

# Reading and the Development of Social Understanding: Implications for the Literacy Classroom

Stephanie Kozak, Holly Recchia

A well-written story can not only transport the reader into new worlds but also affect how elementary-level readers see and participate in the social world around them.

As reading teachers have long known, the benefits of reading for pleasure are indisputable. Extant research literature has focused primarily on the cognitive benefits of reading, such as spelling, vocabulary size, and general knowledge (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Mol & Bus, 2011; Sparks, Patton, & Murdoch, 2014). However, recent empirical research provided exciting clues that the benefits of reading may extend to other abilities more directly reflected in social competence; namely, the ability to understand and sympathize with others' emotions, cognitions, and motivations. In this article, following Carpendale and Lewis (2006), we refer to this set of abilities as *social understanding*.

These skills are critical because social understanding makes relationships possible. Part of what makes human interactions rich is the ability to feel the joy that others feel, to share in sorrow when someone is in need, and to experience a sense of righteous anger when someone is treated unjustly. Equally crucial is the capacity to understand and empathize with others who have very different experiences. Students may identify with the bullying that Auggie faces in *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio, despite not having the same disability; they may delight in Matilda's perseverance in defying wicked adults in *Matilda* by Roald Dahl, despite not having abusive parents of their own; in *The Book Thief* by Marcus Zusak, they might suffer with Liesel as bombs rain down over Munich without ever having to experience the horrors of war themselves. These socio-cognitive abilities fit within the larger framework of socioemotional learning, which broadly refers to the development of skills and knowledge related to personal and social tasks and challenges (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). A large body of

research has supported the importance of promoting socioemotional learning in schools (for a review, see Taylor et al., 2017).

Whereas socioemotional learning can be integrated in different forms across the academic curriculum, this article focuses specifically on the role that reading fiction can play in developing social understanding. First, we review psychological research providing evidence for a link between reading and social understanding. Next, we draw on scholarship that attempts to explain why this link exists, that is, how reading may facilitate social understanding. Finally, we provide some concrete strategies for book selection and literacy activities in the classroom that can help foster these benefits of reading.

## Reading and Social Understanding

Starting in the preschool years, experience with reading is related to social understanding. It should be noted that the scientific research in this domain has typically been correlational; that is to say, most studies have not been conducive to testing the strong claim that reading causes better social understanding. With that in mind, studies have revealed that 4–6-year-olds whose parents read to them more were better at identifying that others might have desires and beliefs that are different from their own, as as-

Stephanie Kozak is a doctoral candidate at Concordia University, Montreal, QC, Canada; email stephanie.kozak@concordia.ca.

Holly Recchia is an associate professor in the Department of Education at Concordia University, Montreal, QC, Canada; email holly.recchia@concordia.ca.

sessed by laboratory-based theory of mind tasks (Adrián, Clemente, Villanueva, & Rieffe, 2005; Mar, Tackett, & Moore, 2010). One explanation for this association points to mothers' use of mental state language during reading, which may support children's developing understanding of the psychological world (Adrián, Clemente, & Villanueva, 2007; Adrián et al., 2005). In the classroom, the use of emotion vocabulary during read-alouds has also been suggested to support the relation between literacy and socioemotional learning (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006).

Mothers' book choices are also related to their children's socioemotional development. Aram and Aviram (2009) asked mothers to rate whether they agreed with statements such as "It's important that the book will be emotionally stimulating to my child," "It's important that my child can identify with (some of) the characters in the book," and "I prefer children's books with complex, rich messages." A panel of experts in children's literature completed the same questionnaire. Results suggested that mothers who agreed with experts on how to choose books had children whose teachers rated them as having higher emotional attunement (e.g., "pays attention to other people's feelings") and understanding (e.g., "knows which feelings suit different situations").

Early storybook reading may provide an important step toward developing a lifetime love of reading. How often students are read to in kindergarten has been linked to how often they read for pleasure in grade 4 (Sénéchal, 2006). The earlier students get a taste of reading and pick it up as a habit, the more likely they are to read for pleasure, which in turn results in higher reading volume over their lifetime (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Mol & Bus, 2011).

Research examining the links between reading fiction and social understanding in school-age children has been scarce. One recent study examined whether reading literary fiction led to increased social understanding in 10-year-olds. Children who read literary fiction scored higher on more sophisticated measures of social understanding that are reflective of developments in the late school-age years (e.g., lab-based tasks assessing understanding of hidden emotions or sarcastic speech), more

so than popular fiction and nonfiction (Wulandini, Kuntoro, & Handayani, 2018). We will unpack this distinction between literary and popular fiction in a later section.

