



## Teaching Empathy to Students Aged 10-12 Years through Storytelling: An Action Research Study

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Submitted 03.07.2025

Accepted 27.11.2025

Published 31.12.2025

#### Volume No. 12

#### Issue No. II

ISSN (Online) 2414-8512

ISSN (Print) 2311-293X

#### DOI:

**Keywords:** Empathy, Storytelling, Action Research, Primary Education

### ABSTRACT

*Empathy is not an innate trait but a capacity that develops through emotional and social growth, enabling individuals to recognize, understand, and respond to others' experiences with sensitivity. Stories are powerful tools for engagement, education, and influence, especially for young learners. This qualitative action research explored the effectiveness of a storytelling-based intervention incorporating creative activities designed to enhance empathy among primary school students. A total of 22 students participated in a series of structured sessions, including storytelling, role-play, and participatory drawing and narrative activities. Data were collected through four structured sessions conducted over four weeks, following a consistent sequence to ensure procedural uniformity. Quantitative data were collected using a pre- and post-intervention empathy assessment and analyzed through paired-samples t-tests. Results demonstrated a statistically significant increase in empathy scores ( $p < .001$ ), with large effect sizes (Cohen's  $d = 6.07$ ; Hedges'  $g = 5.96$ ), indicating meaningful and consistent improvements across participants. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which revealed that students developed a deeper understanding of empathy through emotional awareness, perspective-taking, and personal connections with the stories, which encouraged prosocial thinking. Findings suggest storytelling with narrative-based and creative approaches can effectively nurture emotional understanding, perspective-taking, and prosocial behavior in young learners. These results highlight the potential of integrating storytelling and creative activities into classroom practice as a structured, engaging, and reflective approach to social-emotional learning. Future research may examine the long-term impact of such interventions and their application across diverse educational settings.*



### Introduction

Empathy ranks amongst the most essential skills an individual should develop for the future. It must not be something extra; rather, it should be considered fundamental (Webb et al, 2024). It is an aspect of human development that is critical for overall social functioning (Kimberly, 2011). Empathy is personally experiencing a situation emotionally and possessing the ability to comprehend it socially (Demetriou & Nicholl, 2021). It emphasizes the feelings of other people and their viewpoints. It is based on perspective taking (Makoelle & Tsediso, 2019). It enables individuals to better understand their own feelings, connect with others, and act with kindness and consideration. For children, it plays a crucial role in forming

friendships, developing strong emotional bonds, discouraging bullying or disruptive behaviors, and helping them engage more positively within their communities (Odumegwu et al., 2022).

Teaching empathy to students can have a positive influence on their attitude, emotional insight, cultural acceptance, and understanding (Webb et al, 2024). Within an educational setting, empathy is a social behavior in the relationship context. It can be taken as a response to a request to address the learners' sufferings, needs, and turmoil. Empathy has become quite essential in corporate, academic, and educational environments. It is viewed as vital for leaders and teachers to understand, acknowledge, and encourage individuals with varying qualities and backgrounds (Makoelle & Tsediso, 2019). Regarding students, there's never a justification for improper conduct, but frequently a reason, which a deeper, shared understanding may resolve. (Lepkowska, 2024).

Stories are powerful tools for engagement, education, and influence. According to Peterson (2017), storytelling not only fosters connection but also cultivates trust and familiarity. It invites the listener to engage with the content from their perspective, thereby enhancing openness to learning. When engaged in a story, a reader experiences the emotions of the main character, such as feeling a sense of loss if the character encounters it. (Odumegwu et al., 2022). This makes stories a powerful tool for teaching empathy to young learners. According to Johnson, Huffman, and Jasper (2014), cognitive psychologists, fictional stories can foster empathy by encouraging listeners to envision themselves in the shoes of others, thereby fostering an understanding of those who are perceived as "outsiders." Beyond creating connection, stories help establish trust and familiarity, allowing listeners to enter the narrative on a personal level, which in turn promotes openness to learning (Boris, 2017).

To establish a conducive learning environment, empathy is significant in a teacher's character, as it promotes strong relationships within the classroom. Evidence indicates that higher levels of teacher empathy led to fewer reported bullying occurrences in both the classroom and school grounds. If the teacher practices empathy, the same is followed by the students (Makoelle & Tsediso, 2019). Empathic attitudes are beneficial for students in cultivating responsibility, friendliness, pacifism, respect, honesty, tolerance, and the human values of collaboration and cooperation, which are essential for teamwork (Derelli and Aypay, 2012).

Naturally, humans are not born with empathy. It is part of their healthy emotional and social development, which enables them to be sensitive and understanding toward others' struggles. The presence of five skills makes an emotionally intelligent individual: self-awareness, self-control, self-motivation, social skills, and empathy (Rivero, 2020). Empathy begins to develop during childhood and matures during the adolescent period (Jacob, 2024).

## **Literature Review**

Empathy is a core socio-emotional skill essential for children's development, influencing prosocial behavior, emotional regulation, and relational understanding. While some studies highlight a modest genetic contribution to empathy, evidence suggests that environmental factors, including upbringing, socialization, and classroom experiences, play a dominant role in shaping empathic capacities (Warrer et al., 2018). This indicates the potential for educational interventions to cultivate empathy intentionally amongst students. School-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programs have been found to enhance not only students' social functioning but also their broader developmental outcomes, demonstrating that empathy can be purposefully nurtured (Silke et al., 2024).

Storytelling and narrative practices are a central approach to teaching students about empathy. Such innovative methods engage children with diverse perspectives, allowing them to emotionally and cognitively inhabit the experiences of others. Bertolotti et al. (2024) examined the impact of storytelling and creative writing on empathy in a randomized trial with 175 participants. Those who engaged in practical storytelling activities indicated significant improvements in empathic abilities compared to a control group, highlighting how narrative-based activities can effectively foster empathy. Structured and intentional storytelling sessions and reflective writing have been shown to significantly improve empathic skills and promote emotional resonance in learners.

