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## Reading With Our Heads and Our Hearts to Build Empathy

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## Reading With Our Heads and Our Hearts to Build Empathy

### Cover Page Footnote

Please note that the manuscript file includes two tables, a figure, and two appendices. The tables and the figures are now embedded in the article. The appendices are at the end.

# Reading With Our Heads and Our Hearts to Build Empathy

by Heidi Gibbons



As an educator, a parent, and a human on this planet, I aim to prepare future decision makers of our society who are thoughtful and compassionate. Many literacy educators know that we can foster empathy in young people through reading. Because I teach reading, and because I believe empathy is a social and cognitive skill that can be taught, I decided to conduct a study to discover what impact reading could have on intermediate readers' empathy skills while using the Book Head Heart (BHH) framework introduced by Kylene Beers and Bob Probst (2017) in *Disrupting Thinking*. This framework encourages students to read metacognitively with an additional focus on their deeper feelings and understandings.

## Literature Review

### Reading Instruction in Schools

Reading instruction includes more than just teaching students how to decode and extract information. We also want students to interact with the text, learn from it, and grow as human beings (Beers & Probst, 2017; Johnston, 2012; Petrich, 2015). I use the term "text" often throughout this article. By text, I mean any written form that is read, viewed, or listened to by a reader. This includes, but is not limited to, novels, graphic novels, short stories, biographies, news articles, informational books, wordless books, short films, and audio



Heidi Gibbons

books. Beers and Probst (2017), teaching veterans and reading instruction experts, argue that "[I]n today's world, learning to extract information is not enough" (p. 21). Their BHH framework offers a tool educators can use alongside the Common Core State Standards to help their students respond to texts on multiple levels.

Research contends that reading should focus on the text and also go beyond its four corners, ultimately leading to the reader and the text coming closer together, connecting on metacognitive and emotional levels (Beers, 2013; Brett, 2016; Cain, 2015). In addition, relevance matters. A student who reads a topic or story that is relevant to their lives can truly interact with a text and will therefore take something away from it (Beers, 2013; Brett, 2016). Empathy is one student trait that has the potential to change or grow as a result of reading.

### Empathy

The terms "empathy" and "sympathy" are sometimes interchangeable, but the difference is point of view, with the former having the observer take the point of view of another. Both include an observer's ability to feel for another person (Aristu, Tello, Ortiz, & Gándara, 2008; Parsons, 2013). Empathy means taking care to discover feelings behind behaviors to better understand them (Johnston, 2012). According to Beers

and Probst (2017), cultivating empathy is a worthwhile goal for reading instruction because “we believe creating this more compassionate, civic-minded person begins with the texts we have them read and the thinking we ask them to do about those texts” (p. 71). In *Opening Minds*, Johnston (2012) makes a similar argument: “Apprenticing children into humanity” (p. 71) includes learning to make caring, compassionate, empathetic choices.

Reading can increase a reader’s empathy, compassion, and/or social behavior (Cain, 2015; Johnson, 2011; Petrich, 2015; Verden & Hickman, 2009). Parsons (2013) found that fourth graders had a combination of three different relationships with texts: as outsiders observing the characters, with the characters in the book, and actually feeling they had become the characters. This idea of becoming the character is tied to the empathy described by Verden and Hickman (2009), who described reading and discussion as an intervention of sorts for students with social-emotional needs “to be somewhere else for a while and, at the same time, understand through relating to the stories” (p. 13). This idea of becoming the character also meshes well with the concept of social imagination because of the perspective-taking involved (Johnston, 2012). Research suggests that reading fiction and responding in written or oral form can lead to a reader-character connection where the reader’s imagination leads to growth in caring thoughts, caring behaviors, and empathy (Cain, 2015; Johnston, 2012; Parsons, 2013; Verden & Hickman, 2009). Many educators believe strongly in the positive benefits of learning communities that grow through response to reading and conversations (Beers & Probst, 2017; Johnston, 2012; Petrich, 2015).

## Theoretical Framework

### Transactional Theory

Rosenblatt’s Transactional Theory differentiates between aesthetic reading and efferent reading, arguing that both are important to readers as they transact with a text and set a purpose for reading. Aesthetic reading involves thoughts and emotions; the reader “experiences, savors, the qualities of the structural ideas, situations, scenes, personalities, emotions called forth,

participating in the tensions, conflicts, and resolutions as they unfold” (Rosenblatt, 1988, p. 10). Efferent reading occurs when “meaning results from the abstracting-out and analytic structuring of the ideas, information, directions, conclusions to be retained, used, or acted on after the event” (p. 10). Although a reader’s transaction can land anywhere along this continuum, Rosenblatt (1988) reasons that most readings will land somewhere close to the center of the continuum between efferent and aesthetic reading. She also argues that “different readings of the same text may fall at different points along the efferent/aesthetic continuum” (p. 11).