Considering that reading volume is cumulative over a lifetime (Stanovich, West, & Harrison, 1995), most research examining associations with reading

volume has focused on adult participants, such as university students. In this older population, positive associations are shown between reading in one's free time and social understanding (Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, dela Paz, & Peterson, 2006; Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009; Mumper & Gerrig, 2017). In studies such as these, social understanding is often measured by whether participants can identify actors' mental states by looking only at their

eyes (the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test; Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Hill, Raste, & Plumb, 2001).

### PAUSE AND PONDER

- What are some reading experiences in your own life that have had an impact on the way you interact with the world?
- What is it about fiction that leads to a unique reading experience?
- What are the different ways in which we can learn to empathize with others?

### But What Explains the Connection?

Thus far, we have presented evidence that reading is related to social understanding. Next, we will describe different reasons that have been proposed for why this is the case. One explanation is that fiction is a simulation of the real world, and as such, by engaging with fiction, readers are able to undergo experiences vicariously through the lives of the protagonists (Mar & Oatley, 2008). For example, although readers are unlikely to find themselves actually stranded in the Canadian wilderness, reading *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen offers a simulation of that kind of experience. Gerrig (1993) referred to this as transportation: when the reader is transported into the story and immersed in the world the author has created. When we interact with other humans, part of successful social interaction is inferring what other people are experiencing in given situations; reading fiction allows us to simulate characters' inner thoughts, feelings, and plans (Mar & Oatley, 2008). It stands to reason, then, that perhaps the more characters a reader gets to know and the more experiences with the inner workings of other human characters a reader has, skills related to social understanding are exercised by proxy. As Bishop (1990) eloquently stated, "Literature trans-

forms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience” (p. ix).

A second explanation is related to the emotions evoked during reading, with deeper emotional engagement leading to the most pronounced impact on empathy. For example, one study examined what happened to readers immediately after they read a short story that was written specifically to encourage warm feelings, such as sympathy or compassion (Johnson, 2012). In this study, adults who reported feeling emotionally transported by the story also described feeling more empathetic emotions while reading (e.g., feeling moved, soft-hearted) and were more likely to exhibit helping behaviors (picking up pens that the experimenter dropped) immediately afterward.

Because social understanding relies fundamentally on making inferences about others’ mental states, a third explanation centers on readers’ opportunities to generate such inferences about characters in a book and thus hone their inferencing abilities (Mar, Oatley, Djikic, & Mullin, 2011; Mumper & Gerrig, 2017). Generally, inferencing involves drawing a connection or understanding an implication that is not explicitly stated (Van Kleeck, 2008). For example, when a character slams a door, readers can infer that the character is angry, and the author does not need to state this directly. Yet, inferences can vary in their depth, breadth, and abstractness. The previous illustration is a small-scale example; accomplished readers can often infer motivations, thoughts, or emotions in individual passages quite effortlessly. In contrast, inferences can also be drawn at the level of a character’s more enduring motivations or to account for entire plot lines. For example, Professor Snape’s motivations are unclear across much of J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, leaving the reader to infer his intentions not only from his words and actions but also as these are filtered through the perspectives of the other characters who serve as the central narrators of the story.

## You Are What You Read? Choosing Texts to Develop Social Understanding

Empirical research also has suggested that some texts are more conducive to supporting social understanding than others. The examples from children’s literature that we have used thus far have all

come from fiction rather than nonfiction. Research has suggested that the relation between reading and social understanding is unique to fiction (Kidd & Castano, 2017; Mar et al., 2006). Unlike nonfiction, fiction typically takes a narrative structure that has some special properties (see Bruner, 1991), including chronological form, emphasis on the particular, violation of expectation, and psychological complexity; by design, narratives are intended to convey meaning. Even more, whereas nonfiction’s primary goal is to present verifiable factual truths, fiction instead relies on verisimilitude (truthlikeness). In this sense, the power of fiction is based on its capacity to draw the reader into an imagined world (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013). It is precisely these characteristics of the narrative form that make it ideal for promoting the psychological processes described previously, including simulation, emotional evocation, and inferencing. Harry Potter is clearly not a real person, but his struggles are likely to feel very real to the reader.

Bal and Veltkamp (2013) provided experimental support for the claim that feeling highly transported by a fictional text is uniquely linked to increases in empathy. In their study, some participants read a chapter from a Sherlock Holmes story by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle or from *Blindness* by José Saramago, and other participants read newspaper articles dealing with humanitarian crises. These articles were selected specifically to contain social content that was not presented in a narrative form. The findings revealed that one week later, only people who were emotionally transported by the Sherlock Holmes chapter reported feeling increased empathy and concern for other people.

