

3.8.4 Empathy through Literature

Brief description, and rules of the implementation of the learning activity

Reading or listening to stories that highlight characters' emotions provides a rich context for children to practice emotional perspective-taking. This activity encourages children to notice and name how characters feel, why they might feel that way, and what might help them. Using classic children's books, the teacher leads discussions and activities that explore the emotions, thoughts, and motivations of the characters, helping children step into the characters' shoes and reflect on how they would feel in similar situations.

Skill focus

- **Primary Skill Focus**
 - Empathy
- **Complementary/Secondary Skill Focus**
 - Emotional awareness, regulation and communication

Age group	Student number	Duration
6-10 years old	Whole class	45-60 minutes

Proposed step by step implementation of the learning activity

1. **Prepare the Material:** The teacher selects one or more passages from classic or age-appropriate children's literature, focusing on scenes where characters experience strong emotions or face moral dilemmas. The passage can be a full scene or short excerpts depending on time and age.
2. **Read Aloud:** The teacher reads the chosen text aloud to the class, using expressive tone and pacing. They pause at key moments—such as a character making a tough decision, experiencing a loss, or expressing joy or anger.
3. **Guided Reflection Questions:** After each pause, the teacher asks questions like:
 - What is the character feeling right now?
 - What made them feel that way?
 - Have you ever felt something similar?
 - If you were in their shoes, how would you react?
 - What could the character do next?

4. **Pair or Small Group Activities:** Children break into pairs or small groups to:

- Act out short scenes, experimenting with different emotional responses or outcomes.
- Create “emotion maps” showing how the character’s feelings evolve through the story, using drawings, symbols, or colour coding (e.g., red for anger, blue for sadness, yellow for joy).

5. **Sharing and Class Discussion:** Groups share their interpretations or creative outputs with the class. The teacher facilitates a closing discussion, comparing different emotional journeys and encouraging students to reflect on how stories help us understand others' feelings.

Indoor/Outdoor Classroom layout notes

Indoor: Arrange students in a semi-circle around the teacher during read-aloud to encourage focus and facial expression observation. For pair or group activities, use floor mats or tables where children can act out scenes or create drawings together in a calm, shared space.

Outdoor (optional): If the weather allows, reading sessions can be held under a tree or in a quiet corner of the school yard. Children can sit on mats while listening, then move to small groups spread out for discussion and drawing.

How does this learning activity develop this particular skill?

Reading or listening to stories that highlight characters' emotions provides a rich context for children to practice emotional perspective-taking. This activity encourages children to notice and name how characters feel, why they might feel that way, and what might help them.

Through guided questions and class discussion, the activity helps children:

- Identify emotional cues in the text or illustrations,
- Reflect on how they themselves might feel in similar situations,
- Explore appropriate and supportive responses.

By discussing literature together, students also develop emotional vocabulary and learn that emotions are complex, valid, and often influenced by context. The shared experience of the story opens a safe space for connection and empathy.

What do we want to achieve regarding primary skill development (student understanding and/or behaviour)?

As a result of this activity, students will:

- be able to recognize emotions in others
- be able to use perspective-taking through fiction
- be able to connect fictional scenarios to personal experiences
- be able to discuss about emotions and actions

Suggested use, and practical subject-related examples

- After reading *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (ages 6-7), children discuss how Peter felt when he disobeyed his mother and was chased by Mr. McGregor.
- After *Charlotte’s Web* (ages 8-9), they explore Wilbur’s feelings of loneliness and Charlotte’s compassion.

- After Matilda (ages 9-10), they discuss how Matilda felt misunderstood and how Miss Honey showed empathy.

Suggested Books

- 6-7 years old: The Tale of Peter Rabbit (Beatrix Potter), Frog and Toad Are Friends (Arnold Lobel)
- 8-9 years old: Charlotte's Web (E.B. White), Pippi Longstocking (Astrid Lindgren)
- 10 years old: Matilda (Roald Dahl), The Hundred Dresses (Eleanor Estes)

Materials and tools needed for implementation

- Copies of the books (or selected passages)
- Paper for emotion maps
- Art supplies for drawing character emotions

Guiding questions

- How did the character's feelings change during the story?
- Have you ever felt like one of the characters?
- How would you have felt in that situation?
- How did other characters show empathy?
- What does this story teach us about understanding others?

Tips and Tricks for dealing with challenges

- **Challenge:** Some children may focus only on the plot and struggle to identify feelings.
Tip: The teacher should model emotional interpretation, saying, "I think Peter might feel scared because..." to demonstrate the link between actions and emotions.
- **Challenge:** If children give simplistic answers ("He's sad"),
Tip: the teacher can prompt deeper exploration with questions like, "Is he sad or frustrated? How are those different?" The teacher should also validate all emotional interpretations, encouraging children to see multiple perspectives (e.g., how Mr. McGregor might feel).

Difficulty level tailoring

- **Beginner learner (6-7 years old):** focus on naming basic emotions and acting out scenes with exaggerated body language to reinforce feelings.
- **Advanced learners (8-9 years old):** introduce character perspective journaling, where they write diary entries from the character's point of view.
- **Experts (9-10 years old):** encourage debate-style discussions, asking whether characters made the right choices and how empathy could have changed the outcome.

Debriefing and Reflection questions

- How did the character's feelings change during the story?
- Have you ever felt like one of the characters?
- What helped the characters feel better or more understood?
- What could another character have done differently to show empathy?
- What does this story teach us about recognising and respecting emotions?