By integrating narratives that are culturally and contextually relevant, educators can make learning personally meaningful, thereby supporting both empathy development and critical thinking (Aramudin & Susanti, 2024). Narrative-based approaches encourage students to recognize emotions, consider alternative viewpoints, and connect classroom learning to social realities, establishing a foundation for prosocial behavior and inclusive interactions.

Complementing narrative approaches, the art activities, including drawing, observing, and interpreting artworks, provide powerful mechanisms for empathy education. Engaging children in creative expression allows them to externalize and reflect on their own emotions while simultaneously exploring others' perspectives (Harz et al., 2023). Observational and reflective art practices encourage perspective-

taking and emotional awareness, helping learners to recognize the experiences and feelings of others in a tangible and meaningful way (Einarsdottir et al., 2009). The combination of narrative and artistic interventions not only enhances emotional literacy but also supports cognitive and social-emotional development, highlighting the versatility of arts-based pedagogies in fostering empathy.

As noted by Literat (2013), employing participatory drawing in research enables children to convey their perspectives and feelings, generating valuable qualitative data. Drawings provide a developmentally appropriate and expressive medium for young learners to convey their emotions, perceptions, and interpretations, particularly when verbal communication skills are still developing. Through these visual representations, children are able to communicate ideas that might otherwise go unexpressed, offering researchers a valuable insight into their perspectives (Einarsdottir et al., 2009).

In order to assess the effects of a brief empathy training program on primary school kids, Demetriou et al. (2024) studied 900 students in six different nations. The program promoted empathy, emotional awareness, and cultural curiosity through video-based lessons followed by discussions. The results showed that over the course of ten weeks, pupils' behavior and emotional literacy significantly improved. The effectiveness of structured empathy education in fostering positive social outcomes is demonstrated by teachers' reports of improved classroom behavior and increased friendliness among pupils.

Culturally responsive teaching further strengthens empathy development by bridging the gap between students' environment at their homes and their classroom learning. Teachers who employ culturally responsive practices provide greater emotional support and model inclusive, empathic behavior, creating an educational climate conducive to empathy and tolerance (Ladson-Billings, 1995). By embedding lessons within students' local and cultural contexts, educators make social and emotional learning personally relevant. Aramudin & Susanti (2024) found that integrating cultural narratives and community issues into social science lessons significantly enhanced elementary students' empathy, tolerance, and prosocial behavior, highlighting the value of contextually relevant teaching in promoting socio-emotional development.

Lavigne et al. (2022) observed elementary classrooms in the United States and the Netherlands to explore the effects of culturally responsive teaching on emotional support. The study found that teachers who applied high levels of culturally responsive practices also provided greater emotional support to students, emphasizing the critical role of inclusive pedagogy in fostering empathy and positive classroom relationships. Moreover, addressing empathy deficits has important implications for social behavior; for instance, research on bullying demonstrates that low affective empathy contributes to the persistence of aggressive behavior, indicating that cultivating empathy is essential for creating safe and supportive learning environments (Dautenhahn et al., 2007).

Research highlights the critical role of children's active participation in educational contexts. For instance, Yang and Nasri (2024) examined students' perspectives during social-emotional learning activities, demonstrating that the classroom's emotional climate significantly shapes children's engagement and development. Similarly, Mahony et al. (2024) emphasize that incorporating children's perceptions is essential for promoting equity and inclusion, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals' vision of quality education for all. Together, these findings support the importance of research approaches that position children as active contributors rather than passive subjects.

In the realm of literature, Chaudhary (2018) investigated the impact of multicultural literature on elementary students' empathy and cultural competence. The study concluded that exposure to diverse narratives enhances students' ability to understand and appreciate different perspectives, thereby cultivating empathy. Tragic events such as lethal school shootings, along with growing theoretical and empirical focus on school bullying, highlight a concerning empathy deficit among today's children and youth (Kimberly, 2011).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Empathy is a critical skill for young learners, yet it is often overlooked in traditional education. While storytelling is known to engage children emotionally, its role in developing empathy has not been sufficiently studied in classroom settings in Pakistan. This research explores how storytelling can be used as an intentional teaching tool to foster empathy in students aged 10 to 12.

### **Objective**

To teach empathy to students aged 10-12 years through the read-aloud storytelling method and creative activities.

### **Research Question**

How can storytelling be effectively used as a pedagogical approach to inculcate empathy among students aged 10 to 12 years?

## **Supporting Research Questions**

1. In what ways does storytelling influence students' emotional awareness and understanding?
2. How do students demonstrate and express empathy through creative activities?
3. How does the use of storytelling impact students' interpersonal relationships and the overall classroom climate?
4. To what extent do storytelling sessions lead to measurable improvements in students' empathy scores between pre- and post-intervention assessments?

## **Null Hypothesis**

**H<sub>0</sub>:** There will be no significant difference between students' pre-test and post-test empathy scores following the storytelling intervention.

## **Alternative Hypothesis:**

**H<sub>1</sub>:** There will be a significant difference between students' pre-test and post-test empathy scores following the storytelling intervention.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research approach**

This research employed qualitatively driven mixed-methods action research to investigate the use of storytelling as a pedagogical tool in teaching empathy to 10-to 12-year-old children. Action research was considered appropriate because it was participatory, reflexive, and ongoing, and enabled the researcher to have a direct dialogue with the students, to try strategies and adapt them on the run, to observe their growth, and to modify the subjectivities in professional classroom conversation.

Although the research focused primarily on the collection and analysis of qualitative data through storytelling sessions, observations, student work, and teacher reflections, the study also integrated the use of closed-ended pre- and post-intervention questionnaires. The former were used to measure students' empathy before and after the intervention, which provided a reinforcing quantitative dimension. Focus was, however, predominantly on the process and experience of empathy development.

