
Opening Doors to Empathy: Using Picture Books as Pathways to Compassion

Donna Fortune

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Abstract: Sensory figures are one strategy that can be implemented by teachers to cultivate and promote empathy with and for others. Teachers who implement picture book read alouds that include strong and well-developed characters promote sensory and evocative imagery through diverse texts and give students a pathway for understanding and building compassion for others. Many children's books are designed specifically to promote empathy by exploring diverse perspectives, emotions, and experiences and, when coupled with the development of a sensory figure, actively engage students in stepping into the shoes/lives of another person/character. This teaching strategy provides teachers with a bridge to give students an entrance for exploring a more empathetic stance on the road to becoming a more informed global citizen.

Teaching empathy to children is crucial for social and emotional development and provides students with a roadmap for navigating the pathway for developing compassion for others. As teachers work to meet the needs of a more diverse student population, building empathy is an essential component to help students build positive relationships with each other, improve their ability to communicate in a more diverse classroom and create more authentic opportunities for social awareness (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018). These skills may help students learn how to improve communication which can reduce conflicts, improve emotional intelligence and encourage general well-being and positivity in the global classroom. Additionally, Keegan (2021) suggests, “Understanding how emotions delineate citizenship boundaries is pivotal to the work of social studies education and the preparation of youth as engaged and compassionate citizens who can respond to human suffering” (p. 16).

Empathy is a foundational skill that is also crucial for personal growth, interpersonal relationships, and creating a more empathetic and compassionate world. Sanna (2018) posits, “Introducing a child to this concept of empathy, I believe, is the key to a united, globally conscious world” (p. 72). In 1933, Dewey shared “there is no education when ideas and knowledge are not translated into emotion, interest, and volition” (p. 189), yet empathy has not always been a purposeful educational goal. In today’s global classrooms, teachers must have empathy for their students in order to create opportunities in the classroom to promote empathy (Aldrup et al., 2022). Developing teaching strategies using children’s picture books to implement authentic ways to engage students in becoming more empathetic to each other has been a mission in my own practice. Many of the pre-service teachers I work with are often challenged when faced with the idea of building empathy or using picture books that may contain some difficult topics, and it is a challenge for current teachers as well. We need to find ways to help educators

with implementing this topic with students (Fortune & Barksdale, 2023; Payne & Journell, 2019).

Developing Empathy

Picture books are a powerful medium for implementing authentic experiences for students to actively engage in developing empathy and compassion for each other and themselves (Fortune & Barksdale, 2023). Diverse children's books with strong, well-developed characters and story lines offer vivid illustrations and experiences that can help young readers understand and learn to connect with their feelings and experiences with the new and often different experiences of others. When these three components are combined, students begin to learn and develop compassion and empathy for the different experiences of other people. Empathy is a crucial skill for students to develop as they navigate an increasingly interconnected and diverse world (Gerdes et al., 2011), and social studies content provides a valuable platform for fostering empathy and promoting positive social change.

In today's interconnected world, understanding diversity is crucial for success for students to comprehend their role as a citizen. As children grow up, they will interact with people from diverse backgrounds in their communities, workplaces, and social networks. They need to understand the complexities of social justice and their role as a citizen (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). By learning about diversity from a young age, children develop the cultural competence and interpersonal skills needed to thrive in a globalized society (Payne, 2018). This article explains the importance of building empathy with students and how to implement sensory figures using children's picture books in order to help students better understand the world around them and their place in it.

Building Empathy: Children's Picture Books

To develop empathy through social studies content, educators can incorporate various topics and teaching strategies that encourage students to develop empathy and learn to appreciate diverse perspectives, experiences, and cultures (Lain, 2019). Children’s picture books are consistently used in elementary classrooms and provide an effective entry for teachers to begin complex conversations with students. It is essential to provide students with more awareness of their role as a global citizen. By learning about diverse cultures, backgrounds, and experiences, children develop empathy and compassion for others. Understanding different perspectives helps children relate to people who may be different from themselves and fosters a sense of caring and connection with others. Specifically, Lock and Prestia (2004) suggest, “The human brain uses vision, taste, touch, sound, smell, and motion to make sense of the environment and produce a response” (p. 172). By using sensory details and images in stories, educators and storytellers can create a more immersive learning experience with specific opportunities for responses from their students.