Other research has suggested that not all fiction is created equal in promoting such outcomes. One study pitted literary fiction against popular genre fiction (Kidd & Castano, 2017) and found that reading literary fiction was related to social understanding as assessed by the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test, whereas reading genre fiction was not (for experimental evidence involving random assignment, see also Pino & Mazza, 2016). In these studies, literary fiction was classified as literature that has high-quality writing and was lauded by critics. Literary fiction is argued to contain more figurative language, to be told from shifting perspectives, and to include dynamic character development that often disrupts readers’ expectations. In other words, literary fiction is unpredictable and complex. In contrast, popular genre fiction is, almost

by definition, predictable. Different genres follow specific patterns; romance novels, thrillers, and mysteries follow expected plot formulae in order to fit into the genre. Related to this, Kidd and Castano also discussed the importance of well-rounded, complex characters. Fiction populated by flat, predictable protagonists arguably offers less opportunity for the simulation of social experiences that could enrich real-life interactions. Reading about multidimensional characters with complex histories, goals, and plans is more conducive to this goal. For example, in *Six of Crows* by Leigh Bardugo, Kaz Brekker's motivations are ambiguous and potentially suspect throughout the novel. It is only at the end of *Crooked Kingdom*, the next book in Bardugo's series, that the reader can adequately judge what drives Kaz's desire for revenge and his possibilities for redemption.

Although this distinction between literary and genre fiction is worth considering, we suggest that distinguishing between high- and low-quality writing may be equally useful. After all, if a genre fiction book is well written and features complex characters, it might also promote associations between reading and social understanding (Mar et al., 2011). While readers are visiting Narnia (*Chronicles of Narnia* series by C.S. Lewis), Hogwarts (*Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling), and Panem (*Hunger Games* series by Suzanne Collins), they are also experiencing the emotions of Lucy, Harry, and Katniss firsthand, suffering through their trials, conquering their obstacles, and celebrating their victories. Arguably, although all of these books could be considered genre fiction, the quality of the narrative has the power to transport readers (Gerrig, 1993) into the fictional worlds that the authors created.

It must be kept in mind that engagement and motivation are crucial factors at work here. Readers are unlikely to feel transported by books they find unenjoyable or are extrinsically motivated to read. For this reason, it is useful to match books to the interests and experiences of individual readers. Bringing together these principles, Ivey and Johnston (2013) restructured the reading program in a middle school, replacing the classic classroom novel approach with a self-directed, self-paced program. Students chose the novels they wanted to read from approximately 150 young adult novels that were prescreened and introduced by their teachers. The students made note of which titles they found interesting and read these at their own

pace. Year-end interviews with students showed that having the freedom to read what they wanted, when they wanted was engaging, and it also helped them develop a new understanding of the individuals around them:

I thought [*Destroying Avalon* by Kate McCaffrey] was really good, really sad at the end. But it just makes you think about, to pay attention to how people react, to pay attention to how they're feeling about stuff. Like when you see people you don't really think, you know, you think, well, they don't have problems or whatever. But then some of the ones I've read, you can just understand people better. (Ivey & Johnston, 2013, p. 262)

Indeed, 70% of students in this study reported that the reading program was connected to changes in their relationships both in school (teachers and classmates) and outside of school (family). Thus, a reading program centered on self-chosen texts apparently provided opportunities for students to forge or deepen relationships.

## Classroom Implications

In this section, we consider how teachers can use this knowledge in a classroom learning context—by offering some book suggestions and accompanying activities that may promote social simulation, emotional evocation, and/or inferencing—and thus support the sociocognitive benefits that students could get from reading these specific novels. These strategies were identified via consultation with expert teachers and teacher trainers and by drawing on various teacher resources, such as online communities. Many of these practices may be familiar to experienced teachers of literacy, inasmuch as they are often used with the aim of supporting reading comprehension and engagement. Fortuitously, these practices may have the added benefit of supporting the association between social understanding and reading and are also in line with established best practices in socioemotional learning (e.g., active, explicit; Taylor et al., 2017).

## Selecting Books and Matching Them to Readers

The first step is choosing appropriate texts. As noted, these texts should be well written, have character-driven plots, be centered on complex characters, and be conducive to simulating social experiences.