### **Research Tools**

Triangulation was ensured by using multiple instruments to gather data from various sources:

#### **Empathy Questionnaire**

A pretest and post-test closed-ended questionnaire was administered before and after the intervention to determine students' pre-intervention level of knowledge and understanding in empathy and any change post-intervention. Students' empathy was measured using a simplified version of the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) (Spreng et al., 2009). For this study, the language was simplified to make it suitable for 10-12-year-old students. Questionnaire answers were offered and compared to the students' perception changes.

#### **Observations**

The researcher made informal, unobtrusive observations in each session about what the students were doing, their emotional reactions, and social occurrences. Behavioral signs of empathy were noted in storytelling, conversing, and creative work.

#### **Creative Expression Activities**

Students were involved in creative exercises where they could show their empathy by writing, drawing, role role-playing.

#### **Teacher Interviews**

After each session, brief semi-structured interviews were conducted with classroom teachers to evaluate their views on student behavior, emotional development, and the overall effectiveness of storytelling sessions.

#### **Population**

The participants were 5th-grade students, aged 10-12 years, at a primary school. Participants in this age range were chosen because of their cognitive and emotional development level, which allowed them to interact with moral stories, engage in reflective conversation, and express empathy.

#### **Sample Size and Method of Sampling**

Using purposive sampling, a sample of 22 students was recruited. Initially, 36 students were identified based on availability and teacher recommendations. Following the pre-intervention empathy questionnaire and initial screening, 22 students were included in the final analysis. The only qualifying criteria were regular attendance at meetings, willingness to converse and engage in activities, and availability for all three days of the weekly sessions over three consecutive weeks.

## **Data Collection Procedure**

Data were collected in four planned sessions, all of which took place over three consecutive days per week on a 1-week interval. The same sequence of procedures was used in every session to maintain uniformity:

### **Storytelling Sessions**

The sessions consisted of a read-aloud storytelling technique, told expressively with aspects of voice, such as intonation and voice modulation, and included the use of gestures and facial expressions combined with visual aids. These methods were employed to emotionally involve students in the story and to facilitate their understanding of the moral of the story. The intervention was based on four targeted stories:

1. *Rolling into Friendship: Lily's Bright Adventure*
2. *Behind the Noise: A Lesson in Empathy*
3. *The Hundred Dresses*
4. *Homeless Man and the Young Girl*

## **Action Research Cycles**

The intervention was implemented in four cycles of action research conducted over a week. Each cycle followed a pattern spread over three consecutive days and was designed to promote empathy and involve storytelling, discussion, creative activities, and observation in students aged 10-11 years old. The cycle of doing (Plan-Act-Observe-Reflect) following the action research model from Kurt Lewin (1946) was used on the stages in order to be able to foster day-to-day improvement and to take flexible pedagogical decisions.

### **Cycle 1**

**Plan:** The researcher created a preliminary process of teaching empathy through moral storytelling. All materials were created, including a story, pre- and post-story discussion questions, and a creative activity that supported the same theme as the story. The empathy questionnaire was the pretest for the first meeting.

**Act:** The intervention was delivered in the following way over 3 days:

**Day 1:** Pre-story questioning was discussed on day one to activate students' prior knowledge, and students were engaged in a guided discussion as an introduction to certain key themes.

**Day 2:** The story was read to them, adding expressions and visuals. Students then rewrote what they heard in their own words. Comprehension and moral interpretation questions were administered following the story.

**Day 3:** In relation to empathy, a creative exercise as well as a reflective talk was carried out to support empathy. In this session, written reflections were collected from the students, like What is one thing you learned from the story, What is the lesson, and How can you apply it to your life? The purpose was to make students reflect on the story and respond.

**Observe:** A series of spontaneous observations was recorded in the individual sessions, noting students' emotions, spoken and non-spoken responses to peers, and engagement.

**Reflect:** The effectiveness of the intervention was evidenced through the observation and student work data, which were analysed by the researcher. Reflections guided adaptations for the next cycle, including pacing and facilitation of dialogue.

### **Cycle 2**

**Plan:** Reflective adjustments were also made based on feedback from Cycle 1. A different text was chosen, with revisions to the prompts and development of creative activities. At the end of the session, students completed a worksheet activity titled "Understanding through Empathy", in which they were asked to create drawings that captured the emotions most strongly felt within a given situation. The accompanying prompts encouraged students to analyze the scenario from an empathetic perspective, focusing on identifying the causes of the situation, considering more constructive responses, and reflecting on how an act of empathy could positively influence the outcome.

**Act:** A similar structure was maintained in the storytelling process with improvements in narrative pedagogy and student-driven reflection.

**Observe:** The research also involved ongoing anecdotal observations designed to focus on the participation of individual students and the recognition of emotions and viewpoints expressed by the story characters.

**Reflect:** Reports from students suggested heightened emotional sensitivity. The researcher indicated the necessity of developing more emphasis on the link with the characters' experiences. These findings then

informed the design of Cycle 3.

### Cycle 3

**Plan:** The researcher intended to have students engage in more independent work and chose a narrative with moral decision-making to increase empathy generation. Students role-played classroom or home scenes to demonstrate that when someone feels stress, isolation, frustration, or sadness, empathy can be displayed.

**Act:** The same structure was followed in the session, with less instructor-directed story interpretation and more expressive activities led by students. Students engaged in role-play activities, enacting familiar classroom and home scenarios to explore emotional experiences. Through these enactments, students practiced demonstrating empathy by responding to others' feelings in constructive and supportive ways. This creative, experiential approach enabled students to internalize empathic responses, understand the impact of their actions on others, and actively reflect on how empathetic behavior can positively influence social interactions and outcomes. Role-play, as a pedagogical tool, thus served both as a medium for emotional engagement and as a strategy to reinforce the learning objectives of the empathy-focused intervention.