This teaching strategy, creating sensory figures, allows listeners/readers to visualize and, in many ways, feel what the characters are or have experienced thereby fostering a deeper emotional connection and understanding of the place and time of the character. This connection is an essential component for understanding others that can be used by educators to engage students in understanding the perspectives of those who may not sound or look like them or experience their own culture. As a result, creating sensory figures is one strategy teachers can implement to foster empathy for others in all grade levels. It can be the first step in helping students understand how to see the world in the light that we are all global citizens and our actions impact others around us (Estellés & Fischman, 2021).

Stories provoke us to attend and oftentimes become more emotionally involved in the narrative of a story. Grundel and colleagues (2022) go so far as to suggest that stories are the natural language of the brain. Brains process information in sequences that are attached to previous experiences and histories to make meaning of the world around us. Stories can evoke levels of oxytocin that provide pathways for our emotions to become engaged in the narrative or, in this case, the picture book that is read prior to asking students to create a sensory figure (Zak, 2016). The listener (or reader) of the story that has a well-developed character can create a sensory pathway for becoming more empathetic by making a sensory figure to unpack the emotions or feelings of the character. As students begin to develop empathy, they learn more about the point of view of others which begins to improve their own ability to function as a more informed citizen because they start to understand someone else's view of the world. Students can build more meaningful connections with others, including teachers, parents, and other students.

Engaged Global Citizens & Empathy

In our increasingly interconnected world, fostering empathy is crucial for nurturing citizenship and helping students understand their role as engaged citizens. Empathy allows individuals to connect with people from diverse backgrounds, understand others' experiences, and build meaningful relationships across geographical and cultural boundaries (Keegan, 2021). It provides a bridge for shifting from the mindset of 'us' or 'them' to 'we' and develops a more inclusive and compassionate environment as students develop more understanding of diverse cultures, climate issues, conflicts, and the impact of the world's diversity on people. Engaged with empathy, individuals can recognize the impact of these issues on others, inspiring them to advocate for justice and solutions through the lens of a more empathetic stance. Collaboration

requires empathy and the ability to communicate across cultures, borders, and languages.

Empathy promotes the idea of respect in that students begin to learn to listen to each

Other, and it can lead to promoting a more inclusive global community (Kollntai, 2015).

Implementing strategies for students to build empathy toward others helps students move toward a anti-complicity approach when engaging people from different cultures and backgrounds (Zembylas, 2019).

Sensory Figures

Sensory figures are not literal figures, but rather a teaching strategy that can be used to engage students in using their senses (sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing) to enhance learning and build empathy about a variety of topics in the classroom. For example, in the children's picture book *Each Kindness* (Woodson, 2017), the character Chloe deals with the emotions of empathy, regret, and the ripple effects of kindness and cruelty when she encounters a new student. After listening to the story, students would be asked to put themselves into Chloe's shoes and use their five senses to create a sensory figure (image) from one small moment in the story to better understand how she (they) might feel in that moment.

Sensory figures are a literary device that teachers can use to engage all the reader's senses and help them make more aesthetic and efferent connections to a character (Rosenblatt, 2005). By incorporating sensory details, writers can create a more vivid and immersive experience for the reader. Students use the language of the text or imagery to create their own sensory figure to help them try to understand the point of view of the character they select to write/draw about. Incorporating sensory details and diverse texts in storytelling can significantly increase empathy among readers as they begin to better understand how to make inferences about the characters based on the emotional connections that sensory figures can promote.

This strategy requires students to use various senses to create a more engaging and immersive learning experience, particularly aimed at fostering empathy in students for others. When paired with picture books, this engagement allows students to bridge the gap between the abstract ideas of the story into more concrete experiences which can lead to not only better comprehension but more empathy for the experiences of the character. Engaging students in using multiple senses can also provide them with more motivation and memory for the concepts (Chatterjee et al., 2016).

Implementing opportunities for using sensory figures to engage multiple senses creates opportunities for students to reflect on the character, the background, and the events of one small moment in time that the character is experiencing and step into their lives for a moment. They are asked to use their senses to envision the character's feelings and emotions. By presenting stories that include a wide range of sensory experiences and perspectives, children can learn to empathize with characters who may perceive the world differently from themselves.

Sensory figures also enable students to connect with the character's emotions and experiences on a much deeper emotional level and reflect on how their emotions and perspectives are often different and sometimes similar to those of the character. Students begin to develop a different type of empathetic vocabulary as well as beginning to reflect and think more about the emotional impact of the sensations they begin to feel as they step into another person's experiences.

