



# Fiction, empathy, and gender diversity: exploring the impact of using a novel in a child and youth care classroom

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Article abstract

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## **FICTION, EMPATHY, AND GENDER DIVERSITY: EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF USING A NOVEL IN A CHILD AND YOUTH CARE CLASSROOM**

**Julie James**

**Abstract:** To better understand how using a novel in a child and youth care classroom impacts empathy in relation to gender diversity, a qualitative study was constructed. Data were gathered using an online questionnaire administered to child and youth care practitioner students. These students had engaged with the novel *Scarborough* (Hernandez, C. [2017]. *Scarborough: A novel*. Arsenal Pulp) in a course about foundational therapeutic knowledge. The study sought to identify: (a) what perceptions and emotions were evoked by engaging with the narrative of a young person exploring gender; (b) what, if any, aspects of empathetic connection emerged in relation to this exploration; and (c) what, if any, connections were made to the theoretical material taught in the course. The study incorporated child-and-youth-care-specific and critical social theory frameworks, and theorized about evocative objects and the concept of empathetic distress. The findings suggest that novel-based teaching can elicit from students, or help them express, higher-order empathy in relation to gender diversity, and that a narrative about the struggle to live as one's genuine self is one possible pathway towards achieving this empathetic connection. Additional research is needed to investigate these preliminary findings and to address bias in the existing literature on adult education and the use of fiction.

**Keywords:** gender diversity, empathy, fiction, child and youth care (CYC), youth work, teaching methods

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Engaging in teaching practices that help student practitioners overcome possible biases and develop deeper levels of cognitive and emotional understanding of marginalization can be an important component of child and youth care education. While issues of structural oppression may be taught, and laws and policies may dictate how child and youth care practitioners are to engage with young people, personal bias and a lack of depth of understanding can lead to ineffective or even discriminatory practice with marginalized youth populations (Acker, 2017). One underexplored area in the child and youth care educational literature is how to discuss gender diversity in a child and youth care classroom. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the impact of using a work of fiction in the context of teaching child and youth care students about gender diversity.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Gender Diversity and Child and Youth Care Practice***

Gender diversity challenges the concept that gender is rigidly binary and tied to one's sex assigned at birth. Instead, gender is understood to have multiple manifestations that may not be in line with one's sex assigned at birth, and that may also be fluid and change over time (Ehrensaft, 2016; Pyne, 2014, 2016; Temple Newhook et al., 2018; Travers, 2018). The gender affirmation model is grounded in the idea of gender diversity, denounces pathologizing gender nonconformity, and works to follow the lead of young people as they reveal their genuine gendered selves (Ehrensaft, 2016; Pyne, 2014, 2016; Temple Newhook et al., 2018; Travers, 2018). By utilizing the gender affirmative model, the possibilities for expression, affirmation, acceptance, and authenticity open onto a spectrum of gender identities and explorations.

Gender congruence — whereby one's internal identity, physical body, and social expression are experienced as being in harmony with one another — is important for health and well-being (Ehrensaft, 2016; Pyne, 2014, 2016; Temple Newhook et al., 2018; Travers, 2018; Travers et al., 2012). However, gender-diverse young people — whose identity does not fit the rigid binary of male or female, or is not linearly tied to the sex assigned at birth, or is fluid — may face significant obstacles in accessing gender congruence: absence of gender-affirming healthcare; lack of strong support from family (including family of origin and chosen family); and the necessity of navigating cis-normative and transphobic services and spaces, such as public spaces, consumer areas, schools, social services, and community services (Travers, 2018; Travers et al., 2012).

For child and youth care workers, therefore, it is important to competently support these young people through understanding and affirming their gender explorations, defending against pathologizing their gender journeys, connecting them to appropriate resources as needed and desired, working with families towards understanding and acceptance, and advocating with them to secure rights and services. Research shows that young trans and gender-diverse people who are supported by adults within family systems and in community settings experience dramatically

greater well-being than those without such supports, including strikingly less suicidality (93% lower, as cited in Travers et al., 2012); they also experience depression and anxiety at non-clinically significant levels, and have more self-esteem (Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Olson et al., 2016; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2018; Travers et al., 2012; Veale et al., 2015). Child and youth care practitioners are well-positioned to be among these key supportive adults.