**Observe:** Observations revealed increased levels of confidence in students to share feelings and discuss character motivations. Creative responses were more subtle and showed greater insight into empathy.

**Reflect:** Reflective analysis showed significant development in empathetic language and perspective-taking. Some minor changes were presented in terms of storytelling methodologies in the last cycle to ensure maximum engagement.

### Cycle 4

**Plan:** The last Story was chosen to integrate the empathy concepts discussed in previous cycles. Preparation also comprised the follow-up empathy questionnaire.

**Act:** The previous session continued the three-day format of its predecessor. By Day 3, the post-intervention empathy questionnaire that measures overall change was administered. For the activity in this session, students used drawings, words, and symbols to represent how they conceptualized empathy. Through a Draw-and-Tell approach, they then explained their illustrations, allowing insight into their understanding of empathic thinking at this stage of the intervention.

**Observe:** Emotions, peer support, and participation (final report). Final observations were collected for emotional awareness, peer support, and participation. These observations complemented questionnaire data.

**Reflect:** A contrast of pre- and post-questionnaire results showed positive development in students' empathy awareness. The researcher expressed that, through storytelling, discussion, and creative activities, students' empathetic understandings were effectively developed.

The researcher took informal notations during the duration of all sessions in regards to student involvement, responses to, and interaction with the materials. Students also took the empathy questionnaire during the pre- and post-survey before the first session and after the last session, respectively, which allowed us to compare their empathy awareness and understanding. Teacher interviews provided additional perspectives on students' behavioral changes and the effects of the intervention.

### Data Analysis

#### Thematic Analysis

Several themes were identified through qualitative analysis of the storytelling-based classroom intervention designed to facilitate empathy in 10-12-year-olds. Data was gathered from informal classroom observations, students' writing, creative expression activities (drawings and role plays), and teacher interviews immediately following the session. As the drawings were primarily representative, a thematic analysis was conducted (Kisovar-Ivanda, 2014), with data analyzed inductively through coding to identify common patterns and themes in students' responses and behaviors. Each theme is substantiated with descriptive evidence and student quotes or artefacts.

#### Theme 1: Emerging Understanding of Empathy

This theme reflects the developmental shift in students' understanding of empathy throughout the four storytelling sessions. At the outset, students tended to interpret empathy in limited, action-based terms such as being "kind" or "helpful." However, as the intervention progressed, their conceptualization expanded to include emotional recognition, perspective-taking, and a more nuanced awareness of others' experiences.

##### a) Initial Surface-Level Understanding

At the beginning of Session 1, most students exhibited a basic or vague grasp of the term "empathy." For example, Student 13 wrote, "*I learned the lesson to be kind to everyone,*" while Student 14 reflected, "*If someone is struggling with something, I should help them.*" These responses showed a tendency to associate

empathy with general acts of kindness, lacking depth in emotional awareness or cognitive engagement.

Some students acknowledged unfamiliarity with the concept itself. A few mentioned they had “heard” the term but could not articulate its meaning. Their early responses were primarily centered on outward behaviors, rather than an internalized emotional understanding.

#### **b) Growth through Story Engagement and Reflection**

As students engaged in repeated read-aloud sessions supported by discussions, visual aids, and creative expression, their understanding deepened. By Session 2, students began demonstrating awareness of the emotional and situational context behind others’ behaviors.

Student 4 commented, *“Now I understand why the father was silent. We should not judge a book by its cover,”* referring to *Story 2: Behind the Noise*. Similarly, Student 7 said, *“I was judging the father... but now I know what he was going through.”* These reflections suggest a growing ability to move beyond assumptions and engage in perspective-taking, a core component of empathy.

This pattern was replicated in creative tasks. Drawings that were posted after Session 2 included images of helping strangers, helping those in need, and seeing behind others’ emotions. For instance: Student 1 and Student 8 illustrated donating clothes to the needy. Scenes of emotional aid and friendship were depicted in Students 2, 7, and 17.

#### **c) Integration of Emotional and Cognitive Empathy**

After Session 3, students began to articulate a more unified concept of empathy that included understanding, feeling, as well as thinking, and action. A comic-like drawing illustrated the transformation from physical aggression to regret and fixing things: “Hit, Ow!” → “It’s too cold and icy... Oww, my heart hurts... OK. I know, I won’t do that again.” Other students were able to exhibit empathy within peer-to-peer relationships: Student 3’s image had two girls helping one another under a serene sky, in an example of emotional support. Student 8 drew a conversation: “I have no dresses.” / “I have many. Let me help you.” indicating emotional sharing and resource-sharing.

In Session 4’s drawings, symbols of empathy, e.g., flowers, hearts, and an image of helping someone, were depicted. These symbols were accompanied by personal, emotion-oriented captions (students 5, 9, 14, 18, and 22), indicating a more intimate and reflexive comprehension.

#### **d) Personal Connections and Perspective-Taking**

Some students even started making connections to the stories in their own lives. Student 11 offered an example in which she unfairly judged someone and learned to take context in consideration. Student 3 mentioned, “These sessions made me think about so many people I never think of and about how they must feel.”

Students also demonstrated increasing sensitivity to the experiences of the disempowered. (Student 12, whose sister has a disability). “It’s not about blinding yourself to Lily’s wheelchair, but accepting Lily with the wheelchair.” “There’s nothing to be ashamed of for a disabled person. “Lily can’t walk, among other things, but no one could paint like her. Not only empathy is seen but advocacy and emotional intelligence is reported here.