Sensory figures can be implemented as an interdisciplinary content strategy in various content areas. Here, I focus on how to incorporate this strategy into social studies instruction. By incorporating sensory figures effectively, educators can create a dynamic and engaging learning environment that caters to diverse learning styles and empowers students to become more active

and empathetic learners. Teachers utilize the language from the story that helps promote visual images, sights, sounds, smells, and textures from the character or historical event. Sensory figures involve descriptive language that expands children's emotional vocabulary. By encountering words that describe various emotions and their corresponding sensory sensations, children gain the tools to not only understand their own emotions but also identify and empathize with the emotions of others as they engage in listening to the stories and create their own sensory figures (Kaplan, 2016).

Implementing Sensory Figures in the Social Studies Classroom

Global citizenship is the concept of individuals seeing themselves as members of a global community and being aware of and taking responsibility for the challenges and opportunities faced by people around the world (Payne, 2018). Empathy allows individuals to understand and connect with the experiences of others, even those who are different from themselves (Hasio, 2015). This understanding can lead to a sense of shared responsibility for the well-being of all people, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, or social status.

For example, when individuals can empathize with the plight of refugees fleeing war or violence, they are more likely to support policies that assist refugees. Similarly, when individuals can empathize with the experiences of people living in poverty, they are more likely to support policies promoting economic development. In addition to promoting a sense of responsibility, empathy can also lead to more compassionate and understanding interactions between people from different cultures. When individuals can see the world through the eyes of others, they are less likely to judge or stereotype others (Batson & Ahman, 2009). This vision can lead to more respectful and inclusive interactions, which can help to build bridges between different cultures.

Empathy is an essential component for building global citizenship because it allows individuals to connect with others on a human level. This connection can lead to shared responsibility for the well-being of all people and more compassionate and understanding interactions between people from different cultures. For example, when students learn how to empathize with students who experience poverty, connections can be to supporting fair trade; if someone is living in an area that is highly contested, students might learn about strategies for peacebuilding initiatives. When students learn to empathize with the experiences of others from different cultures, countries, or who look different from them, they can begin to become less afraid of the unknown and more likely to learn how to respect other cultures and people.

Sensory figures in children's picture books can serve as a bridge, a platform for educators, to use in connecting young readers to diverse characters and their diverse experiences (Lain, 2019). By engaging the senses, fostering emotional connection, and expanding emotional vocabulary, these figures play a vital role in nurturing empathy and understanding in children. This experience can set the stage for positive social interactions and emotional intelligence as they learn the importance of seeing themselves as a part of the global citizenry.

A Model Lesson: Sensory Figures and Diverse Children's Books

This lesson can be adjusted for different grade levels (elementary, middle, high, or post-secondary). The resources provided throughout were developed by the author to support the usage of Sensory Figures as a teaching strategy to help build empathy and provide teachers with resources for building a more empathetic classroom and students. The general directions for conducting this activity include how to model a read aloud with the follow-up activity of a sensory figure:

- Discussion about Read Alouds/Sensory Figures
- Modeling how to complete Sensory Figures

- Read Aloud (a few pages)
- Participants write brief reflections about the character (feelings, ideas)
- Read Aloud (a few more pages)
- Participants will be asked to complete a sensory figure about that ‘small moment’ of time in the story (the moment can be assigned or student selected)
- Share their sensory figure with partners/small groups

Although this paper is specifically geared toward elementary students, I use this activity regularly with pre-service elementary teachers to provide them with a tool to use in their future classrooms. It can be easily adjusted to middle or high school students because picture books evoke emotions and between the narrative and the imagery, students can ‘feel’ the story (Kaplan, 2016; Lain, 2019).

Step One: Inferencing

Many students know there are five senses, but it is essential to help students see beyond the basic vocabulary of the ‘senses’ and understand how to make inferences about how their five senses can function in the historical context of the story. Sensory figures target the five main foundational components of the senses: see, smell, hear, taste, and touch which students learn in preschool and kindergarten. But when paired with this activity, these five senses take on additional meanings as they relate to how students learn how to put themselves into the characters’ shoes. Students are then expected to begin to create and generate inferences about how these *generic* senses can take on additional meanings. This first step is critical for helping students understand how to use inferences to help them use their affective and efferent stance as a listener and as readers of the texts. This stance helps them begin to see others in a different way. The ability to make inferences from texts helps students develop the cognitive and emotional skills necessary to understand, relate to, and empathize with the experiences of others, both in literature and in real life.