However, internalized bias may prevent child and youth care practitioners from embracing or fully understanding gender diversity. The founder of transformative learning theory, Jack Mezirow (2000), asserted that by working through “disorienting dilemmas” — where, in order to resolve the dilemma, a student is required to question and/or alter their internalized assumptions — deeply-held perspective shifts can take place. Mezirow stressed that empathy is a vital component for meaningful perspective shifts in adult learners, a claim that many scholars working within this theoretical tradition have built upon (Jarvis, 2012a; Kitchenham, 2008; Taylor, 2007; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007; Ziegahn, 2005). It has been asserted that a deep cognitive and emotional connection to conceptual content via narrative engagement can help overcome bias and foster shifts in perspective (Jarvis, 2012a; Kitchenham, 2008; Taylor, 2007; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007; ; Ziegahn, 2005). Enacting a sustained engagement in the narrative of a novel may be a particularly effective way of cultivating empathetic engagement and affecting paradigm shifts in students (Jarvis, 2012a). Very little child and youth care literature has focused on gender diversity overall, and studies that have investigated exactly how engagement with fiction leads to developing transformative empathy are rarer still; there seem to be no studies at all that focus on the specific question of how fiction can help shift internalized perspectives that support gender diversity.

### ***Fiction-Based Pedagogy***

Few studies have examined teaching and learning about gender diversity at the university level. The scant literature on teaching about gender diversity within helping professions in universities has predominantly focused on delineating the problem of lack of material about gender diversity and on the changes needed to address it in curricula within social work education (Acker, 2017; Austin et al., 2016; Byers et al., 2019; Craig et al., 2017). The limited literature focusing on how these issues apply to child and youth care workers explores how to support young gender-diverse people by focusing on general awareness and terminology (James, 2019; Skott-Myhre & Wagner, 2014), providing ethical care (Clark, 2017), examining the roles child and youth care practitioners can play (Clark, 2017; James, 2019), developing theoretical frameworks (Skott-Myhre & Wagner, 2014), and detailing lived experiences (Skott-Myhre & Wagner, 2014).

Education scholarship has demonstrated that fiction can be a powerful tool for cultivating learning that is oriented towards social justice. Many educators and researchers have argued that fiction can promote a deeper empathetic understanding of marginalization and improve critical social thinking (Tisdell & Thompson, 2007, cited in Jarvis, 2012b). Fiction can provide opportunities for “disorienting dilemmas” that allow readers to imagine an array of possibilities, understand different life experiences, have intense emotional responses, and be led to subsequent

ideological critique (Jarvis, 2012b). Some transformative learning theory scholars have argued that arts-based techniques, including the use of fiction, can tap into emotionally laden and unconscious psychological conflicts, potentially opening up pathways for empathetic engagement with individuals dealing with structural oppression (Dirkx, 2012; Jarvis, 2012a, 2012b; Lawrence, 2012).

Other scholars have focused on how fiction can cultivate critical social reflection and empathy. Some have argued that fiction can be used as an innovative pedagogical tool for critical reflection by providing narratives that explore complex social issues in detail (Gouthro & Holloway, 2013, 2018; Hoggan & Cranton, 2015; Jarvis & Gouthro, 2019). Using fiction in professional practice contexts can prepare students for a variety of difficult experiences clients may face (Clover, 2015 as cited in Gouthro & Holloway, 2018; Jarvis & Gouthro, 2019). Keen (2007) provided a detailed analysis of how the novel can be used to deepen empathy through sustained engagement in evocative narratives. Jarvis (2012a, 2012b) found that fiction may override preexisting prejudices through mimicry that induces involuntary empathy.

Despite the large body of literature indicating the potential power of the use of fiction as a teaching tool, little is known about how it can cultivate empathy. Jarvis (2012a) conducted a systematic examination of 325 peer-reviewed articles and concluded, “Relatively little adult education literature focuses directly on fiction’s empathic potential, speaking instead about the effects of fiction in a way that only implies it develops empathy” (p. 747). Jarvis also noted that “predicting a response or identifying consequential changes in understanding or behaviour is difficult” (p. 744). As a result, Jarvis and others have stressed the need to directly examine the relationship between using fiction and empathetic engagement (Gouthro & Holloway, 2018; Hoggan & Cranton, 2015; Jarvis, 2012a).