#### **e) Expressing Empathy in Their Own Words**

After the intervention, students were able to describe empathy at the emotional and cognitive levels. For example: Student 4 explained, *“Empathy means supporting others and understanding their feelings, going into the other person’s shoes and seeing their point of view.”* Student 10 reflected, *“If I were asked to teach empathy, I would teach them to be kind and understand others.”* Student 1 acknowledged a personal transformation: *“I wasn’t aware... how and in what ways I can help others.”*

This theme portrays a development from more simplistic, behaviorally based concepts of empathy to deeper emotional and cognitive involvement. Through narrative work, reflective questioning, role-play, and art, the students developed and deepened a more sophisticated, multifaceted concept of empathy in their verbal responses but also in their behaviors, drawings, and connections between empathy and lived experiences.

### **Theme 2: Emotional Awareness and Understanding:**

This theme features an increased emotional understanding of students and the ability to articulate internal experiences. Throughout the sessions, the participants demonstrated increasing skills from recognizing emotions to realizing and interpreting more complex emotional expressions. This emotional development was facilitated through storytelling, conversation, and hands-on activities.

#### **a) Development of Emotional Vocabulary and Recognition**

At first, students tended to identify basic emotions like “happy” or “sad.” Risk factors included going to a haunted house and wrecking a car, high stress levels, and no prior experience. Still, by foregrounding emotionally rich narratives and taking part in expressive activities (e.g., drawing, writing, role

play) that they could attach labels to and respond to, they found they could name and make sense of complex feelings like stress, grief, loneliness, accomplishment, frustration, satisfaction, and internal battle.

#### **b) Emotional Depth in Creative Expression**

There was a noticeable development in the depth of emotion for students doing creative expression through the four sessions. The expression “happy” was one of the most frequently portrayed pictures in the second session, followed by “sad,” “angry,” “worried,” etc. Such sentiments, though heartfelt, were necessarily superficial in making a beginning of emotional consciousness. But a significant increase in the variation and subtlety of emotional portrayal was apparent by session four. Students started using more empathetic verbal language, facial expressions, and visual symbols to express their understanding of others’ emotions.

For example, Student 19 drew a person crying with the phrase “you are not alone,” and Student 3 described “stressed” and “good friend” to express emotional distress and support. Student 1 stated: “I’m here because you need to tell me about your problems,” suggesting a movement of emotions away from “me” towards “you” in an empathic/other-oriented direction. In addition, Student 15’s, “It looks difficult, but I can help you,” and Student 2’s, “I can imagine your feelings,” conveyed an initial emotional sensitivity and a readiness to recognize the others’ experiences. Underlying these creative works was an increased ability to empathize and a greater emotional maturity among the informants.

#### **c) Role-Plays Reflecting Emotional Complexity**

More detailed emotional awareness of the students was also evident in their role-play scenarios. There are opportunities for students to become engaged in realistic social situations in which students would be able to act out and present the many aspects of feelings. Frequently chosen scenarios among the students were related to topics such as bullying, judgment, and family difficulties. For instance, one team showed a bullying episode that was resolved as the bully made an apology and a friendly gesture, which demonstrated an understanding of contrition and atonement. Another was a role-play on judging by looks that ended in mutual understanding and empathy. One performance that stood out was of students representing a scenario of parental emotion overload, which concludes with child support and the child taking responsibility for a share of household duties.

Students were able to examine, throughout these skits, not only what it feels like in emotional situations, but also the implications of empathic or non-empathic reactions. The perspective-taking of these experiences enabled an emotional level of connection to develop, emphasizing the role of perspective-taking and emotional connection in social encounters. In sum, role-plays were a strong instructional practice for building and evidencing those emotionally complex ideas and empathy in young children.

#### **d) Verbal Reflections Demonstrating Emotional Insight**

During post-intervention interviews, students' verbal reflections provided evidence that they were developing emotional understanding and that they were beginning to recognize the possible impact of their actions on others. These reflections were a strong attestation of the internal shifts they experienced from the storytelling, the empathy-building sessions. Student 16, for instance, shared feelings for the emotional content of the stories, and described, *“Sometimes I also felt so many emotions, but no one understood it... My feelings changed as the stories turned to their end.”* This implies not just empathy but recognition of emotional transformation through a narrative experience.

Also, Student 1 stated on other effects of empathy, *“I understood how our actions or words can make someone else feel good or lessen their worries.”* This suggests that participants in the experiment can think about what it might feel like, emotionally, to be in someone else's shoes. Student 2 repeated this rising empathy by saying, *“The sessions made me think about how other people feel when we behave badly or kindly... There is a big difference”*. These reflections show an improved emotional state and a greater awareness in connecting with others. Together, these findings suggest the learning of emotional intelligence, especially in empathy, self-awareness, and social perceptions.

### **Theme 3: Perspective-Taking and Shifts in Understanding Others' Feelings**

This theme highlights the development of perspective-taking abilities and the enhancement of cognitive empathy among participants. Across the read-aloud sessions, students demonstrated a growing capacity to consider the thoughts, feelings, and circumstances of others, particularly in emotionally complex contexts. The stories served as a powerful medium for encouraging them to step into the shoes of both familiar and unfamiliar individuals, reflect on different viewpoints, and deepen their understanding of others' situations.

#### **a) Development of Empathy through Story Engagement**

This was particularly evident in students' reflections on misunderstood characters, especially The father in Story 2 Behind the Noise. Student 7 reflected, *“I was judging the father... but now I know what he was going through.”* Similarly, Student 8 shared, *“He wasn't just silent, he was struggling.”* Student 5

explained, “*From all four stories, ‘Behind the Noise’ really changed my perspective. I felt really bad for the father. Everyone judged him before he told the truth.*” Student 4 added, “*Now I understand why the father was silent. We should not judge a book by its cover.*” Student 10 commented, “*I thought maybe the father did not say anything to his kids because he was old. But I had no idea he was struggling so much in his mind.*”

These reflections indicate the transition from quick, surface-level assumptions toward a deeper, context-sensitive understanding of others’ actions. By identifying hidden struggles and reconsidering initial judgments, students began to apply empathy at a cognitive level, recognizing that outward behavior may mask internal hardship.

