

Kids learn more than just dates and facts when listening to historical fiction, according to new study

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Teaching history to elementary students is stereotypically a straightforward affair, heavily weighted with names, dates and facts. But in a new paper published in the journal *The Reading Teacher*, a pair of Concordia researchers show that students can learn just as much from a good novel as they can from a good textbook—and in some cases, contribute to their own socio-emotional growth.

As researchers and co-authors Sandra Martin-Chang and Meredyth Dwyer point out, the link between reading fiction and [empathy](#) development is well known. However, less is understood about the link between fiction and building world knowledge in young readers, especially when it is incorporated into the curriculum.

By reading aloud carefully selected excerpts from fiction and non-fiction books, the researchers found that students learned the same amount about a particular period of history. But those who were exposed to fiction were better able to empathize with characters and see the world through their perspectives.

"Bringing [history](#) to life through fiction is important for cross-curricular teaching," says Martin-Chang, a professor in the Department of Education. "Historical empathy gets students thinking about how everyday people lived and how they were impacted by events. It allows them to be transported into a different world."

The study was designed and led by Meredyth Dwyer, who is currently completing her MA in Counselling Psychology at Yorkville University and working as a child and youth counselor in Ontario.

The Great Depression inside and out

For the study, 41 students between the ages of 9 and 12 were separated into two groups of roughly the same size and gender balance. Dwyer

read aloud three excerpts from the novel "Bud, Not Buddy," a novel set during the Great Depression. Dwyer incorporated additional facts into the novel at appropriate sections to ensure it contained the same historical facts as the non-fiction text. For the nonfiction group, she read from the textbook "What Was the Great Depression?", a book designed for readers in grades 3-7 that explains the era in age-appropriate language.

Dwyer read aloud to the groups to control for different reading skills and to level access to the texts as much as possible. Dwyer read to the students four times over the course of one week for 25 minutes at a time.

The students then filled out a series of questionnaires. Each questionnaire recorded scales of empathy with the characters and the students' feelings toward wanting to help them. The questionnaires also considered the students' overall enjoyment and transportability, i.e., whether they felt that they had been transported or swept away by the story into another time and place. The researchers also had the students fill out Great Depression knowledge quizzes before and after the fourth and final visit.

Children in the fiction group reported that the more they felt transported into the novel, the more able they were to take on others' perspectives and become involved in fantasy. These children also expressed more of a desire to help the characters and reported higher listening enjoyment. By contrast, those in the nonfiction group reported a link between transportability, overall enjoyment and fantasy elements, but not with report any with socio-emotional.. Both groups reported knowing more about the Great Depression after the listening activities than they did before.

Learning with soft skills

"These results show that the students learned as much [factual information](#) from the novel excerpts as from the nonfiction text. But the ones that had listened to historical fiction showed more empathy development. They also related to and wanted to help the main characters more," says Martin-Chang.

She says she believes this study has pedagogical potential even though it is based on a relatively small sample size.

"This is a classroom-ready practice where teachers across domains could work together to augment learning across disciplines," she comments.

"There is lots of room for synergy that we may be passing up. As Meredyth points out, our goal should be to work 'soft' skills like the ability to identify with others into as many classes as possible while keeping the same amount of factual learning."

More information: Meredyth Dwyer et al, Fact from Fiction: The Learning Benefits of Listening to Historical Fiction, *The Reading Teacher* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/trtr.2177](https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2177)

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