Specific book selections will necessarily depend on the school context, the grade level, and the concerns and needs of the students. For example, book selections for a group of students who are deeply engaged in environmental stewardship issues would be different than those for a group of students who are struggling with overly competitive behavior. Feeling motivated to engage with a story is a key factor in being immersed in a book (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006); therefore, being able to match a reader to a book is one of the greatest tools in the teacher’s arsenal. The more familiar teachers are with the literature targeted at their students’ age groups, the better their matchmaking abilities will be. As underlined by Bishop (1990) and many others, it is also crucial to provide students with books that authentically represent a variety of voices, traditions, and experiences, especially including the voices that are underrepresented in the literature.

We have compiled a list with some suggestions for inspiration in Table 1.

In the classroom, there may be situations in which teachers prefer to have students reading common materials rather than purely individual selections. Much like selecting films for a class, not every single student will enjoy every teacher-made suggestion; however, this should not deter teachers from thoughtfully selecting a novel for the whole class to read. Alternatively, the use of literature circles in a classroom creates a middle ground whereby teachers can retain the motivation connected to students choosing their own reading materials. The advantage of literature circles is that teachers can preselect several books and thus ensure that the reading material is high-quality, fulfills all the requirements we have outlined, and is appropriate. Once the teacher has made the preselections, students can choose

**Table 1**  
**Book Suggestions**

Storybooks	Middle-grade novels	Young adult fiction
<i>Miss Nelson Is Missing!</i> by Harry Allard	<i>Ms. Bixby’s Last Day</i> by John David Anderson	<i>Love, Hate, &amp; Other Filters</i> by Samira Ahmed
<i>A Year of Borrowed Men</i> by Michelle Barker	<i>El Deafo</i> by Cece Bell	<i>Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda</i> by Becky Albertalli
<i>Those Shoes</i> by Maribeth Boelts	<i>Because of Mr. Terrupt</i> by Rob Buyea	<i>The Crossover</i> by Kwame Alexander
<i>The Day the Crayons Quit</i> by Drew Daywalt	<i>Matilda</i> by Roald Dahl <sup>a</sup>	The Six of Crows duology by Leigh Bardugo <sup>a</sup>
<i>Last Stop on Market Street</i> by Matt de la Peña	<i>Out of My Mind</i> by Sharon M. Draper	The Hunger Games series by Suzanne Collins <sup>a</sup>
<i>Du Iz Tak?</i> by Carson Ellis	<i>George</i> by Alex Gino	<i>The Marrow Thieves</i> by Cherie Dimaline
<i>Red: A Crayon’s Story</i> by Michael Hall	<i>Paper Things</i> by Jennifer Richard Jacobson	<i>Will Grayson, Will Grayson</i> by John Green and David Levithan
<i>Owen</i> by Kevin Henkes	<i>Fatty Legs</i> by Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton	<i>Destroying Avalon</i> by Kate McCaffrey <sup>a</sup>
<i>Flora and the Flamingo</i> by Molly Idle	The Chronicles of Narnia series by C.S. Lewis <sup>a</sup>	<i>Ramona Blue</i> by Julie Murphy
<i>Lost and Found</i> by Oliver Jeffers	<i>Wonder</i> by R.J. Palacio <sup>a</sup>	<i>I’ll Give You the Sun</i> by Jandy Nelson
<i>The Bad Seed</i> by Jory John <sup>a</sup>	<i>Hatchet</i> by Gary Paulsen <sup>a</sup>	<i>Word Nerd</i> by Susin Nielsen
<i>I Want My Hat Back</i> by Jon Klassen	<i>Percy Jackson and the Olympians</i> series by Rick Riordan <sup>a</sup>	<i>Carry On</i> by Rainbow Rowell
<i>The Stamp Collector</i> by Jennifer Lanthier	<i>Love, Ish</i> by Karen Rivers	<i>Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe</i> by Benjamin Alire Sáenz
<i>Henry’s Freedom Box</i> by Ellen Levine	Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling <sup>a</sup>	<i>Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood</i> by Marjane Satrapi
<i>Virginia Wolf</i> by Kyo Maclear	<i>Counting by 7s</i> by Holly Goldberg Sloan	<i>Goodbye Stranger</i> by Rebecca Stead
<i>The Junkyard Wonders</i> by Patricia Polacco	<i>Short by Holly Goldberg Sloan</i>	<i>Dear Martin</i> by Nic Stone
<i>After the Fall (How Humpty Dumpty Got Back Up Again)</i> by Dan Santat <sup>a</sup>	<i>When You Reach Me</i> by Rebecca Stead <sup>a</sup>	<i>The Hate U Give</i> by Angie Thomas <sup>a</sup>
<i>The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs!</i> by Jon Scieszka <sup>a</sup>	<i>Charlotte’s Web</i> by E.B. White <sup>a</sup>	<i>The Book Thief</i> by Marcus Zusak <sup>a</sup>
<i>Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale</i> by Mo Willems <sup>a</sup>	<i>Karma Khullar’s Mustache</i> by Kristi Wientge	

<sup>a</sup> Mentioned in this article.

books from the curated list and are then grouped by these choices.