### The Book Head Heart Framework

BHH is a simple and direct framework that leads readers down a path that can be both efferent and aesthetic when interacting with texts. Beers and Probst (2017) explain to students: “Of course you must read what’s in the book. The author put those words there for a reason! But you also must read thinking about what’s in your own head, your responses. And finally you must read thinking about what you took to heart—your feelings, commitments, and values” (p.63).

The Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) aim to prepare students for college and career by the time they finish high school. These standards affect the approaches to reading instruction that teachers often take. Attention to standards can lead many educators to over-emphasize an exclusive focus on the text, and Beers and Probst agree that “learning to pay attention to what’s in the text is necessary” (p. 63). However, they contend that the standards also focus on other goals beyond extracting from the text including intellectual and emotional interaction. BHH can help educators show students a path to those end goals. Drawing on Rosenblatt’s (1988) seminal work, Beers and Probst (2017) believe readers should have experiences with texts that fall along the efferent/aesthetic continuum.

As teachers, the way we teach students to approach reading matters. Traditional methods, Beers and Probst

(2017) reason, need to be disrupted. At the core of their argument is the goal that all readers are “responsive, responsible, and compassionate” (p. 162). Their BHH framework is a vehicle by which we can help students reach that goal. The book and head elements of the framework promote responsiveness and responsibility. The heart element of the framework encourages compassion. Bressler (2018) stated, “For Beers and Probst, to be a compassionate reader is to be an empathetic reader” (p. 2). I sought to examine what would happen if I taught students to apply the BHH framework while reading. See Figure 1 for a resource page I chose to share with students.

