

Trends in Empathetic Reading for Freedom Students

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Introduction

Abstract

Students in a Freedom School summer program were recorded in an exit interview, covering a variety of topics related to the program. Here we focus in on one question set regarding how the students relate to characters in the stories read. These analyses serve to inform future research into identifying why a large group of the students were not able to readily relate with characters in the stories, as well as to perhaps inform future Freedom School programs how they might improve student connecting with the stories being read.

Goals & Questions

It is hoped that that general trends and common quirks might be identified in the set of students at the freedom schools who said they did not relate with any characters in the stories read over the program's duration. Certain trends are expected, although the set of students isn't large enough to make broad general claims.

What is collected and determined can then be used by future researchers and program coordinators to better aid the students. This may be in the form of either revised exit interviews, a more specific and informed research project, or changes in the program's reading list.

Leads and Expectations

- Age group will most likely dominate as a common trend
- A majority of students may not fully understand or relate in this context
- Some students will likely be resistant to reading in general
- Students may show signs of relating elsewhere in their talk, even if they don't think of it as such



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Method

Research Design and Subjects

Exit interviews from the 2016 North Florida Freedom Schools were coded and analyzed specifically for qualities of the student showing signs of relating with characters in the books they read, as well as any associated qualities that may shed light on how or why the student did not feel any connection with the characters.

"Do you feel like you could relate to some of the characters of the stories you read?"

"Did you feel you could relate or be friends with some of the characters of the books you read?"

The students were 5 to 13 years old, but divided by age into three levels by the camp, with the younger children in the lower level, and older students in the higher levels.

"Did you feel like some of the characters were like you?"

Students across all levels were divided between three groups based on their response to the question of relating with characters. These groups are students who provided a clear "yes" answer, students who gave a firm "no" answer, and those who either changed their answer or struggled to understand. The latter two groups received the most attention in a qualitative analysis. These groups are then furthered layered with additional determinants that are believed to highlight potential trends.

"Did any of the stories seem like a story that you know personally, like you've been through?"

Data Collected

Students with Clear "No"

Requires Definition	Level	Has Favorite/Liked Books	Explains Why	Character Focus/Talk	Indirect Relating
No	1	X	X	X	X
No	1	✓	X	X	X
No	1	✓	X	✓	O
No	1	O	X	✓	X
No	1	✓	✓	O	X
No	2	O	O	✓	X
No	2	✓	✓	✓	O
No	2	✓	✓	✓	X
No	2	✓	✓	✓	X
Yes	3	✓	✓	✓	O

Students with Flipped or Unclear Responses

Requires Definition	Level	Has Favorite/Liked Books	Explains Why	Character Focus/Talk	Indirect Relation
Changed	1	✓	✓	✓	O
Changed	1	✓	O	X	X
Changed	1	✓	✓	O	X
Changed	1	O	X	X	X
Yes	1	✓	✓	X	X
Yes	1	✓	X	X	X
No	2	✓	✓	O	X
No	2	X	✓	✓	✓
Changed	2	✓	✓	✓	✓
Changed	2	✓	✓	O	X
Changed	2	O	O	X	✓
No	3	✓	✓	✓	X

For contrast, 22 students were able to readily identify with a character. Of this set, four were Level I students, 12 were level II, and six were level III students. Only a single level I student required defining of the word relating in this context.

Results

Discussion

Age is the most consistent determinant in being able to relate. This is likely a child developmental issue as much as it is uncertainty in the question itself. Younger students could consistently answer, although they did not explain as much as their older peers.

"I don't really know why I liked the books...I just liked it."

Students overwhelmingly say they to enjoy reading, or are able to provide a favorite book of some kind. This is in spite of being unable to articulate why they favor a book or being able to relate to characters.

Several students showed signs of prior discussion on relating in a classroom setting. Students who quickly could speak on relating to characters consistently showed signs of character relation elsewhere prior. Several students who flipped their answer to a positive after a change in questions for example did speak on similarities between themselves and the characters in a book.

Several student explanations and preferred books were rooted in less human or character focused topics. A fantasy story with Humpty Dumpty or historical pieces may hold the attention of some students, but would be more difficult to directly personalize with. This may not be a bad thing, as the case of historical interest may be a sign of a higher reading level.

"I liked The Watsons go to Birmingham... I studied that Birmingham was, was the most racist place back then in 1963 and I was surprised that the Watsons would go there if they knew that."

Conclusions

There may not be a strong need for students to relate with characters, for the purpose of growing student interest in reading. Most every student was able to speak well of books in some way at least.

- Sympathetic to...
- Understand the motivations of...
- Personalize with...

For fostering student development, the question of relating may not be entirely the best question. Interviewers had a variety of reinterpretation of the question to aid the student understanding. But not all explanations were alike or synonymous.

Future studies would be best served with discussion and interview shortly after students have read a story, rather than weeks potentially. These would use an array of developmental questions, considering sympathy, understanding, and personal similarities. These would be aimed towards a variety of different story types which are already common in student curriculum.