



Teachers as Meaning Makers in Empathetic Reading Sessions: Toward More Emotional and Holistic Literature Pedagogy

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Abstract

Purpose: This study explores interactive poetry therapy as a method for empathetic reading in holistic, emotional literature education. **Design:** Five experienced teachers participated in a descriptive case study by attending interactive empathetic reading sessions during in-service education. The participants, inspired by an extract from a novel, wrote personal stories and presented them for group discussions. **Methodology:** The data, consisting of audio recordings of the dialogues and the researchers' associated notes, were analysed via thematic content analysis. Three main themes, which are presented under the headings: Story level; narrative meanings; Individual level; emotions relating to storytelling moments; and Communal level; issues of welfare and self-care. **Findings:** The results indicated that the writers' personal stories and the group dialogues based on them prompted the participants to reflect on their own experiences and emotions, and prompted them to examine ethically challenging issues in the teaching profession. **Originality:** The study of empathetic reading in teachers' in-service education provide more understanding of possibilities for teachers to increase their knowledge of the value of stories and narratives.

Keywords

literature education, empathetic reading, interactive poetry therapy, in-service education

Introduction

The meanings teachers derive from texts and the processes they enhance matter in literature and reading education (Aerila & Kauppinen, 2021). Current theories of reading see it as an interactive process whereby experiences are shared and readers become immersed in the events and the personalities of the characters in the text (McCreary & Marchant, 2017). This approach to reading is not yet common in educational contexts, with reading education mostly aimed at improving skills or the analysis of texts (Aerila & Kauppinen, 2021). Making literature and reading education more interactive and experiential enhances readers' involvement in and enjoyment of narratives (Aerila & Kauppinen, 2021). This emotional stance during empathetic reading improves reading skills not only from the perspective of academic achievement, but also from the perspective of social-emotional development and wellbeing (McCreary & Marchant, 2017).

Literature and reading can provide emotional and social support to children, families, and teachers, while experiences of empathy enhance the understanding and enjoyment of fiction (Hogan, 2010). Although the importance of social-emotional skills has been acknowledged at the administrative level of education for years (The Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014), literature's capacity to improve overall wellbeing has not been seriously considered, and the understanding and enjoyment of fiction are not emphasised in current literature and reading education; hence, more innovative approaches are needed.

According to Kauppinen et al. (2020), teachers' experiences of literature enhance pedagogical innovations in literacy instruction, and may support their understanding of the social, emotional, and personal meanings embedded in literature. This means that teachers' own experiences of the emotional elements of fiction are a prerequisite for pushing literature pedagogy and reading in a more empathetic and emotional direction. When these experiences shape teachers' own reading, they lead to deeper engagement with literature education and an increasingly multifaceted use of fiction in instruction (Cremin et al., 2014; Kauppinen et al., 2020).

Developing empathetic reading in holistic emotional literature education

Developing students' social-emotional skills is a central aim at all levels of the Finnish national curriculum (The Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014). Different creative processes can be effective tools for social-emotional learning, since they direct thoughts from everyday life to other places, and may provide new perspectives on life situations (Nordbø & Thorød, 2014). Furthermore, emotional, holistic literature education alongside other art subjects can provide resources for proactive welfare work and tools for coping with challenging situations (Aerila & Kauppinen, 2019).

Empathetic reading focuses on the social-emotional effects of reading based on a deep dialogical process that generates emotional experiences (McCarty Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 2012), allowing readers to develop empathy as a social skill (Mar et al., 2009). However, empathetic reading depends on the extent to which a reader feels transported by the narrative and experiences empathy (Stansfield & Bunce, 2014). Blair (2005) divided empathy into cognitive and affective types. Cognitive empathy refers to the ability to perceive events and phenomena from another's perspective, while affective empathy refers to the ability to reach someone else's emotional experiences (Blair, 2005). Interactive reading as a part of emotional and holistic literature education entails sharing the feelings and perspectives generated by reading and imagining another's situation and condition, as presented in a narrative (Taylor et al., 2003).