## Methodology

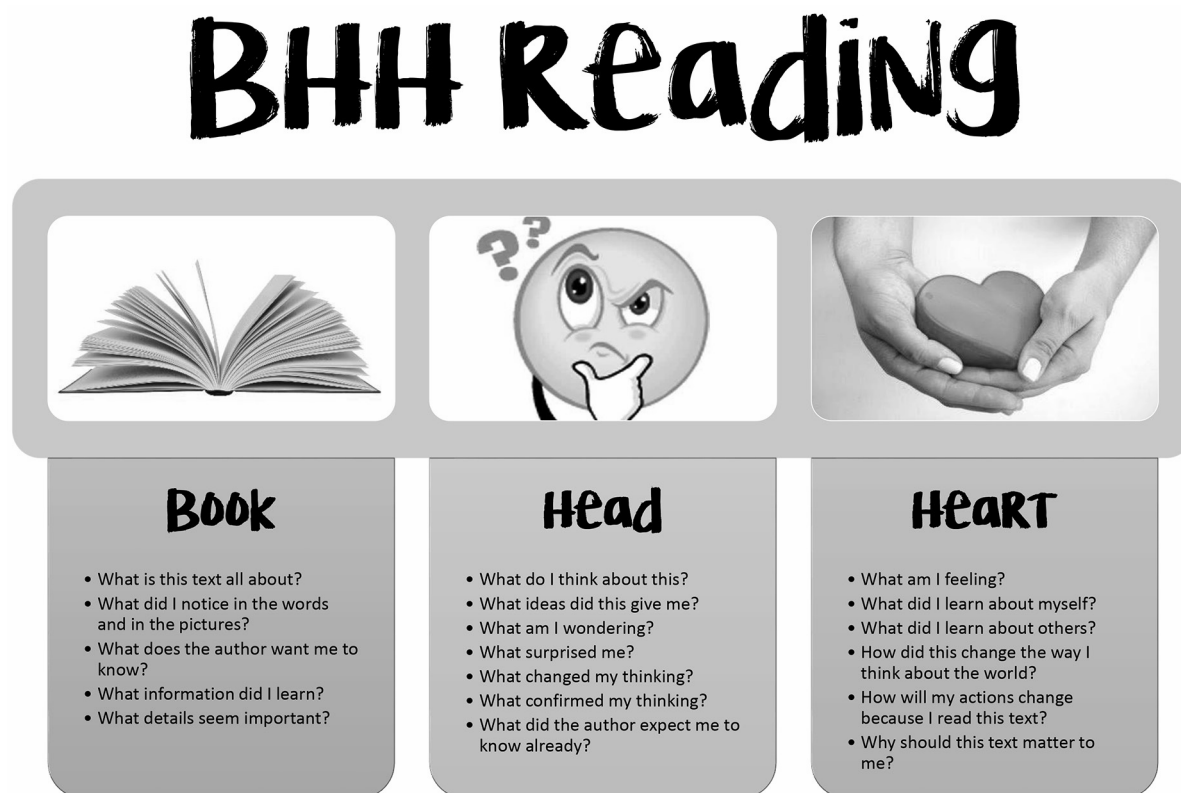
### Teaching Context and Participants

I teach accelerated Reading and Math to third, fourth, and fifth graders at an elementary school in the western suburbs of Chicago. I have twelve years of teaching experience in elementary and middle school classrooms.

I implemented the BHH framework with my third, fourth, and fifth grade students to take their reading experiences beyond the text and into their own lives to see if the BHH approach could indeed lead to more compassionate readers, more empathetic humans. In the beginning of the 2019–2020 school year, I had three accelerated reading groups in three different grades: third grade had eleven students, fourth grade had five students, and fifth grade had nine students. All students who participated in the study were ages 8 - 11. Each student had parental consent to participate in the study and had also given student assent to participate. In total, 25 students participated in the study.

### Data Collection and Analysis

I decided to use a pre-test and a post-test in the form of two already-existing measurements of empathy: Bryant’s Empathy Index (1982) and the Empathy Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents (Rieffe et al., 2010). The former was designed to measure empathy



Based on *Disrupting Thinking* by Kylene Beers and Robert Probst

*Figure 1. BHH Reading Resource Page (found on Richmond Street School’s website article about BHH - [shorturl.at/atvz7](https://shorturl.at/atvz7))*

in children and adolescents (using a scale ranging from -11 to 11), and the latter was designed to measure children's ability to understand the feelings of others (using a scale ranging from 0 to 36). I also included two supplemental questions asking students to self-report how empathetic they were and the level at which they were able to take another's perspective. I included these questions because I wanted direct self-reporting questions that were absent from the two measurements.

In addition to the surveys, I spent time observing students' interactions with one another on two separate occasions when they had earned a reward day, once before implementing BHH and once several weeks later. I observed each group for 50 minutes, taking note of the behaviors as indicated in Table 2. While my sample of 25 students was a small one, I was curious to glimpse any indications of change. Finally, I analyzed students' responses to reading in their literacy notebooks that were written during the time period before I taught the BHH method; and I evaluated students' later responses after providing direct instruction and practice time using the BHH method. To do this, I coded students' comments in three categories (See Table 1). I did both analyses (before and after teaching BHH) so that I would have a way to compare potential differences in responses after students learned to use the BHH method while reading.

### **Implementing the Book Head Heart Framework**

Before teaching BHH, I provided time in class for students to respond to shared texts (picture books and novel chapters). I provided a T-chart with which students were familiar, labeling the two columns, "What I noticed in the text?" and "What do I think about it?" Early in the school year, we focused on strategies such as making predictions, asking questions, describing conflict, and recognizing figurative language. I anticipated these strategies being very much a part of the "Book" and "Head" parts of the framework.

I introduced the BHH framework to each class by sharing the resource page shown in Figure 1 that outlines how readers can interact with a text. To allow students practice with the BHH framework, I read aloud *After*

*the Fall* (2017) by Dan Santat with the simple instructions that they add to their literacy notebook using a three-column chart as opposed to our previously-used two-column chart. The three columns were based on the newly-introduced framework: "In the BOOK," "In my HEAD," and "In my HEART." While I did not model this for students explicitly on that day, I did provide the resource page to each student to use as needed. Also, as we read, I paused on a few occasions to allow students time to write and share if they wished to do so.

After concluding *After the Fall* and sharing aloud some of our responses, I read aloud another story. To help students understand the "how a text changed me" response under the examples in the Heart column, I followed up *After the Fall* with a true story Dan Santat shared on Twitter. The full story can now be found on Santat's blog: <https://tumblr.co/ZJeVix2lAaCyB>. This story allowed students additional practice with BHH, but I also had a secondary purpose: to show an example of how a person can be changed by reading because the individual in the story shared how a book was a catalyst that changed his approach to life. This man, who had once been on the streets, turned his life around after reading the book.