Similar insights emerged from other stories. Student 4 described her reaction to Story 1: “*I judged Lily at the beginning of the story, thinking why she was not in a special school. But after the full story, I realized she is just like us, only in a wheelchair. She is so much better at painting than even I.*” Student 6 observed, “*Lily must have felt so lonely when she was new to the school,*” while Student 11 noted, “*Lily must be more nervous than me to go to a new school. She must be worried about what students will think of her wheelchair.*”

These examples reveal a growing awareness of the emotional and situational experiences of individuals with disabilities, as well as an emerging recognition of inclusivity. Students moved from perceiving differences in a limiting way to acknowledging individual strengths and emotional realities.

#### **b) Recognizing and Acknowledging Multiple Viewpoints**

Role-play activities further reinforced perspective-taking. During one session, Student 16 remarked, “*Everyone has their own struggle, so we should be kind to everyone.*” Many students, including Students 11, 13, 4, 7, 19, and 2, emphasized that the read-aloud sessions had taught them not to judge others based on appearances or without knowing their circumstances. Student 12 stated during their role-play, “*We have to understand others’ problems and help them find a solution if we can.*”

These comments show that students were extending empathy beyond story characters to real-world applications, suggesting that the intervention fostered a more generalizable habit of considering others’ viewpoints.

One group enacted a scenario involving both bullies and defenders, exploring what it feels like to be excluded and the courage it takes to stand up for someone. During the discussion, Student 14 stressed, “*Try to understand everyone.*” Other groups presented situations such as helping a classmate with personal issues or supporting a peer with poor eyesight. These role-plays provided experiential opportunities for students to embody different roles, reinforcing the importance of empathy through active engagement.

#### **c) Visual Representations of Perspective-Taking**

Perspective-taking was also evident in students’ artwork. Many illustrations depicted acts of kindness toward strangers, peers, and family members, such as donating clothes, books, or food to those in need (Students 8, 1, 7, 17, and 13). Student 16 created a comic that presented both sides of a conflict and how it was resolved.

These visual depictions suggest that students were not only internalizing the value of empathy but were also able to creatively represent the process of considering another’s viewpoint. The inclusion of scenarios, symbolic elements, and resolution-based narratives shows an integration of cognitive and emotional empathy into their self-expression.

#### **d) Shifts in Perception and Cognitive Empathy in Daily Life**

Overall, students showed a marked shift from self-focused or judgmental thinking toward an ability to empathize with multiple viewpoints. This growth in cognitive empathy was nurtured through narrative immersion, collaborative activities, and guided reflection. As the class teacher observed, “*The stories were a great way to encourage the students to think of other people. These may be fictional characters, but they made the students think of someone from their real lives.*” This statement underscores the capacity of well-chosen narratives to bridge the gap between fictional empathy and real-life social understanding.

### **Theme 4: Supportive Peer Behavior**

A recurring theme across the sessions was the growing willingness of students to help others, both in their classroom interactions and in the scenarios they imagined and discussed. The development of a prosocial mindset became increasingly evident throughout the read-aloud sessions. Through drawings, role-plays, and discussions, participants consistently demonstrated a readiness to offer support and assistance in both real-life contexts and imagined situations, reflecting a deepening sense of empathy and social responsibility.

#### **a) Pro-Social Behavior through Verbal and Creative Expression**

Many students incorporated specific helping behaviors into their drawings and written reflections.

Student 8's drawing showed one girl donating clothes to another, captioned, "Let me help you." Student 19 wrote, "You must be hungry, I understand." Student 13 reflected, "I learned the lesson to be kind to everyone," while Student 19 also stated, "We should help others no matter what problem they have." Student 22 shared, "I learned that everyone is equal, so they should be treated that way. I also learned that you can do so much with just support." Student 3 wrote, "At the start, Lily was nervous, but when she was surrounded by supportive friends, she was happy. I learned the importance of being a good friend so that someone with any problem can feel supported."

These reflections reveal that students were not only identifying helping behaviors but were also linking them to emotional well-being, social inclusion, and equality. The responses suggest that students were moving from a general understanding of kindness to recognizing the specific impact that support can have on others' confidence and sense of belonging.

#### **b) Visual Depictions of Care and Support**

A commonality observed across many drawings was the willingness to offer support, whether to a friend or a stranger. Acts of kindness, help, and care were depicted in various sketches. For example, Student 12's drawing focused on the concept of understanding another person's problem and offering help. Student 6 included words such as "Love, solve issues, heart, motivate others, care for others, sharing, help, encourage others, be a team."

These artistic choices suggest that students were internalizing empathy not merely as an abstract concept, but as a set of tangible, actionable behaviors that could be expressed in everyday interactions. The repeated inclusion of emotional symbols such as hearts, flowers, and words of encouragement indicates a developing connection between emotional understanding and prosocial action.

#### **c) Reflections on Collective Support**

Student 5 offered an especially thoughtful perspective: "I learned that together we can overcome any challenge. Being a kind and supportive friend matters. By being kind to others, I can spread kindness around me." This statement highlights the recognition of collective resilience and the idea that kindness can have a ripple effect within a community.

The class teacher also reflected on this theme, stating, "In today's times, it is so important to teach the significance of being kind and offering support to one another. These students are the future, and this is the perfect time to teach them to be there for each other. There is already too much hatred in the world. I'm glad to see my students speak about promoting a kind environment, looking out for each other, and developing this helping mindset." The teacher's observation reinforces that the prosocial attitudes observed in students were not isolated responses but part of a broader shift toward valuing kindness and mutual care.