Interactive poetry therapy using StoRE®

The Finnish Stories make Readers (StoRe®) pedagogical approach to literature (Aerila & Kauppinen, 2021; Kauppinen & Aerila, 2022) aims to create meaningful connections between children and literature, and to encourage teachers and parents to engage with literature as a component of holistic, social-emotional education using creative, arts-based learning methods. Such methods are tools for creating other realities and using imagination and multisensory action (the activation of all faculties: see Baines, 2008) to enhance the agency of reading communities (Kauppinen & Aerila, 2022).

In this study, we investigated interactive poetry model of creative art therapy as an application to the StoRe® approach. The model frames reading processes as dialogical and capable of being boosted by the arts-based group activities of readers. It sees literature as

an emotional tool for helping us understand ourselves, others, and the world around us (Hogan, 2010). The interactive nature of the model enables words and texts to have a healing effect via empathetic reading, reflective writing, and reciprocal processes (Kauppinen & Aerila, 2022).

The interactive poetry therapy model developed by McCarty Hynes and Hynes-Berry (2012) comprises four phases. The first phase involves identifying an element or detail of the text that draws the reader's attention, evoking memories and inner images. This recognition may happen immediately based on the text or as an effect of group dialogue. The second phase, called catharsis, encompasses the experiences of the readers. In this phase, readers share the thoughts and feelings the text has awakened in them and may address feelings in their own lives. In the third phase—insight—readers connect the generated emotions to their personal lives. In the fourth phase—integration—readers recognise issues on a more intellectual level, and may understand the reasons behind their behaviours and attitudes.

The phases of interactive poetry therapy are not usually linear; they often overlap, and participants may not be aware of them. According to Stansfield and Bunce (2014), readers' experiences of fiction and feelings of being transported by narratives are meaningful for their empathetic stances. Furthermore, story-based, narrative, and affective empathy support the helping tendency in readers (Stansfield & Bunce, 2014).

Interactive poetry therapy can be used as part of therapeutic counselling, but in this study, it was applied as an instructional method in an educational context. Educationally, interactive empathetic reading sessions share one of the purposes of therapeutic counselling, which is to identify and modify factors that influence learning (Milne, 2015, p. 188). In both therapeutic and educational contexts, interactive empathetic reading sessions are goal-oriented and aimed at eliciting children's or adolescents' emotions via literary activities. However, teaching is structured, has explicit objectives, is focused more on instruction than counselling, and is separate from therapy.

In this study, we considered teachers to be meaning makers in a fiction reading community. We focused on the emotional processes associated with reading; the implicit and explicit perceptions, emotions, and experiences of the participants during the interactive empathetic reading session; and the possibilities and meanings of the interactive poetry therapy model for holistic literature education and the StoRe[®] approach. Examining teachers' reading processes during the intervention helped us expand our knowledge of adults' relationships with fiction reading and expressions of real-world empathy, which are currently under-researched (Stansfield & Bunce, 2014).

The research questions underpinning the study were as follows:

1. What kind of meaning-making did teachers engage in during empathetic reading?
2. How can empathetic reading be meaningful in an educational context?

Methods

Design

This study was a descriptive case study (Woodside, 2017) with a hermeneutic-phenomenological research design (Delve & Limpaecher, 2023). We collected data for the study during StoRE[®] in-service training in spring 2019. The training had two main objectives: 1) to enable teachers to gain experience of the personal and group emotional dimensions of reading, and 2) to enhance their awareness of the common meaning-making processes underlying storytelling (Kauppinen & Aerila, 2022).

During the training, the teachers participated in three meaning-making sessions based on empathetic reading with the aim of evoking emotions to increase the teachers' knowledge and skills in support of their own teaching. Each session lasted about 125 minutes and followed the phases of McCarty Hynes and Hynes-Berry's (2012) interactive poetry therapy model, but it involved different assignments and genres. The activities for the three phases were creative writing, choosing a card and writing a letter, and composing a diary or a visual collection, respectively, supported by discussion and aimed at enhancing emotional engagement with the text to facilitate individual experiences with the texts and the sharing of them with others. This paper is based on the first two phases of the first session. The process for the whole session is illustrated in Figure 1.