A few key insights from the above literature review relate to this study. The material on gender diversity specific to child and youth care is very thin (Clark, 2017; James, 2019; Skott-Myhre & Wagner, 2014), with no literature at all on effective teaching practices. There is a very rich adult education literature on the potential for using fiction to develop empathetic engagement leading to analytical abilities for critical reflection and internal perspective transformation (Gouthro & Holloway, 2013, 2018; Hoggan & Cranton, 2015; Jarvis & Gouthro, 2019). Yet within this literature, fiction’s potential is only implied, with little to no work on how empathy or ideological critique can be cultivated in adult students when using this arts-based technique. Literature that discusses using fiction in professional university programs is especially scant. Important gaps in knowledge therefore need to be addressed.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Given the gaps in research, this study applied an open, evocative framework. Hoggan and Cranton (2015) argued that a fictional work, character, or metaphor can be understood as an evocative object, which may “stimulate readers intellectually and emotionally, concretize abstract

concepts, and potentially shape the way readers make sense of themselves and their experiences” (p. 8). Building on their work, qualitative open-ended questions were constructed, and students’ responses were analyzed to explore what cognitive and emotive elements were evoked in relation to a storyline about a young person exploring their gender.

The study’s theoretical approach also stemmed from a desire to understand whether any particularly helpful forms of empathetic engagement emerged from these data. As discussed above, much of the existing research on the use of fiction in social justice education indicates that it is a potentially powerful pathway to empathy, but it is not yet clear how specific forms of empathy emerge from, or are expressed when, engaging with fiction. Jarvis (2012a) suggested building on Hoffman’s (2000) concept of “empathetic distress” and anger when trying to foster learning oriented to social justice; empathetic distress and anger surface when one becomes deeply aware of issues of oppression that someone else is experiencing, and motivate actions to help alleviate that suffering. Within this context, consideration was given to how experiences of privilege and oppression, and the internalization of these experiences, may impact a student’s development of empathetic distress; some may have already found a pathway to empathy, while others may not yet have done so. Privilege may impede the development of this type of empathy, oppression may encourage it, and the internalization of both may interrupt it.

Hoffman (2000) identified five hierarchical and connected ways in which empathetic distress and anger can emerge: (a) mimicry (copying someone’s body language and mannerisms); (b) classical conditioning (automatic and involuntary cognitive and emotional responses that arise from witnessing suffering); (c) direct association (connecting another person’s experiences to one’s own); (d) mediated association (taking direct association a step further by incorporating knowledge about the other person’s character and situation); and (e) role-taking (imagining the emotions and experiences of the person undergoing distress). Jarvis (2012a) argued that these elements can be elicited via engaging with fictional narratives, and the first two elements may help readers address their preconceived biases, leading to the involuntary development of empathy towards a marginalized group. The data were mined for all five of Hoffman’s elements. Finally, in addition to exploring what cognitive and emotional elements were evoked, and what, if any, elements of empathetic distress emerged, the study explored the theories and frameworks taught in a second-year undergraduate child and youth care course about foundational therapeutic praxis.

## **Methodology**

### ***Reflexivity and Social Location***

As a cisgender, white, academic woman, I come to the work with young gender-diverse people as an outsider with privilege. The privileges I am afforded result from white supremacy, cis-heteronormativity, colonization, and neo-colonial practices — the very structures that create systemic oppression for trans and gender-diverse children and youth, as well as for racialized individuals, Indigenous communities, and individuals dealing with poverty. Given that I have spent

over 20 years working with young people in schools, hospitals, and in the child welfare system, and that many of these young people are negatively impacted by the very systems from which I benefit, I have been grappling with how to effectively use my privilege to challenge these systems. I understand that my role is to access resources, provide my labour, and ensure that the young people are paid for their work. The trans, two-spirit, and gender diverse young people who take the lead on these projects are clear that cisgender people should start to analyze and critique the operation of cis-normativity and transphobia much more pervasively. This study emerged from a desire to interrogate, and help erode, cis-normativity and transphobia.