### Reading-Related Activities

Although read-alouds should be only one tool in the teacher's toolbox, these can be used effectively to immerse a whole class into a fantastic book. Reading a story aloud lends itself to prediction activities, which can be conducive to both simulation and inferencing. These activities involve stopping at a pivotal point and asking students to predict what happens next. When the plot of the story is character-driven, predicting the next step requires taking the perspective of that character and making inferences about his or her goals and knowledge. For example, in *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White, when Wilbur is petrified of becoming Mr. and Mrs. Zuckerman's Christmas dinner and Charlotte vows to save him, students could predict how she will do so. Follow-up activities could involve drawing, writing, or enacting an invented next chapter in the book.

To support an immersive experience in reading, teachers can also create a multisensory experience in the classroom to help students feel transported into another world. The Harry Potter series lends itself well to this type of activity. The classroom can be decorated with (artificial) candles and magical objects. Students can be sorted into houses, house points can be given for good work, and an academic Triwizard Tournament can be hosted. Other curricular areas can be connected to the literature unit: Math problems can be structured around galleons and sickles and knuts, science activities can revolve around making potions, and physical education could involve playing quidditch.

Another way to support the link between reading and social understanding is to ask students to retell the story, or parts of a story, from the perspective of a different character. Prompts could include asking students to consider characters' intentions or asking what students would have done in the characters' shoes. To scaffold this, teachers might choose to present students with a CHAMP organizer, a Chart for Multiple Perspectives, wherein students identify an event, describe what the characters involved are feeling, and provide evidence from the text (McTigue, Douglass, Wright, Hodges, & Franks, 2015). These activities are helpful because they encourage students to evaluate the character's thoughts and emotions, evaluate how their own thoughts and emotions are different or similar, and

draw connections with internal states as guides for action. Similarly, by retelling a pivotal moment from a different character's point of view, students are challenged to consider how the same situation can be understood or interpreted in different ways. For example, in *The Lightning Thief*, the first book in the Percy Jackson and the Olympians series by Rick Riordan, retelling Percy Jackson's arrival at Camp Half-Blood from Annabeth's perspective requires thinking about the events from another point of view and thus scaffolds a deeper understanding of her motivations. Possible formats for such responses could include drawing comic strips, writing story chapters, or creating short films.

Another suggested activity involves writing a letter to one of the characters in a book, such as offering advice in the protagonist's time of need. This could be done as students reach a point in the book when characters are experiencing a moment of crisis, retrospectively after finishing the story, or at both points. For example, students could write advice letters to Humpty Dumpty in Dan Santat's *After the Fall (How Humpty Dumpty Got Back Up Again)*. At the end of the story, when we see how he picked himself back up and tried again, a prompt could be, "Write a letter to Humpty Dumpty telling him about a time you got back up again and how your story is similar to or different from his."

In a Hot Seat activity, students take on the roles of characters in a book. For older readers, the author can also be included in the casting. Students are encouraged to prepare by considering all aspects of a given character, including how they might act, talk, and dress. Typically, all actors then get together and a type of talk show is hosted. For example, if the activity were based on *Wonder*, students would take on the roles of Auggie, Via, Justin, Miranda, Jack, Summer, and perhaps even Julian, Auggie's parents, and Mr. Tushman. Additionally, one student could become the author. Students who have not been cast as characters are tasked with writing open-ended questions that the actors will answer while staying in character, questions that delve deeper into the characters' experiences: "Julian, why were you so mean to Auggie?" "Jack, why did you say something so hurtful about Auggie?" "Auggie, why did you forgive Jack?" "Via, do you get jealous of all the attention Auggie gets? Why or why not?" Both asking and answering encourage students to engage with the characters' emotions and perspectives in a meaningful way.

Readers Theatre is somewhat similar to Hot Seat; for this activity, students turn a novel into a play. Taking a novel and adapting it into a script requires a synthesis of the characters' emotions and reactions to events in the novel and requires the actors and directors to interpret the perspectives of the characters whose inner voices are not heard as much. For example, if one character ends up double-crossing the others at some point in the story, the actor playing that character must consider the complex emotions the character is feeling in that portrayal. When Edmund betrays his brother and sisters in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the first book in the Chronicles of Narnia series, students could be encouraged to consider his internal conflict when portraying him in a scripted version. A related activity may be for students to "change up the script." For example, while reading Jory John's *The Bad Seed*, students could be asked to imagine and enact how the Bad Seed might have turned out differently if he had not experienced so many hardships.