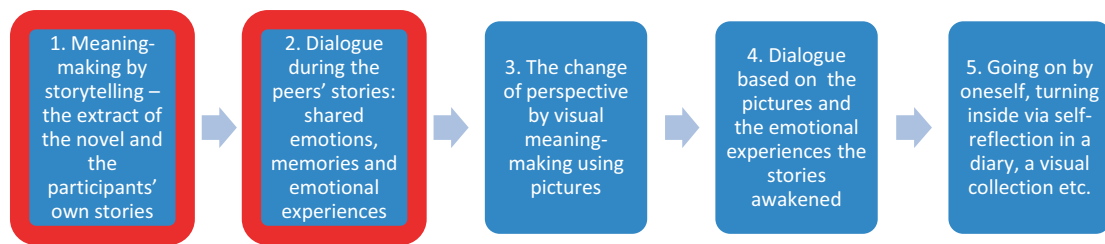


Figure 1 The Phases of the Empathised Reading and Creative Writing Session

Participants

Five experienced primary and secondary school teachers, who formed the group in in-service teacher training, voluntarily participated in the study and engaged in group meaning-making sessions.

Procedure

The first meaning-making session was based on an extract from Elena Ferrante's (2012) novel *My Brilliant Friend*. In the extract, the main characters, Elena and Raffaella, are children playing outdoors with their dolls. The text takes the children's perspective, and there are hints of threat in the extract. The extract vividly depicts the children's world, enabling readers to become immersed in their self-narrated thoughts and actions. Based on this extract, the teachers composed stories about their own life experiences (Figure 1, Phase 1) based on the feelings and memories evoked by the extract. During the session, the writers read these stories aloud to the group, in turn, and then discussed each story as a group (Figure 1, phase 2).

Data collection

The research data consisted of 11 transcribed sheets of dialogue and 2 sheets of the researcher's brief notes on the stories. Group dialogues provided the main data, with the researcher's notes considered secondary but essential for understanding and analysing the main data. The researchers audio-recorded all the group dialogues and transcribed them in detail, including the participants' non-verbal cues. The personal stories (creative writing activity; Figure 1) were not used as data because of their sensitive nature. The researcher's notes included information about the themes, perspectives, and characters of the stories, as well as information on the thoughts and feelings the extract elicited in the teachers' minds.

Data analysis

We analysed the data using qualitative thematic content analysis to capture the complexities of meaning within the overall textual data set (Guest et al., 2012). The text-based meanings

drawn from the empathetic reading were analysed in two stages (Delve & Limpaecher, 2023). Firstly, we identified and listed the common themes in the dialogues and confirmed them by comparing them with the researcher’s notes. Secondly, we categorised the meaning-making into three main themes at the story, individual, and communal levels to represent the entire body of data. For example, the story level was based on the classification of the dialogues and the researcher’s notes regarding the characters, the plot, the perspective, and participants’ non-verbal cues during the storytelling process (Table 1). To increase the reliability of the analysis, it was conducted by the first author and then double-checked by both researchers (Guest et al., 2012).

Table 1 An Example of the Analytical Process at the Story Level

Teacher A’s story in brief	The repetitive themes in the meaning-making	Empathetic meaning-making categories
The child is trying to manage in an unpleasant situation. The story was told from a nearby adult’s perspective.	An unpleasant situation in the school’s celebration – focus of the story A child with her mother – characters A nearby adult at the school’s celebration – perspective	Story level
	Shame, uncaring; emotional conflict towards parents and other adults’ behavior – verbally and non-verbally expressed emotions in the dialogue	Individual level
	Educators’ ethics (regarding both parents and teachers) – main theme produced by the teachers’ group	Communal level

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the Finnish General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and according to the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK), ethical review is not required. Prior to collecting the data, we obtained the teachers’ informed consent regarding their participation in the study. This included obtaining written consent to use the data from the sessions for research purposes and ensuring that the participants were fully informed about the study, the data being collected, how it would be used, and the fact that they could cease participation at any point. Furthermore, the teachers could participate in the sessions, even if they did want to take part in the study.