Hearing this story led to many opportunities for sharing Book, Head, and Heart thoughts, but it also gave students a strong, striking example of how we can truly interact with a story and be changed. The man Santat tried to help had really connected with a lesson from *After the Fall*: get back up and try to make progress one step at a time. He put that lesson into action in his own life. A gift of money and act of goodwill from Santat had potential to help but in the end did not. *After the Fall* also had the potential to help; in the end, it made all the difference. This person was in a situation that students could hardly imagine. However, because of their interaction with the true story Santat shared, they had a way to do just that: to imagine what another person felt and why they felt that way.

After reading this story, we continued to practice BHH while reading a class novel. In third grade we read *May B.: A Novel* (Rose, 2014), in fourth grade we read

*A Year Down Yonder* (Peck, 2000), and in fifth grade we read *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* (Curtis, 1997). In addition, students continued to read books from a variety of genres on their own. I allowed student independence; indeed, I wanted to make it clear that each person’s interaction with a book is unique to them.

We also started using the word “empathy” in our active vocabulary. It happened quite naturally when students started sharing what they wrote while reading; we discovered that these empathetic thoughts were usually in their “heart” column. In order to help all students understand, I walked them through my thinking while reading *May B*. In this book, one of the secondary characters is Mrs. Oblinger, who comes across as rude and even a little bratty...well, that was how I was feeling about her when I first started reading and completing my BHH columns. As the book progressed, however, I allowed the students to hear my thoughts and feelings shift. This modeling helped students understand the BHH process. I modeled how I tried to empathize with her using text clues in order to better understand her situation and her actions. A character who first “annoyed” me was now in my heart. When students started to share heart thoughts about why a character

felt or reacted a certain way, I helped them name the process of looking for the why behind actions and emotions as empathy.

Findings

Response to Reading

In analyzing students’ journal responses to reading, I recorded an increase in empathetic comments. Per entry, the average total of empathetic comments went from 0.28 to 1.26 instances. See Table 1. Students’ interactions with their books appeared to go deeper based on the increase in what they noticed in the book, their head, and in their heart. I separated those comments further into subcategories shown in Table 1. Some examples of student thoughts included, “I keep feeling bad for Kenny. I want to go sit next to him,” “It’s sad that Byron failed a grade,” and “I believe judging them instantly is wrong.” Another student stated, “I would do the same if I wasn’t so selfish about having everything and took a moment to think about what I already had.” Other comments were as follows: “I feel sorry for May B,” “I feel really bad. He would be really lonely,” “I’m feeling really worried about those kids,” and “This is so nice! I think I would give someone homeless money, but not \$400!”

Table 1  
*Student comment types before and after implementing BHH Framework.*

Category	Percentage of instances in 39 total journal entries (BEFORE BHH)	Percentage of instances in 42 total journal entries (AFTER BHH)	Total change in numbers of instances of each category
1	74.4%	57.1%	29 instances to 23 instances
2	43.6%	85.7%	17 instances to 36 instances
3	28.2%	126.2%	11 instances to 53 instances
KEY: Category 1 - recognized character’s emotion/characteristics Category 2 - explained the WHY of a character’s emotion/characteristic Category 3 - shared own emotions toward character/showed empathy			

A positive change occurred in all three categories. It is important to note that some entries had more than one category of thought, thus the percentages adding up to over 100%. In addition, the percentage of 126% indicated that students were interacting and considering their own emotions more than once (on average) per journal entry.

I attribute the increase in student comments that shared feelings to our use of the BHH framework, which gave students a way (even permission) to share their emotions and their thoughts about characters' experiences. They were still taking the time to note what was in the book, but their own emotional level of interaction increased overall.

### Interacting Beyond Books

I also wanted to determine if there was a shift in students' everyday actions since implementing BHH in our daily reading routines. The post-survey results

compared to the pre-survey results showed a slight increase in scores indicating empathy. Bryant's Empathy Index indicated an increase of the average student total from 3.8 to 4.36 (on a scale that ranges from -11 to 11). EmQue's student totals changed from 24.32 to 25.04 (on a scale that ranges from 0 to 36). The two follow-up questions also had responses that increased slightly. The first question was, "Are you an empathetic person?" The average student response increased from a 4 to a 4.2 (on a scale of 1 to 6). The second question was, "Are you able to take the perspective of others?" The average student response increased from 3.8 to 4.2 (also on a scale of 1 to 6).

Before and after totals of instances of observed empathetic behavior indicate that all three categories remained the same. See Table 2. Although the before and after totals stayed the same, it is notable that there was an increase in compliments and a decrease in negative words/behaviors.