Often, reading responses take the form of worksheets. Thoughtful questions that promote inferences may be particularly conducive to targeting the sociocognitive competencies that are the focus of this article. For example, if students were doing a unit on *When You Reach Me* by Rebecca Stead, they could be asked to explain why Sal did not talk to Miranda after Marcus punched him or why he did not want to be her friend anymore. In each case, students are being asked to reflect on the feelings, insecurities, and expectations that guide people's actions. These kinds of inferencing questions stand in contrast to more basic comprehension questions about the text (e.g., "Who is Miranda's best friend?") or less psychologically based inferencing questions (e.g., "Does Miranda have a lot of friends?"), neither of which may be as effective in supporting the development of social understanding.

Younger students can be encouraged to read between the lines of the text by using a think-aloud technique when reading a storybook for the first time, and then annotating the storybook with sticky notes that contain their inferences, questions, and other reactions to the text. For example, in *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale* by Mo Willems, Trixie's non-verbal reactions to Knuffle Bunny's disappearance can provoke discussions about needs, frustrations, and misunderstandings; here, a teacher could make note of the class's thoughts and ideas and mark

them on a sticky note on each page. These comments and reactions also provide possibilities for rereading activities. For example, some questions related to author's craft could be, "Were there clues to where Knuffle Bunny was the whole time?" "How does Mo Willems use illustrations to tell the story?" "Would the story work without the pictures?" This way, students can visualize how often readers are required to make inferences and the richness that this adds to stories.

The suggested activities and accompanying titles are a useful starting point for making connections between the act of reading fiction and skills related to social understanding. In our examples, we have selected books because of their quality, their character-driven plots, and their richness in describing human interactions. Yet, many of these books also lend themselves to concrete actions that extend beyond the literacy classroom. A unit on *Wonder* could inspire a schoolwide anti-bullying initiative. Reading *After the Fall* can lend itself to creating mental health awareness campaigns. *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas can start as a literacy unit but evolve into a letter-writing campaign to elected officials regarding ongoing challenges faced by marginalized communities. These are simply examples; there are a multitude of ways in which well-chosen novels can serve as springboards for meaningful service learning activities.

## Final Thoughts

Our aim in this article was to build a case for the power of fiction; the scholarly literature increasingly demonstrates that reading not only has cognitive benefits but is also linked to skills underlying social understanding. Although these objectives are arguably of value in all settings, teachers may be especially keen to implement these activities in classrooms where students have more pressing emotional needs and challenges, as extending and exercising skills related to social understanding could have far-reaching benefits. Fortunately, activities that promote sociocognitive development also tend to be fun, engaging, and motivating for students, as they serve to immerse them in fictional settings and thus also encourage a love of reading. As such, we suspect that many effective teachers are already implementing such activities in their literacy classrooms—but perhaps without explicitly considering how these activities can also serve to promote students' socio-emotional learning.



## TAKE ACTION!

1. Choose texts carefully and with intention: high-quality writing, character-driven plots, interesting multidimensional characters.
2. Consider how motivating and engaging the text is for readers. The more familiar you are with children's literature, the more you will be able to use resources strategically for these purposes.
3. Extend on the reading materials by having conversations and engaging in activities that promote simulation or transportation, evoke emotions, and exercise inferencing skills.