We took several measures to ensure the anonymity and rights of the participants. The teachers’ original stories were not used as data, but the researcher’s notes regarding them were substituted. Furthermore, all the personal information in the data was anonymised, and the teachers’ names are replaced in this article with codes (A–E).

Findings

Meaning-making in empathetic reading

Three levels of meaning-making were identified in the data at the story, individual, and communal levels. The story level comprised the focus and perspective of the story and the narrative traits of the storyteller. At the individual level, the emotions elicited by the story were expressed by the storyteller and the other group members. The communal level was based on the group’s interpretations of the main themes of the story. Table 2 presents details of the three levels of meaning-making.

Table 2 The Levels of Meaning-making in the Process of the Teachers' Group

1. Story level: Focus, characters and perspective of the story	2. Individual level: Expressed emotions (verbal and non-verbal) relating to the storytelling moments	3. Communal level: The main themes of the stories given by the group
The mother–daughter story (Teacher A) The child is trying to manage an unpleasant situation/the nearby adult's perspective	Shame, uncaring Emotional conflict towards parents and other adults	Educators' ethics (regarding both parents and teachers)
The mother–son story (Teacher B) Mother empathizes with her son's emotional experience/the teacher–mother's perspective	Misfortune as a parent, loneliness	Children's needs – realising them as adults
Safe, peaceful moment in childhood (Teacher C) Beneficent moment in the children's own childhoods/the child's perspective	Positive emotions, safe and happy feelings when the time is slowly passing in the grandparents' house	Storytelling as a route to participants' own childhoods
Unfair situation at school (Teacher D) The child's feelings of unfairness/the pupils' class perspective (community)	Unfair situation of participants' own school years; teacher's strange reaction to the child. The peers express hard feelings, even psychological feelings—awakens empathy in the group	Educators' ethics: the power stance Opportunity to share uncomfortable feelings as a teacher and receive comfort from colleagues
Envy in the children's world (Teacher E) Envy as an emotional reaction of a child, mental growth/the class pupils' perspectives (community)	Envy, shame; growing confidence and sense of togetherness	Forbidden emotions, competition as a human action

The analysis of the data showed that the story-level elements were essential factors underpinning individual and communal meaning-making. Alongside the personal stories, the discussions they prompted proved to be an essential part of the meaning-making process, and during the dialogues, the teachers produced their own mini-stories. In this way, the group dialogues expanded and deepened each personal story. From the perspective of an empathetic reading process, the emotions expressed, and the themes of the stories composed during the group's dialogue were meaningful and an essential part of meaning-making.

Story level—narrative meanings

In the study, the stories functioned as starting points for the group's meaning-making. In general, the stories concerned personal emotional experiences from childhood and illustrated the participants' strong emotional experiences as children (Table 2). They focused on two main themes: family relationships (mother–son or child–grandparent) and meaningful events at school (e.g. a drunken mother at a school party, a teacher's unfair treatment of a student, and envy of a classmate).

The creative writing activity offered meaningful insights into the emotions surrounding particular situations or events in the childhood stories of Teachers B and C. Teacher C recalled the positive emotions of safety and happiness associated with memories of being a child at her grandparents' house. Teacher B's story was about the mother–son relationship and children's needs. In Teacher B's story, the son's loneliness touched the storyteller as a mother, who told to have the same feelings in childhood and could identify with the son. The emotions that the teachers as storytellers included in their stories had strong perspectives. Teacher B's mother–son story was told from the mother's perspective and concentrated on

the misfortune and loneliness of being a parent, whereas Teacher C's story about a child's visit to her grandparents' house highlighted a safe and happy childhood and was told from the child's perspective.