### ***Research Design and Questions***

The study population included students in a second-year child and youth care class that taught foundational theoretical knowledge for therapeutic engagement. This course used Catherine Hernandez's 2017 novel *Scarborough* as a textbook, and applied a series of theoretical frameworks to the book's characters. One character, eight-year-old Bing, who is assigned male at birth, explores elements of gender diversity (wanting to wear lipstick, using nail polish, and performing at school in a pink sequin halter top). In class, the concept of gender diversity and the gender affirmation model were applied to Bing's story. While Bing's ultimate gender identification remained unknown, students were asked to imagine how they would engage with Bing to support this exploration. This paper therefore presents the qualitative findings from two open-ended questions on students' reflections about Bing's gender explorations. Responses were assessed for empathetic engagement, as well as reactions to — and the possible incorporation of — gender diversity and the gender affirmation model.

The study investigated three overlapping areas. First, it explored what emotional and cognitive elements were evoked by engaging with Bing's exploration of gender. Second, the study explored what, if any, elements of helpful empathetic engagement surfaced in relation to engaging with a fictional narrative about a young person exploring their gender. Finally, the study investigated possible connections between the concept of gender diversity and the gender affirmation model presented in the course and in Bing's narrative. These examinations were exploratory in nature and were intended to help direct future research.

### ***Novel-Based Pedagogy in the Classroom***

In a course on therapeutic foundations in child and youth care practice, a central objective is to develop an understanding of how relational child and youth care practice can take place in the context of understanding the systematic oppression that the field not only often perpetuates, but also often derives support from. In each class, the main concepts of critical-theoretical works (covering, for example, neocolonialism, anti-Black racism, and gender diversity) and relational child and youth care practice are presented in overview, then applied to a variety of case studies drawn from my practice, media narratives, television, film, and YouTube videos. The students are often asked — individually, in pairs, in small groups, or in the large group — to imagine themselves as this young person's child and youth care practitioner, and to articulate how the issues

of structural oppression taught in class would impact their approach to working with this person. In relation to sexuality and gender, the course teaches that binary notions of dimorphic sexed bodies (Fausto-Sterling, 2000) and the confinement of sexuality to a heterosexual orientation are products of colonial and neo-colonial Eurocentric structures that do not reflect the actual spectrum of humanity (Dale, 2012; Deschamps, 1991; Nanada, 1990; Roscoe, 1991). Sex, gender, sexuality, gender identity, gender expression, transgender, gender-nonconformity, and cisgender terminology were defined in several classes for the students. One class is dedicated specifically to learning about gender diversity and the gender affirmation model.

The novel *Scarborough* (Hernandez, 2017) was added as a central text to the course in order to provide an ongoing narrative that students could engage with and apply to the course concepts. The novel was written by Catherine Hernandez, a racialized, queer individual whose works centre the stories of Indigenous and racialized young people who experience poverty. One character, Bing — an eight-year-old, highly intelligent Filipino, assigned male at birth — explores elements of gender nonconformity and expresses an attraction to a male student. Throughout the novel, Bing displays an interest in nail polish and lipstick that he keeps hidden from other students. His mother, Edna, appears to be both supportive and cautious; she notices his interest, at one point asks him to refrain from wearing lipstick at school, and tells him that he appears to be like one of his uncles. Ultimately, she helps him coordinate a school performance in which Bing sings a Whitney Houston song and removes his tuxedo to reveal a pink sequin halter top. In this scene, Bing expresses joy in revealing their true self, and Edna cries tears of relief. It is, however, unknown if Bing is identifying as trans or gender-diverse, is exploring gender nonconformity on their way to identifying as part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum, and/or is exploring gender with a variety of other possible identification outcomes.