#### **d) Integrating Empathy into Action**

Such consistent expressions reflect that students were not only learning what empathy meant but were also motivated to apply it meaningfully. The growing willingness to help others, whether through tangible acts, emotional support, or verbal encouragement, suggests that empathy is becoming an integrated part of their social identity, extending beyond the classroom into their perceptions of community and future relationships.

### **Theme 5: Developing Empathy through Personal Connection with the Stories**

#### **a) Relating Stories to Personal Life Experiences**

The use of storytelling was central to the intervention, as it allowed students to connect fictional scenarios with their own real-life experiences. These personal connections made empathy more real, relatable, and meaningful. Many students demonstrated emotional engagement by identifying similarities between the characters' experiences and their own.

For example, in the first story about a girl with cerebral palsy, Student 12 related Lily's experience to her sister's disability, saying, "When someone encourages her and is kind to her, she feels encouraged." The class teacher noted that such moments were powerful in shaping students' understanding: "The best part about these stories was that the students were able to relate to every situation. These are things they see or hear about in everyday life. It was meaningful to guide them through these situations using storytelling and to reinforce the importance of empathy through related activities and discussions."

Similarly, Student 3, who was already familiar with the condition, helped her peers understand disability better. Student 11 recalled a personal family situation that mirrored the story's conflict. These responses show how stories created a bridge between lived experiences and the emotions of fictional characters.

#### **b) Storytelling as a Moral and Emotional Catalyst**

Reflections revealed that students began to see empathy not only as an emotional reaction but also as a moral responsibility. Student 6 wrote, "I learned to be kind to others and give support to those who need it, so next time if someone with a disability comes to my class like Lily, I will make sure to provide her

support." Similarly, *Student 14* shared, "I learned that if someone is struggling with something, I should help them by motivating them."

The teacher observed that these responses indicated a shift in students' mindset from simply understanding feelings to actively considering supportive actions in real-life contexts.

#### **c) Self-Reflection and Insight**

Story 3, which addressed hidden struggles, prompted deep self-reflection. *Student 21* admitted, "From this story, I learned that I should be a kind person. I think many times I am not nice to others, so I should change that." Likewise, *Student 22* reflected, "I learned that everyone is equal, so they should be treated that way. I also learned that you can do so much with just support."

Returning to the earlier story of Lily, *Student 12* added, "There's nothing to be ashamed about for a disabled person. Lily may not be able to walk, but no one could paint like her either. It's not about ignoring Lily's wheelchair but accepting her with it. I can imagine my sister in Lily's place."

These reflections highlight that storytelling encouraged students to go beyond surface-level empathy and engage in genuine perspective-taking.

#### **d) Recognizing and Challenging Judgments**

Some students reported becoming more aware of how easily they might judge others without knowing their circumstances. *Student 11* described a time she judged a family member before understanding their situation and explained how the story taught her not to judge based on appearances alone. Similarly, *Student 3* recalled a real-life encounter with a misunderstood woman, saying, "This story reminded me of that scenario and how important it is to understand that we might not know what another person is going through; sometimes, they are in some very difficult situation."

#### **e) Emotional and Creative Responses to Stories**

The emotional arcs of the stories, especially moments with twists or climaxes, sparked visible emotional reactions such as widened eyes, exchanged glances, or verbal exclamations like "Oh no!" and "Wow!" Drawings produced by students also reflected the merging of story and self; characters were often depicted in real-life settings like family gatherings or school, showing how empathy was being integrated into their worldview.

*Student 9* summarized the overall learning: "These sessions made me think of the situations of so many people I never thought about before."

Overall, storytelling proved to be a transformative approach in developing empathy. By connecting personally to characters and scenarios, students not only understood others' feelings but began to see empathy as active support and understanding. As *Student 4* expressed, "Empathy means supporting others and understanding their feelings, going into other people's shoes and seeing their point of view."

### **Theme 6: Positive Shifts in Classroom Climate**

#### **a) Increased Participation and Peer Encouragement**

Teachers and facilitators noted that as the sessions progressed, the classroom atmosphere became more supportive and collaborative. Students who were initially shy or hesitant began participating more actively. In Session 4, for instance, a few students reluctant to act in role-plays were gently encouraged by their peers and eventually delivered their lines with growing comfort.

These little but meaningful changes reflected a collective willingness to include and uplift one another, signaling the emergence of a stronger group bond.

#### **b) Acts of Cooperation and Inclusion**

Visible signs of peer cooperation were evident in sharing reading materials and stationery, giving each other a chance to speak without interruption, passing activity sheets smoothly, and responding supportively in discussions.

During the post-read-aloud session in Story 4, *Student 19* shared, "Helping others makes us feel good too." While enacting a scene about a student's untidy appearance, *Student 17* remarked, "Instead of laughing at others, we should understand and help them." Reflecting on the role-play, *Student 6* said, "No one should be left out. We should include everyone." *Student 10* added, "We should have an inclusive attitude."

These reflections were strong attestations of the internal shifts that had taken place from passive observation to active empathy and responsibility toward peers.

#### **c) A Safe Space for Emotional Expression**

Teacher reflections highlighted that students were increasingly willing to share feelings, listen to one another, and engage meaningfully over the weeks. These sessions appeared to foster a safe environment where empathy and emotional expression were welcomed and valued. As one teacher put it, "By the end, it felt like the class was not just learning together but caring for each other."