The story of a drunken mother at a school party (Teacher A) focused on emotional conflict in a community told from the perspective of an adult who stayed near the child. The main emotions the child experienced in that situation were shame and feeling neglected. The story was told in a detached way: the adult was a community member and only a bystander, but nevertheless, as an omniscient narrator, knew the child's mind. The perspectives in the teachers' stories took a healing stance towards difficult emotional events. Communally shared emotions (the whole class, the pupils with their parents, and the teachers at the school party) functioned as releasing elements in the stories.

Personal stories included narrative elements that made interpretations of sensitive meanings possible. Identification of the son's feelings was at the heart of Teacher B's story, with Teacher B recognising the same feelings in his own childhood. This comparison with the personal story made the memory meaningful. Furthermore, the duality, considering the event from both the mother's and teacher's perspectives, made the role conflicts of an educator visible. The first-person child's perspective gave Teacher B a chance to reflect on his own memories and feelings surrounding childhood events. Likewise, Teacher A's perspective choice had an alienating effect, and the participants seemed to empathise with the child's emotions throughout the story. In summary, it seems that the narrative perspective and structures supported the participants' storytelling and enhanced their immersion in experiences and emotions.

Individual level—emotions relating to storytelling moments

During the sessions, the teachers expressed emotions such as unfairness, loneliness, caring, and empathy. They also expressed harsh feelings and even physical reactions during the discussion. For example, the group had sensory experiences, as expressed by Teacher C: "In [the case of the drunken mother at the school party] [*ironic laughter*], you saw it, the situation."

In this study, the authentic storytelling situation created opportunities for multisensory experiences. Verbal and non-verbal expressions offered tools to support the storytellers' multifaceted meaning-making, and the personal stories were absorbed by other session members with all their senses. From a narrative perspective, the non-verbal cues, both in the read-aloud situation and the group discussions, enhanced the atmosphere of the story. These cues could be interpreted as meaningful emotional actions. For example, Teacher C imitated the storyteller's diction, and showed how meaningful the storyteller's comment about the story's character was to her: "It was great when you said [the friend] 'looks irritating.'" The study showed that emotional experiences in the storytelling situation created a phenomenon of shared group emotions, with emotions tending to be transmitted from one participant to another, especially in face-to-face situations (Zheng et al., 2020).

According to the analysis, storytelling in the safe group gave participants the chance to enter the worlds of fiction and handle difficult feelings from different stances. Teacher A highlighted this ironic stance via laughter and tone of voice, while comparing own personal story to the one they had just heard:

This was totally opposite to my [*laughter*] description, which had [*speaking with a calm voice*] a safe and gentle feeling, of everything being all right and all things in their places ... genuine. All the details were great, [such as the] potato peels in the compost heap. The boundaries were clear: where you can play and where [you] can't. It was all there.

In addition to multisensory emotional experiences, participants formed mental images formed and expressed them during the dialogues. They originated in the descriptive parts of the stories regarding, for example, the characters' features and the atmospheres and milieus of the stories. For example, Teacher D momentarily revealed a sensitive side when commenting on the main character: "You can imagine such a shy and timid person." Mental images were also evident when moving between participants' experiences and the stories' worlds. Teacher C described the child's situation in Teacher A's story in dual terms, contrasting the child's emotions with those of the nearby adult: "It [the story] made me feel like the child was waiting. She stares and waits, and then something so awful happens that she becomes frozen and can't do anything. You would like to help her."

During the sessions, it was apparent that the stories' power was in how they awoke emotions in a concrete and authentic, often multisensory, way, and how these emotions were shared in the situation (Figure 1; Kosonen, 2018). Furthermore, the narrative choices evident in the teachers' personal stories were meaningful in the context of interactive empathetic reading. Notably, the free choice of traits for personal stories may be important for expressing the (implicit) emotions connected to the story. For example, Keen (2007) reported that the details of fictional characters may trigger memories and emotional experiences. Certain traits, such as names or recognisable situations, are necessary for character identification and for a reader to feel empathy for fictional characters (Keen, 2007).