In each class, passages from *Scarborough* were utilized to apply the conceptual content taught that day through individual, paired, small-group, and large-group activities. The students' main paper asked them to choose a young character they felt most compelled by, imagine themselves as a child and youth care practitioner in the novel working with that young person, and apply three theories (at least one child-and-youth-care-specific theory and at least one framework that addresses structural oppression) to the work they would do with this young person.

Gender-affirming practitioners from a variety of professional backgrounds frequently report encountering types of gender exploration that can lead to a variety of gender identifications (Ehrensaft, 2016; Pyne, 2014, 2016; Temple Newhook et al., 2018; Travers, 2018). These practitioners have advised that working from a model of gender affirmation, and supporting and following the lead of the young person through this process, helps the young person's overall well-being and contributes to an understanding of their gender identity or identities (Ehrensaft, 2016; Pyne, 2014, 2016; Temple Newhook et al., 2018; Travers, 2018). The students in the course were therefore encouraged to engage with this part of Bing's storyline from a gender-diverse and gender-affirming perspective, and to consider the ways in which they would support Bing through this exploration.



Throughout each reiteration of the class (at the time of writing, it has been taught eight times), many students expressed a deep engagement with the novel, including feeling love and compassion for each of the young characters. I became interested in how this engagement with a novel in the child and youth care practice classroom was impacting the learning for students in relation to issues of diversity and structural oppression. Given my work with gender-diverse young people, I was particularly interested in the impact on students of the explorations of gender nonconformity in Bing's narrative. Initially, the study had a pre- and post-test qualitative design; however, due to restrictions and revisions imposed by the research ethics board, a pre-test was not possible, as approval was not granted until the day before the last class of the semester. At the end of this last class, the study was presented. All 38 students in attendance chose to complete the online questionnaire (about 10 students had left early).

### ***Data Collection and Participants***

An online questionnaire was administered to second-year students of a child and youth care course on foundational knowledge of therapeutic engagement with young people. Students were told about the questionnaire on the last day of class, signed an online consent form, and were provided class time to complete it. The questionnaire also included some queries that were not relevant to this analysis. Two open-ended questions were specific to this investigation; they focused on reactions to Bing's narrative in relation to his explorations of gender. Thirty-eight students engaged with the questionnaire, but not all students answered every question, and many skipped the open-ended questions or provided very brief responses. Of the two questions analyzed for this discussion, each had 17 responses that were robust enough for analysis; thus a total of 34 responses were used for this assessment. Data were coded via NVivo 12 software using an integrated inductive/deductive methodology.

All participants answered “no” to the following question:

Do you identify as trans or gender-nonconforming? \*For the purposes of this study, trans or gender-nonconforming refers to people with a diverse array of experiences and identities, including two-spirit, non-binary, agender, gender queer, gender-nonconforming, gender-diverse, gender questioning, transgender, as well as those who identify as men or women but have a history that involves a gender transition (Note: this definition was derived from the Ontario Human Rights Code).

No one identified with this definition of being trans or gender-nonconforming; however, one of the limitations of the question is that it does not capture individuals who are exploring their gender, which could have been solicited in a subsequent question. Due to restrictions imposed by the research ethics board, gathering of further demographic data was not permitted. The class had a total of 56 students. These students also had some limited experience in the field, with most having had only one placement and/or a previous volunteer position.

## Results

Several overarching themes appeared in responses to the questions assessed for report in this paper: “What are your thoughts about Bing’s struggle with his gender identity?” and “Is there anything else you would like to share about Bing and some of the struggles he may have faced in relation to his gender identity?” Across 34 entries, three themes emerged: the importance of living as one’s authentic self, the importance of support, and a desire for social change. All 34 responses included at least one of these themes; 10 included two of the themes; and 5 incorporated all three. Many responses also included emotive content: 15 students reported feeling bad for Bing, 9 expressed joy for Bing, and 16 postulated what Bing’s thoughts and feelings were in ways not explicitly described in the novel. Each overarching theme involved elements of what was evoked cognitively and emotionally for the students, aspects of empathetic engagement including empathetic anger and distress, and connections to course concepts.