## REFERENCES

- Adrián, J.E., Clemente, R.A., Villanueva, L., & Rieffe, C. (2005). Parent-child picture-book reading, mothers' mental state language and children's theory of mind. *Journal of Child Language*, 32(3), 673–686. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305000905006963>
- Adrián, J.E., Clemente, R.A., & Villanueva, L. (2007). Mothers' use of cognitive state verbs in picture-book reading and the development of children's understanding of mind: A longitudinal study. *Child Development*, 78(4), 1052–1067. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2007.01052.x>
- Aram, D., & Aviram, S. (2009). Mothers' storybook reading and kindergartners' socioemotional and literacy development. *Reading Psychology*, 30(2), 175–194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02702710802275348>
- Bal, P.M., & Veltkamp, M. (2013). How does fiction reading influence empathy? An experimental investigation on the role of emotional transportation. *PLoS One*, 8(1), article e55341. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0055341>
- Baron-Cohen, S., Wheelwright, S., Hill, J., Raste, Y., & Plumb, I. (2001). The "Reading the Mind in the Eyes" Test revised version: A study with normal adults and adults with Asperger syndrome or high-functioning autism. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 42(2), 241–251. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-7610.00715>
- Bishop, R.S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 6(3), ix–xi.
- Bruner, J.S. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 18(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448619>
- Carpendale, J.I.M., & Lewis, C. (2006). *How children develop social understanding*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Cunningham, A.E., & Stanovich, K.E. (1997). Early reading acquisition and its relation to reading experience and ability 10 years later. *Developmental Psychology*, 33(6), 934–945. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.33.6.934>
- Doyle, B.G., & Bramwell, W. (2006). Promoting emergent literacy and social-emotional learning through dialogic reading. *The Reading Teacher*, 59(6), 554–564. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RT.59.6.5>
- Edmunds, K.M., & Bauserman, K.L. (2006). What teachers can learn about reading motivation through conversations with children. *The Reading Teacher*, 59(5), 414–424. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RT.59.5.1>
- Gerrig, R. (1993). *Experiencing narrative worlds: On the psychological activities of reading*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Ivey, G., & Johnston, P.H. (2013). Engagement with young adult literature: Outcomes and processes. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 48(3), 255–275. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.46>
- Johnson, D.R. (2012). Transportation into a story increases empathy, prosocial behavior, and perceptual bias toward fearful expressions. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 52(2), 150–155. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2011.10.005>
- Kidd, D., & Castano, E. (2017). Different stories: How levels of familiarity with literary and genre fiction relate to mentalizing. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 11(4), 474–486. <https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000069>
- Mar, R.A., & Oatley, K. (2008). The function of fiction is the abstraction and simulation of social experience. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 3(3), 173–192. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6924.2008.00073.x>
- Mar, R.A., Oatley, K., Djikic, M., & Mullin, J. (2011). Emotion and narrative fiction: Interactive influences before, during, and after reading. *Cognition and Emotion*, 25(5), 818–833. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2010.515151>
- Mar, R.A., Oatley, K., Hirsh, J., dela Paz, J., & Peterson, J.B. (2006). Bookworms versus nerds: Exposure to fiction versus non-fiction, divergent associations with social ability, and the simulation of fictional social worlds. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 40(5), 694–712. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2005.08.002>
- Mar, R.A., Oatley, K., & Peterson, J.B. (2009). Exploring the link between reading fiction and empathy: Ruling out individual differences and examining outcomes. *Communications*, 34(4), 407–428. <https://doi.org/10.1515/COMM.2009.025>
- Mar, R.A., Tackett, J.L., & Moore, C. (2010). Exposure to media and theory-of-mind development in preschoolers. *Cognitive Development*, 25(1), 69–78. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogdev.2009.11.002>
- McTigue, E., Douglass, A., Wright, K.L., Hodges, T.S., & Franks, A.D. (2015). Beyond the story map: Inferential comprehension via character perspective. *The Reading Teacher*, 69(1), 91–101. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1377>
- Mol, S.E., & Bus, A.G. (2011). To read or not to read: A meta-analysis of print exposure from infancy to adulthood. *Psychological Bulletin*, 137(2), 267–296. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021890>
- Mumper, M.L., & Gerrig, R.J. (2017). Leisure reading and social cognition: A meta-analysis. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 11(1), 109–120. <https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000089>
- Pino, M.C., & Mazza, M. (2016). The use of "literary fiction" to promote mentalizing ability. *PLoS One*, 11(8), article e0160254. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0160254>
- Sénéchal, M. (2006). Testing the home literacy model: Parent involvement in kindergarten is differentially related to grade 4 reading comprehension, fluency, spelling, and reading for pleasure. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 10(1), 59–87. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532799xssr1001\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532799xssr1001_4)
- Sparks, R.L., Patton, J., & Murdoch, A. (2014). Early reading success and its relationship to reading achievement and reading volume: Replication of "10 years later". *Reading and Writing*, 27(1), 189–211. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-013-9439-2>
- Stanovich, K.E., West, R.F., & Harrison, M.R. (1995). Knowledge growth and maintenance across the life span: The role of print exposure. *Developmental Psychology*, 31(5), 811–826. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.31.5.811>
- Taylor, R.D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J.A., & Weissberg, R.P. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A