Communal level—issues of welfare and self-care

In the context of empathetic reading, the core meanings of the teachers' personal stories emerged during the group discussions. In the study, these meanings were mainly focused on themes regarding socially recognised, sensitive issues about personal relationships and educators' responsibilities and values (Figure 1). These themes formed the communal level of meaning-making.

Teachers A and D's stories prompted group discussion on the theme of educators' ethics and adults' power over children. The story of the drunken mother (Teacher A) prompted a dialogue about the bystander adult's responsibility towards the child: who takes charge when a parent fails to take care of a child, and what responsibility does the community have? Furthermore, Teacher D's story about a teacher's unfair treatment of a student raised uncomfortable feelings in the teachers. Although the story was told from the student's perspective, it was professionally meaningful for the teachers' in terms of human relations. Humour, even ironic laughter, accompanied the uncertainty about ethical questions that teachers confront daily. According to Teacher E: "In a way, I think [about] how [many] traumas I have caused [for my students], and [*laughter*] those moments have been so brief for me that I haven't necessarily noticed them."

During the dialogues, the participants shared challenging situations and relationships, and the associated emotional experiences were recognised by other teachers. Colleagues expressed comfort and empathy at the group level. Regarding the story of a stern teacher, Teacher D was compassionate towards the teacher and presented a gentle view of the teacher and her demands.

Teacher A: Yes, I think all teachers sometimes put their feet in their mouths [*sympathetically*].

Teacher E: Yeah!

Teacher A: Tired and in a hurry, and putting my foot in my mouth, like this. Trying to deal with a situation too quickly.

Teacher C: Saying the wrong ... things.

Teacher E: A therapist once said that all parents cause trauma to their children, and it cannot be avoided, so I think it's a bit the same with teachers [*laughter*].

The analysis showed that fictional transitions of time and place may help people experience things in a different way, enabling them to be in the situation once again but in different circumstances. During the session, via Teacher D's personal story, the teachers returned in their minds to the decades when the school order was stricter, and teachers' power almost crushed some children. When the memory sharing ended, the group found consolation for difficult experiences: "So, you can turn it [hard experience] into a victory. Maybe, if you have faced something like this [as a child], you say as a teacher, 'I'll never humiliate my students or treat them unfairly'" (Teacher A).

Meaning-making can be boosted and enriched in group dialogues by acknowledging fictional meanings. For example, intertextuality activated the teachers' previous reading experiences. The participants recognised the reference of Teacher A's story to Kreetta Onkeli's (1996) novel *Ilonen Talo (Happy House)*. This kind of cross-textual recognition awakened forgotten events and memories in the participants, and prompted them to share those events and memories with each other.

During the sessions, the interactions inspired storytellers to think aloud and add meaningful details to their written stories. It seems that the group discussions gave the storytellers a place to understand memorable events from an adult's perspective. Teacher D considered the reason for the teacher's actions at the end of the group dialogue: "I remember that I probably answered him too quietly. That was the reason. He couldn't stand it." The dialogue provided the storyteller with an opportunity to rethink the memory in a fresh light, highlight certain issues, and enrich the wholeness of the meaning-making. These storyteller interpretations deepened the participants' emotional experiences of the written story, gave them a chance to revisit memories, and allowed them to derive crucial meaning from them.

Discussion

In this study, meaning-making via empathetic reading became possible by applying McCarty Hynes and Hynes-Berry's (2012) interactive poetry therapy model. The aim of this study was to investigate the potential of this model as an educational tool. The teachers' personal stories during the interactive empathetic reading sessions and the group discussions based on the stories generated emotional reactions and expressions and highlighted sensitive issues, which may be the main features of empathetic reading in an educational context. According to the results, the interactive poetry therapy model offered an opportunity to expand the possibilities of reading to encompass social-emotional issues, such as welfare and self-care. The personal stories written during the session (Phase 1) gave the teachers a chance to revisit their own memories and view them as adult educators. During the Phase 2 interaction, the teachers dealt with the human relations aspects of their professional work, particularly the ethical questions of caring and its limits.