**Figure 1 Drawings made students about understanding empathy**



**Figure 2 Drawings made by students about showing empathy**

### Quantitative Data Analysis

The impact of the storytelling sessions on students' empathy levels was analyzed using a paired-samples t-test.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics*

Measure	Mean	SD	N
Pre-test	2.04	0.20	22
Post-test	3.43	0.11	22

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for students' empathy scores before and after the storytelling intervention. The mean pre-test score of 2.04 (SD = 0.20) indicates relatively lower levels of empathy before the intervention, whereas the post-test mean of 3.43 (SD = 0.11) shows a marked increase following the storytelling sessions. These preliminary descriptive findings suggest that the intervention, including the storytelling sessions and creative activities, positively influenced students' empathetic understanding. The relatively small standard deviation in the post-test scores also implies that the improvement was fairly consistent across participants, highlighting the reliability of the observed gains.

**Table 2**

*Paired Samples t-Test*

	Mean Difference	SD	95%CI lower	95%CI Upper	t(21)	P (2-tailed)
Post Test 1 & Pre-test 1	1.38	0.22	1.28	1.49	28.48	<.001

Table 2 reports the inferential statistics from a paired-samples t-test comparing pre- and post-test empathy scores. The mean difference of 1.38, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 1.28 to 1.49, indicates a notable increase in empathy after the intervention. The t-test confirmed that this difference was statistically significant,  $t(21) = 28.48$ ,  $p < .001$ . This finding provides robust evidence that engaging students in structured storytelling activities effectively enhances their ability to perceive and understand the emotions of others.

**Table 3***Paired Samples Effect Sizes*

	Effect Size	Point Estimate	95% CI lower	95% CI Upper
Post Test 1 & Pre-Test	Cohen's d	6.07	4.20	7.94
	Hedges' g	5.96	4.12	7.79

Table 3 shows the effect size estimates for the change in empathy scores. The Cohen's d value of 6.07 and Hedges' g of 5.96 indicate a notably large effect. These values demonstrate that the intervention had a substantial and practically meaningful impact on students' empathetic skills. The narrow confidence intervals further suggest high precision and consistency in the magnitude of the effect, confirming that storytelling is an effective pedagogical strategy for cultivating empathy in young learners.

The combined results from the analysis collectively indicate a strong and statistically significant improvement in students' empathy levels following the storytelling intervention. The degree of the effect, along with the consistency reflected in the confidence intervals, demonstrates that narrative-based activities are highly effective in promoting emotional understanding, perspective-taking, and social-emotional learning among primary school students.

### Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that storytelling can serve as an effective tool for nurturing empathy in primary school students. Following the intervention, students demonstrated greater emotional awareness, perspective-taking, and supportive peer behaviors, reflecting both cognitive and affective aspects of empathy. These results align with the literature emphasizing that empathy is a skill that can be purposefully cultivated through educational interventions rather than exclusively being an inherent characteristic (Kimberly, 2011; Makoelle, 2019; Webb et al., 2024).

Through engagement with narrative-based activities, students began to recognize and articulate not only the emotions of the characters but also their own emotional responses. This process of connecting personal experiences with the experiences depicted in the stories supports the development of emotional understanding and mirrors findings from Odumegwu et al. (2022), who point out the critical role and value of storytelling to encourage learners to internalize others' perspectives. Similarly, Johnson, Huffman, and Jasper (2014) emphasize that fictional narratives can cultivate empathy by allowing students to imagine themselves in the position of others, particularly those who may be socially or culturally distant from them.

The intervention also appeared to influence classroom dynamics. Students' empathy translated into more supportive interactions with peers, indicating that emotional awareness and understanding can manifest in prosocial behavior. This observation is consistent with the research by Makoelle and Tsediso (2019) and Dautenhahn et al. (2007), which underscores that empathetic attitudes in the classroom foster cooperation, reduce conflict, and contribute to a positive social climate. By actively participating in the activities, students became not only recipients of knowledge or passive learners but also contributors to a more inclusive and emotionally attuned classroom environment, reflecting the importance of children's active engagement in educational settings (Yang & Nasri, 2024; Mahony et al., 2024).

Moreover, the students' perspective-taking improved as they related to the stories on a personal level and envisioned themselves in the characters' experiences. They began to consider situations from others' viewpoints, supporting Chaudhary's (2018) findings that exposure to diverse narratives enhances students' capacity for understanding and appreciating different perspectives. This personal connection to the stories appears to have been a key mechanism for empathy development, reinforcing the idea that narrative engagement encourages learners to internalize social-emotional cues and translate them into behavior.

Collectively, these findings provide evidence that structured storytelling interventions can cultivate empathy in young learners, positively affecting both individual emotional awareness and the broader classroom climate. The results support the integration of narrative-based teaching strategies as a developmentally appropriate and effective approach to fostering social-emotional skills, aligning with previous research that emphasizes the environmental and experiential foundations of empathy (Warrier et al., 2018; Camassa, 2023; Silke et al., 2024).

### Conclusion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that storytelling and creative activities can serve as effective pedagogical strategies for cultivating empathy in primary school students. Both

quantitative and qualitative analyses indicate that students' empathetic understanding, perspective-taking, and emotional awareness improved significantly following the intervention. The paired-samples t-test indicated a statistically significant rise in empathy scores, accompanied by large effect sizes, suggesting that the improvements were both substantial and consistent among students.

The qualitative insights, drawn from the thematic analysis, illustrate that students were able to conceptualize empathy, recognize emotions in themselves and others, and envision constructive responses in social situations. These findings align with existing literature emphasizing the role of narrative-based approaches, culturally responsive pedagogy, and active student participation in fostering social-emotional skills (Bertolotti et al., 2024; Literat, 2013; Silke et al., 2024; Mahony et al., 2024).

In conclusion, the study underscores the potential of structured, interactive, and innovative methods to nurture empathy as a critical socio-emotional competency. By integrating storytelling and reflective activities into classroom practice, educators can provide students with opportunities to internalize emotional perspectives, engage in prosocial behavior, and contribute to a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Future research may explore the long-term effects of such interventions and their applicability across diverse educational contexts to further strengthen social-emotional development in children.

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