Step Two: The Read Aloud

Read alouds are an authentic way for teachers to provide opportunities for students to use sensory figures. Not only can they serve to help students to engage their senses in understanding the world around them; they can also provide students with opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of how to use descriptive language to explain their own emotions and experiences (Fortune & Barksdale, 2023; Kaplan, 2016). Conducting a read-aloud for use as a sensory figure activity requires the ability to engage students' in using their senses and encouraging them to immerse themselves in the story. Frequent opportunities to pause and discuss the story and prompt them to envision some of the small moments (outlined in Step Three) in the story can help them better engage their senses and imagine themselves in the story. It is important to encourage students to use descriptive language to articulate their own sensory experiences as they listen to better understand the characters' experiences in the text.

Selecting the text and its purpose are critical components that must be addressed carefully. Although it is important to select a book that is rich in sensory details and includes descriptive language, strong character development is also essential. The book must be read a few times by the teacher to help prepare questions to help students focus attention to passages that contain vivid sensory descriptions and small moments that may be used by students when they create their sensory figure as part of Step Three.

As the read aloud is conducted, draw attention to the sensory details and help students begin to use their own language to describe the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and the textures that the story suggests. Students can even be asked to close their eyes to envision the details. Promote discussion by pausing after some of these moments to encourage students to reflect on the experiences of the character and their own sensory experiences as they listen to the story.

Give students opportunities to share their feelings and emotions about certain small moments in the story and entrust them with the knowledge that you value their feelings and interpretations. After reading the picture book, give the students opportunities to talk with each other about the story—a debrief for them to think and reflect on the events of the story. This helps students further engage in reflecting on the character’s emotions and deepens their understanding of the events of that small moment in the story. Appendix A includes a list of picture books that include sensory opportunities to help select texts to use with sensory figures. This list is not inclusive of all texts; it is provided as a first step into helping select authentic texts to use with sensory figures.

Step Two: Small Moment Stories

A small moment story is a type of narrative that focuses on a brief, specific event or experience and is traditionally used for improving writing instruction. When used with sensory figures, they help the student focus on specific moments in a story to help build a student’s capacity for empathy. Small moment stories do not encompass the entire story or even a series of events; a small moment requires the writer to think about a single moment in a story where they then begin to highlight the emotions, sensory details, and significance of that particular small moment. When students complete a sensory figure, they place the emphasis of the small moment on a specific event or moment in the story rather than the entire story. Students then can create a more detailed description with additional emotional depth as they begin to think about the sensory details of the small moment. They learn how to immerse themselves in the story, into that one instance as they reflect and begin to make inferences about the character and how that specific small moment impacted the character.

For example, when reading (or listening to) *Henry’s Freedom Box* (Levine, 2016), students learn that Henry escapes slavery when he mails himself in a box to a free state

(Pennsylvania). After listening to the story, students are asked to infer what he might see, hear, smell, taste, touch while he is inside the box (with very little light). Students must make inferences beyond that he just sees the blackness all around him or touches the sides of the box. They begin to think that he ‘sees his freedom’ or he ‘smells fear’ as he is afraid that he might be found. They begin to reflect on how he might feel fear or taste the salt of his sweat from being inside the box.

A second example is from the story *Pink and Say* (Polacco, 2019). In the story *Pink and Say*, students must put themselves in the shoes of any of the three main characters (Pink, Say, or Moe Bay). Sheldon Curtis (Say) is an illiterate white soldier fighting for the Union Army during the Civil War. Pinkus Aylee (Pink) is a black teenager who is also fighting for the Union Army with the Colored Units. Moe Bay is Pinkus’ mother. These well-developed characters provide students with the opportunity to choose a variety of small moments and characters that they would like to think about in more depth. The examples below (Figures 1, 2, and 3) were created by practicing teachers using sensory figures for the first time.