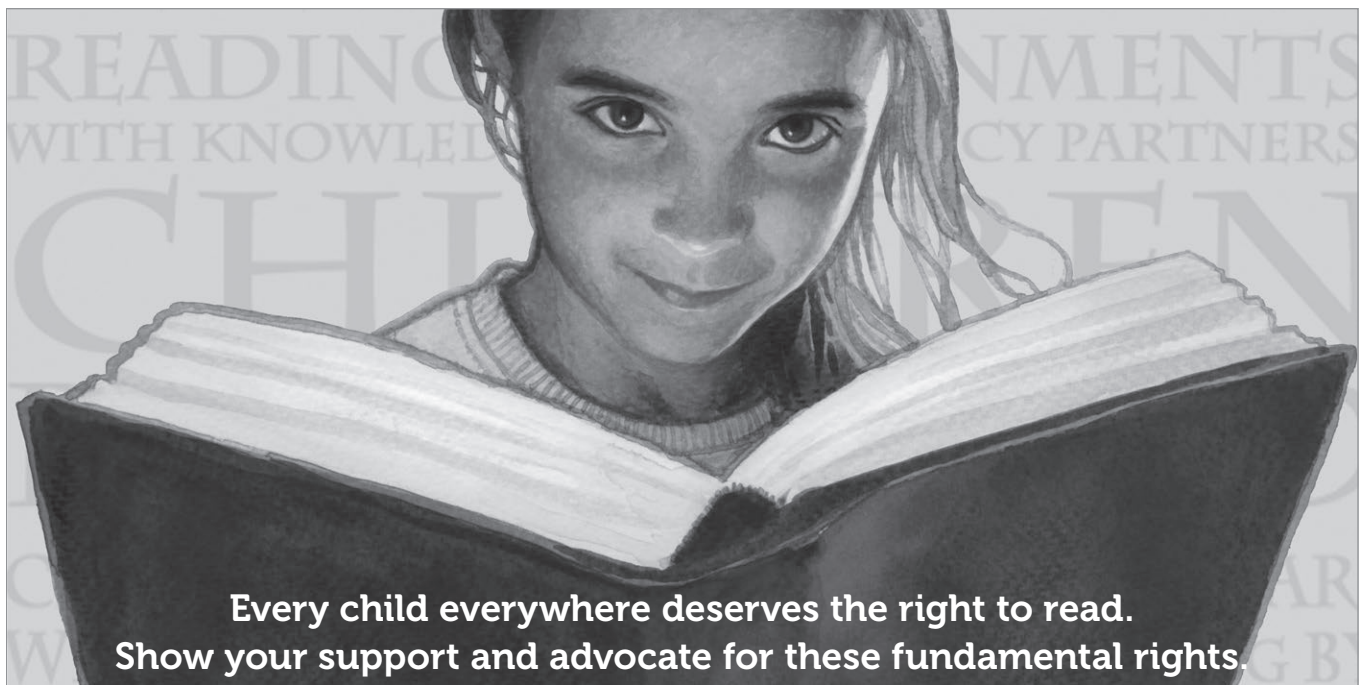
meta-analysis of follow-up effects. *Child Development*, 88(4), 1156–1171. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12864>

Van Kleeck, A. (2008). Providing preschool foundations for later reading comprehension: The importance of and ideas for targeting inferencing in storybook-sharing interventions. *Psychology in the Schools*, 45(7), 627–643. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20314>

Wulandini, Kuntoro, I.A., & Handayani, E. (2018). The effect of literary fiction on school-aged children's theory of mind (ToM). In A.A. Ariyanto, H. Muluk, P. Newcombe, F.P. Piercy, E.K. Poerwandari, & S.H.R. Suradijono (Eds.), *Diversity in unity: Perspectives from psychology and behavioral sciences* (pp. 159–166). London, UK: Routledge.

## MORE TO EXPLORE

- LEARN. (2006). *Response teacher's guide*. Retrieved from [https://www.learnquebec.ca/documents/20181/67977/response\\_guide\\_en.pdf/2bb95bd9-3ab4-4a49-97c5-83d8267e1029](https://www.learnquebec.ca/documents/20181/67977/response_guide_en.pdf/2bb95bd9-3ab4-4a49-97c5-83d8267e1029)
- Oatley, K. (2002). Emotions and the story worlds of fiction. In M.C. Green, J.J. Strange, & T.C. Brock (Eds.), *Narrative impact: Social and cognitive foundations* (pp. 39–69). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Québec Reading Connection: <https://www.quebecreadingconnection.ca>. (This resource provides book suggestions and lesson plan ideas for teachers.)



Every child everywhere deserves the right to read.  
Show your support and advocate for these fundamental rights.

**INTERNATIONAL LITERACY ASSOCIATION**

**Sign on in support of Children's #RightsToRead**  
**[rightstoread.org](http://rightstoread.org)**