have. A new pair is beyond the budget of his grandma but eventually he finds a pair at a thrift store and buys them, despite the fact they are far too small and hurt his feet. When he realizes that those shoes could be a help to his friend, he faces a tough decision. Should he give away his prized shoes to his friend?
Adrian Simcox Does Not Have a Horse	Marcy Campbell	Adrian Simcox is a daydreamer who tells anyone who will listen about his beautiful horse. Chloe, determined he must be lying, becomes more and more resentful the more he talks. She becomes angry enough to intentionally hurt his feelings. Chloe's mother intervenes to help her understand Adrian Simcox a little better.

Fig.1. Details of the books used in this project.

### Illustrative Content and Imaginative Engagement

Research on why adult readers experience empathy has highlighted the role of imaginative engagement. In adult readers, textual features such as foregrounding and ambiguities in characterization leave blanks that the reader needs to fill, through a process of imaginative engagement. Researchers have proposed that this slower, more thoughtful reading process, one where we engage more deeply with the characters, can increase feelings of empathy (Barnes, 2018; Koopman and Hakemulder, 2015). In this project a similar kind of deliberate and imaginative thinking was created, with younger readers, through a focus on illustrative content. This connection between illustrative content and imaginative engagement is supported by the research of Ghiso and McGuire (2007) who found that young children have a more active, engaged literary response when they were required to use the illustrations to establish narrative meaning.

The power of the illustrative content was considered during the process of book selection and in designing the sessions. In fact, two of the books selected were wordless, telling

stories of empathy through powerful illustrations alone. During the reading session there was an intentional lingering over the pictures. Illustrations were prominently displayed (a document camera allowed the teacher to frame the image, and hide any text) and the teacher issued a simple invitation 'can you tell what's happening?' The teacher took a backseat and the students led the process of constructing the narrative. The engagement created, by giving students that role in meaning-making, was evident and the close-looking it required provided a natural pathway to imagining character's perspectives.

### **Perspective-taking**

Our empathic abilities rest on our capacity to understand the perspective of another, a capacity that develops throughout childhood (Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992). Within each reading session, an intentional emphasis was placed on identifying characters' perspectives. Once students had constructed the narrative on a page, the teacher guided the discussion towards perspective-taking. Students were asked to imagine the internal and external dialogue of different characters.

Through analyzing recordings of the sessions, it was possible to learn about the students' perspective-taking skills. Comments like '*I usually look down like that when I'm nervous*' showed how references to body language and facial expressions of characters supported perspective-taking. These were often self-referencing comments, recalling personal experiences as a way to help explain a character's perspective. Directing students to notice body language and modeling the use of self-referencing could be ways teachers can support perspective taking.

Perspective-taking also created opportunities to build connections between stories, and towards wider concepts. Perspective-taking could draw out parallels between characters, which could build into conversations that grappled with larger ideas. In the extract below (fig. 2) a student, engaged in perspective-taking, notices a parallel between characters from different stories and the teacher uses this observation to explore the experience of being empathetic. The teacher's role involved listening and responding to perspective-taking in ways that help students reach bigger ideas.

**Teacher:** Tell me about this picture.

**J:** She, well she's with her sister and her brother, she's not even playing with them.

**L:** She's not even looking... she's not even looking at the TV!

**J:** I noticed something.

**Teacher:** What?

**J:** She, she, she kept her mind stuck on something and, and then in 'How to Heal a Broken Wing' Will kept his mind stuck on something.

**Teacher:** I think you're right. Yeah. Yeah. If you are the kind of person who cares about how other people feel, it's hard to forget when somebody's hurt or upset, she's having a tough time forgetting about it, isn't she.

Fig. 2. Exploring larger ideas through perspective-taking

## Letter writing

Evaluations of literature-based character education programs, such as *The Knightly Virtues* project (Arthur et al., 2014), have highlighted the need for students to not only read about virtues, but also to enact their moral identity. As Thomas Lickona (1991) advocated, students need opportunities to 'do the good', so they can develop the habits and competencies required for taking moral action. To enable younger students to 'do the good' during these reading sessions, a letter writing component was included, giving students the chance to respond compassionately to the characters.

When Karen Bohlin (2005) wrote about teaching high school students about virtue, through literature, she advised teachers to focus on the 'morally pivotal points' as a means to understand a character's motivations and choices. Within these stories, the pivotal moments tended to be when the protagonist experienced conflicting emotions or moral desires. For example, in 'I Walk With Vanessa', the protagonist witnesses a classmate being bullied and experiences a desire to help, but simultaneously a fear of retaliation. It was during these moments, rather than at the end of the story, that students were asked to share what they would write, if they knew the protagonist could read it at that moment. The notes varied in length and complexity, but as the project progressed the letters began to include more markers of empathy. The task of letter writing demanded that students reflect

on the protagonist's experience. Through these letters students demonstrated a desire to respond with sentiments of care, comfort and reassurance (fig. 3). Letter writing had engaged students in practicing a compassionate response to feelings of empathy.

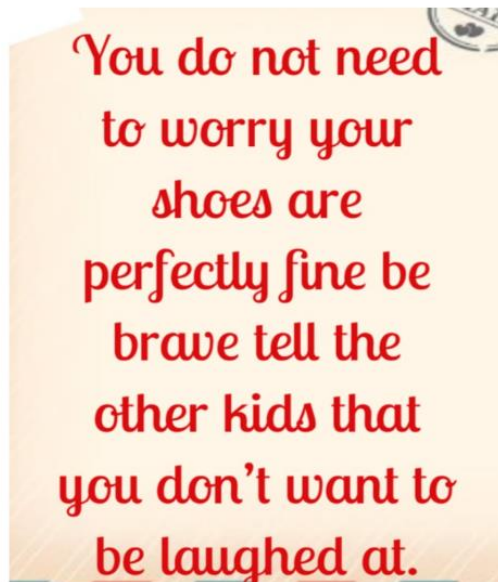


Fig.3. An example of a letter in response to the story 'Those Shoes'

This paper highlights the importance of the quality of the reading experience for younger students, and the teacher's role in curating that experience. When the design of the sessions cultivated a slower, more deliberate and engaged style of reading, with a focus of perspective-taking, the students were helped to engage empathetically with the plight of characters and, through letter-writing, practice a compassionate response. Although this project was focused on empathy, it seems plausible that these elements of imaginative engagement, perspective-taking and reflection through letter writing may form worthwhile components in any approach that aims to teach young students about character and virtue through picture books.

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