

Empathy and the Challenges Facing “Global” Young Readers

Reading fiction is commonly supposed to develop empathy. This presentation turns that idea on its head and looks at how adults interested in young readers may develop empathy for the children and adolescents who take on the challenge of learning how to engage with fiction in the context of their own, often very complex, personal histories.

In order to investigate the role of background setting and experience in reading development, I invited a dozen young adult readers to re-visit their childhood experiences through creating a digital map of a location important to their earlier literate lives. This presentation investigates what those maps (and 24 interviews conducted during and after the map-making exercise) can tell us about child readers. Many participants had a “double” childhood, either literally (because they themselves immigrated as children) or metaphorically (their families have recently immigrated and they have grown up in the context of the cultural heritage of the first country). I explore the weight of the double repertoire, the broad range of individual variation, and the role of reading for children who both look back on the old and learn how to interpret the new. I investigate the particularities of the individual landscapes specified by participants and place these differences in the context of commonalities of the reading experience. Those who work with young people will do that job better by respecting and empathizing with the complexity of the challenges facing them as highly diverse readers.