Figure 1

Moe Moe Bay



Figure 2

Pinkus



Figure 3

Say



Step Four: Sensory Figure Activity

Students can complete their sensory figures in one of two ways. They can use a template (outline of a character; Appendix B) or they can draw their own. Students then would select one small moment from the story to reflect and think about as they start to think about through engaging their senses. They are asked to focus on this one small moment and share what the character is feeling, seeing, hearing, tasting, and touching. Students can make lists, short phrases, or sentences to describe their ideas, but all ideas must come from their own emotional stance about how they ‘think’ the character ‘feels’ in that small moment.

Also included in the resources is Appendix C, a graphic organizer that teachers may choose to use with elementary students. The left column is designed for primary grades and the right for upper elementary. The handout can be used as a template to help students generate their own thoughts, ideas, or feelings. It can also be used as a model where the teacher creates a

sensory figure with the students to scaffold how to create a sensory figure. Sensory figures can also serve as a brainstorming tool to help students write more about the experiences of the character or the character themselves.

The discussion of their sensory figures is an essential component of the activity. Students discussions about their sensory figures not only permits them to share their personal interpretations of the characters but also the perspectives of other students. Each student has used their own experiences to interpret the experiences of the characters in the small moment from the story. There may be similarities (as you can see in the examples provided) but there may also be new ‘AHA’ moments to learn from as students engage in sharing their own perspectives. These moments are where the true learning and empathy for each other starts to happen.

Conclusion

Small moment stories serve as powerful tools for building empathy with children by fostering a deeper level of emotional engagement and promoting understanding of the perspectives of diverse students. They also provide opportunities for students to engage in reflection on the intricacies of human relationships and diverse experiences. Through these well-developed stories, readers begin to develop the empathy and compassion necessary to connect with others on a deeper level and navigate the diversity of the world with greater understanding and empathy. Students learn how to make inferences, improve their own sensory language, and build empathy for others.

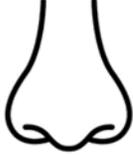
Sensory figures can create a multi-dimensional learning experience that ignites students’ natural curiosity and motivates them to begin to see others in a new light. It provides students with opportunities to begin to see others as they foster a deeper understanding of how others experience the world. Sensory figures provide students with opportunities to see the world

through other experiences, perspectives, and lenses. By incorporating sensory figures effectively, educators can create a dynamic and engaging learning environment that provides experiences that empower students to become more active and successful learners as they learn to navigate their learning and become more active in their role as global citizens.

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Appendix C*

For Younger Students		For Older Students
See/View		I watched I viewed I perceived I recognized I identify
Hear/Listen		I heard I listened I attended to I perceived
Tongue/Taste		I said I tasted I savored I perceived
Smell/Aroma		I smelled I detected I perceived
Touch/Feel		I felt I touched I feared I sensed I detected I perceived
I can see I can hear I can taste I can smell I can touch/feel	Additional Suggestions	I believed... I succeeded... I hoped... I tried... I thought...

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2019.1639792>

Appendix A

Examples of Children's Books	Author
<i>Chrysanthemum</i>	Kevin Henkes
<i>Each Kindness</i>	Jacqueline Woodson
<i>Henry's Freedom Box</i>	Ellen Levine
<i>I Am Enough</i>	Susan Verde
<i>Last Stop on Market Street</i>	Matt de la Peña
<i>Pink and Say</i>	Patricia Polacco
<i>Stand in My Shoes: Kids Learning About Empathy</i>	Bob Sornson
<i>Strictly No Elephants</i>	Lisa Mantchev
<i>The Color Monster: A Story About Emotions</i>	Anna Llenas
<i>The Day the Crayons Quit</i>	Drew Daywalt
<i>The Hundred Dresses</i>	Eleanor Estes
<i>The Invisible Boy</i>	Trudy Ludwig
<i>The Listeners</i>	Walter Dean Myers
<i>The Paper Bag Princess</i>	Robert Munsch
<i>The Rabbit Listened</i>	Cori Doerrfeld
<i>White Socks</i>	Evelyn Coleman
<i>Wishes for Wednesdays</i>	Mini Grey
<i>Wonder</i>	R.J. Palacio
<i>You, Me, and Empathy</i>	Jayneen Sanders

Website Resources
https://www.readingrockets.org/books-and-authors/diverse-bookshelf
https://diversebookfinder.org/our-categories/
https://hereweeread.com/2022/02/the-2022-ultimate-list-of-diverse-childrens-books-copy.html
https://www.leeandlow.com/
https://www.socialstudies.org/notable-trade-books
https://socialjusticebooks.org/booklists/

Appendix B