One of the main results of the study was the importance of group dialogue in empathetic reading. During the group dialogues, the teachers made various comments about the themes of the personal stories and their own memories, which enriched the themes and deepened the dialogue. An interactive approach to reading fosters interpretive communities (Kosonen, 2019), and enriches peers' meaning-making. In the study, the group functioned as a safe place for both individual and communal healing and compassion, seeing previous events from a distance, and receiving consolation for hard experiences. As in

Keen's (2007) study, the teachers together, through their interactions, reached the emotions behind actions, which created deeper understanding and empathy.

The meaning of group dialogues was also strengthened by the notion that it was important for the person who composed the story to also be the storyteller. The physical reactions and descriptions of the storyteller's sensory memories seemed to strongly arouse others' empathy. The description of sensory memories encouraged the participants to immerse themselves in and empathise with situations. Notably, the group dialogues were freeform, and the session functioned as a mirror reflecting participants' own experiences and emotions based on their own life histories.

The results also showed that the novel extract at the beginning of the session enabled the teachers to compose personally meaningful stories and made empathetic reading possible. As Kosonen (2018) argues, the choice of text (as a starting point for a session) is an important part of the process of empathetic reading. In the study, the mental images and emotions evoked by the original text varied, and all the personal stories differed. However, they all related to childhood, as in the novel extract. The contexts of the personal stories were twofold: family and school. The family stories of other teachers, with recognisable milieus and environmental details, awakened positive memories. In contrast to family stories, the school stories included harsh, even hidden, emotional experiences.

It seemed that, in all the personal stories, the choice of perspective was meaningful, and enhanced the emotional reactions during the group discussions. Shared memories of childhood from a child's or bystander's perspective aroused a sense of confidence and togetherness among group members, making it possible to handle sensitive themes through dialogue. The understanding of life cycles and events manifested at the individual level and had a healing effect on the reading community. Furthermore, the stories and their meanings provided teachers with mirrors to examine and approve the ethically challenging aspects of their jobs.

The interactive poetry therapy model seems to enhance affective empathy in groups (Blair, 2005). The feelings and memories connected to the shared stories and non-verbal emotional cues were associated with expressions of warmth, compassion, and sympathy. According to Stansfield and Bunce (2014), these features of meaning-making connect to affective empathy. However, the novel extract and the original stories were sources of cognitive empathy, and various perspectives on the original story were presented in the individual stories and the group discussions. They allowed teachers to understand reality from someone else's point of view and thus deduce their beliefs and intentions (Blair, 2005). However, fluent group interactions are an essential element of reading sessions aimed at maximising the healing effects of empathetic reading.

Limitations

The limitations of this research concern the results, which represent only one group's interactive empathetic reading sessions during in-service training. Other groups' sessions could produce different meaning-making. Furthermore, the data described an overall group process, which may have neglected the teachers' own empathetic reading processes. However, the aim of the study was to examine the interactive poetry therapy model's potential for use in a school context, and for that purpose, the analysis was sufficient. The analysis was ensured by having two researchers who specialised in poetry therapy and creative writing, respectively, which minimised the effect of an individual researcher's personal perceptions throughout the study.

Conclusion

In this study, we explored the connections between empathetic reading, interactive poetry therapy, and holistic literature education. Interactive poetry therapy was used as a model for empathetic reading in an educational context, and the creative writing assignment accompanied by group dialogue enhanced the discussions in an almost opposite way to traditional literature discussions which are teacher-led and focus on original texts, not personal experiences and emotions related to the reading experience. Furthermore, the teachers gained experience in dealing with sensitive and distressing themes with their students.

Statement of interest

The authors declare there are no conflicts of interest in relation to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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