Chapter 7
Empathy Through Textual and Dialogic Engagements:
A Classroom Narrative Study

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the co-authors explore the power of children's and youth literature as high-quality materials for building connections online during the pandemic. Both authors note their experiences, as well as texts that provided a range of connections. The chapter is a narrative case study of the first author's experiences, while the researcher/co-author includes experiences that line up both practically and theoretically. The difficulty of pandemic teaching, as mitigated by some steps in instruction, is a theme of the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Flexibility is a term that teachers know well. Educators at all levels have to be able to change course on a dime for all sorts of reasons, including the individualized needs of learners (Corley, 2005) and times of trauma (Crosby et al., 2020). Sometimes a lesson completely fails because the technology educators expected to be able to use suddenly fails to work, or teachers have to rethink how to teach a lesson because the students are not ready to learn it as envisioned. Being flexible is just part of our job and being able to adapt to whatever changes are necessary is also something that teachers have learned to do daily. In sum, educators are always responding. Burns and Botzakis (2016) noted that responsive teaching is purposeful and considers "learners' identities *and* academic needs" (p. 12). The 2020-2021 school year certainly gave students, teachers, and families many challenges. Because of the essential nature of teacher voice, the narrative study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004) presented in this chapters highlights the

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experiences of the teacher/co-author. The experiences of the researcher/co-Katelign with this teacher's stories of classroom practices that been illuminated by interactions in online spaces, and his notes form a background for the chapter, as well, in terms of practical and theoretical alignments.

WHEN TEACHING CHANGED (AGAIN)

When the pandemic hit, teachers were expected to be flexible in ways that seemed impossible – and sometimes were – leading to the need for both reflection and self-care (Vanderhill & Dorroll, 2022). A lot has happened in the last few years in classrooms, both virtual and in-person; we hope never to revisit many of the events from this year. Surprisingly, there have been some changes that have occurred in the 2020-2021 context that have been ideas we will continue to use moving forward. This article is focused on the practices of a middle grades teacher (Jason), who made instructional decisions to foster online community through literacy practices during the pandemic. For Jason, the most surprising of all has been that the need to be flexible has led to empathy in my classroom and school community. We have been humbled over and over again this year and together with our students have realized a lot about community. Through social-emotional learning, or SEL, (Denham et al., 2003; Katzman & Stanton, 2020), we have grown and we have had to be incredibly flexible in our classroom community. This experience has made us have a deeper and more empathetic understanding.

In the course of the researcher/co-author's experiences as a middle grades educator, schooling seemed to be in a constant state of flux. There were standards changes, textbook changes, and personnel changes at both the school and district levels that seemed to be continuous. This called for constant reading and refreshing of materials, and changes in lesson plans. Additionally, classroom practices changed in response to the growing world of technology. When the researcher began teaching, his classroom was stocked with a few tattered books and a whiteboard. By the time he moved to post-secondary education, nearly all of his students carried cell phones and a large digital screen decorated the learning space. This digital accenting of the traditional brick-and-mortar space was arguably reversed or expanded in the 2020-2021 teaching context.

Notably, teachers found themselves attempting to make connections with students across distance, using digital platforms and video conferencing to maintain some sense of community, as well as steps toward learning. This was a pedagogical and communal reality that varied in contexts, from struggles with making Internet connections to increased linking with learners and even authors to demonstrate literacy practices (Buchholz et al., 2022). Many educators were striving to make the connections and invite the participation that is a hallmark of responsive environments (Maskiewicz & Winters, 2012). As Buchholz et al. (2022) further noted, engagement around children's literature was a nexus point for learners. The teacher/co-author in this chapter illuminates their practices with this phenomenon further through the use of texts for empathy building.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN MIDDLE GRADES LITERACY

A number of frameworks exist for social-emotional learning, a topic that has proliferated and been pushed back on in the pandemic context (Blad, 2020). We are particularly drawn to frameworks and approaches

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