Table 2

*Student behavior observations before and after implementing the BHH Framework.*

Category	Number of Instances Before Introducing BHH	Number of Instances After Introducing BHH	Percentage Change
1	22	22	0%
2	2	12	500%
3	3	3	0%
4	8	8	0%
5	10	6	(-40%)
<b>KEY:</b> Category 1: being helpful in some way (like making space for another) Category 2: giving compliments Category 3: asking about another's well-being Category 4: giving another positive reinforcement Category 5: negative words (i.e. teasing) or behavior (i.e. avoidance)			



One big clue that students were growing in empathy was a comment embedded inside an independent reading response one-pager. This was beyond the student's journal where he had recorded thoughts and feelings in Book, Head, and Heart columns. On his one-pager, this student wrote, "This book changed me from being uncomfortable around someone with a disability, to now wanting to ask in an appropriate way if they want to talk about it because I want them to be confident in themselves." This student was changed as a result of reading and interacting with a book.

In addition, our use of "empathy" in our active vocabulary while interacting with stories showed up in conversations. For example, a third grader told me I had empathy because of how I described my emotions toward a character's situation. Another student showed she transferred her new understanding when completing a project that asked what content of her character she wanted to be known by: she said she wanted to be known for being empathetic. Several months later, a third student commented that he realized he needed to show empathy when someone was acting differently than normal, and another student included the following in one of her independent reading responses: "I think that Steven is just really trying to help Jeffrey be happy and less scared and joking around and is really having empathy for Jeffrey."

I am proud and pleased to see my students' thinking about reading shift from an efferent interaction to one that was both efferent and aesthetic. When a student can point to what an author did to portray a character's emotions, their ability to analyze a text improves. Beyond that, though, a student's ability to interact outside of books improves when they can point to what an author did to portray a character's emotions and express what they (as a reader) felt and did in response. I am pleased with the small changes the data showed overall, and it gives me hope that continued use of the BHH method could, over time, lead to a larger change in students' empathy skills.

## **Implications & Conclusion**

This study's timeframe of eight weeks limited the depth

of results. True evidence of growth in student empathy skills would take more time. Over eight weeks, students showed a change in their ability to interact with books at a heart level (with empathy for characters). The change in their empathy skills beyond books, however, was small. I feel this is because change takes time. Therefore, I believe more research (i.e., a study with a longer timeframe) would be beneficial. Transfer of skills from one situation (interaction with books/characters) to another (interaction with others in life) is possible, and I believe it is important to discover how that transfer occurs over time.

Through this study, I learned that showing kids how to engage with a book at the "heart level" can yield noticeable results. In addition, I have learned there is value in recognizing the cognitive side of empathy. With the vocabulary of empathy, I saw my students better able to include the idea of empathy (and recognize it) in their conversations. This new confirmation will impact my classroom practice in simple but profound ways. I will make a concerted effort to be direct with students about sharing their heart thoughts. We will make a whole-class effort to use the vocabulary of empathy over the course of the three years students are in my classroom.

For other educators who are considering teaching the BHH approach to reading, here are some tips:

**Tip 1:** Remember, as teachers, we're part of the team that can help "apprentice children into humanity" (Johnston, 2012, p. 71). BHH is a way to open up the wider human world to students.

**Tip 2:** Teach students to use the language of empathy and "put themselves in others' shoes." Encourage this inside and outside of class.

**Tip 3:** To start, model with a shared text. Be honest and direct with students about your thinking process; share personal changes in thinking or attitude.

**Tip 4:** Continue embedding the framework into whole-class and independent reading. Even though a shared reading experience may have been used to start, choice reading is key.

**Tip 5:** Students think and feel uniquely, so BHH is NOT a set order or checklist.

**Tip 6:** Students should be encouraged to share (or write down) their most impactful noticings, thoughts, and feelings, but they do not have to interrupt their reading flow constantly.

**Tip 7:** Bring the framework outside of fiction books and into the world of non-fiction, including articles and even discussions about home, school, community, and the world. Help students recognize the power of empathy.

**Tip 8:** When ready, ask students to go deeper by sharing a lengthier reflection about how reading a particular book or article affected and changed their thinking or attitude.

**Tip 9:** Share this framework with caregivers and other educators.

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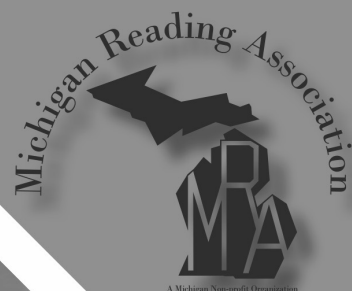
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