### *Theme One: The Importance of Living as One’s Authentic Self*

Of the 34 responses, 24 referred to the importance of being able to live as one’s authentic self. These sentiments were directed at Bing’s journey; however, five responses also included the more general necessity for gender-diverse individuals to be their true gendered selves, and one discussed the importance of all young people being able to express their genuine identities beyond gender. No respondents questioned the idea of being true to one’s self. Many respondents found the idea of a young person’s struggling with revealing who they are, for fear of negative consequences, to be compelling and sad. Overall, living as one’s authentic self was expressed as something to be greatly valued, something that Bing deserved, and something with which many young people struggle. One respondent wrote, “My thoughts are that it is completely normal, and I identify with his struggles of understanding who you are at such a young age and being afraid of what others would think.”

Several students empathized with Bing’s believing he needed to hide his identity explorations, and articulated what they thought Bing was feeling throughout the book: “Bing struggled because he felt like if he came to a true understanding of his gender identity, he would disappoint the people he loved the most such as his mom”; “I think he was very scared to reveal any part of his confusion of identity due to the potential judgments he may receive from his peers”; and “Bing felt like he had to hide his identity to not make anyone question about it or make him feel weird.”

A range of emotions were expressed in the responses coded under this theme. Four students referred to feeling bad that Bing believed he had to hide his gender-identity explorations: “I think it is sad that he felt he had to hide who he really is because of the fear of what the people in his life would say”; “I felt frustrated for him ... because keeping a secret about how you feel hidden from your family, friends, and neighbours is really hard to do, and the fear of opening up ... can be paralyzing”; “Since he is a young individual, I feel bad for what he is going through and that he should not be ashamed about his gender identity.”

Five responses coded under this theme indicated that the students felt happy for Bing, and each statement was made in relation to moments when Bing revealed his gender-identity explorations to others: “It was really cool how it describes his experiences, such as wearing feminine clothes ... and how those things that he was ‘not supposed to do’ as a boy really made him feel like himself and happy”; “I am glad that he finally was able to be himself, and the reception he got from his mom and the people within his school when he performed at the talent show”; “The part where Bing gets to sing on stage was like a cathartic release for me as a reader since Bing is so withdrawn the whole book.”

Five responses connected Bing’s struggle to express his gender-identity exploration to struggles faced by other people, moving beyond gender identity and how individuals may hide their true selves, more broadly, for fear of negative consequences. Two examples include: “It takes them [trans and gender-nonconforming individuals] a while and lots of support to express this to people in the public or school, even though it is just about who they are”; and “Bing’s struggle is something that I heard many children have or are going through in society because of their fear of not being accepted by their loved ones, the society judging them, or other personal reasons.”

While none of the responses included non-support for gender diversity, four referred to the desire to explore the intersections of religion and LGBTQ+ identities more broadly. However, even these responses seemed to support LGBTQ+ communities:

I wish that the faith element had been explored more because there are many of various faiths that are also part of the LGBTQ community.... A good novel overall, it showed also that a person’s gender/sexuality is not like the all-encompassing part of them which is usually what it is thought out to be.

### ***Theme Two: The Importance of Support***

Of the 34 responses, 12 referred to the importance of support for Bing and other young people exploring their gender identities. Of these, eight referred to Bing’s mother’s support of him and his gender-identity explorations, and most of those linked this support to Bing’s being able to reveal his gender-identity exploration in public. All responses framed Bing’s mother’s support of his gender-identity exploration as positive, and none expressed concern over her encouraging him to explore and express gender diversity. As several students put it, “At such a young age, he was able to identify himself, and with the support he got from his mother, he was able to be free about his identity”; “I think the support that he received from his mother really helped him start to openly express who he is”; “I like how Edna was supportive of this exploration although I empathized for Bing in the sense that he felt compelled to hide this exploration of his identity from his peers”; “I thought it was really nice that this was included in the novel because it shows a young boy who is having this struggle and how supportive his mother was of it but also ensured his safety”; “His mother is very supportive of him and what he chooses to wear or do; however, other people in his life or in his community may not be as supportive. They may make fun of him or not respect his decision.”

Students who referred to the positive support Bing received also commented on their feelings in relation to this support, using emotional descriptors such as “love”, “joy”, and “happy”. For example, two student participants wrote, “I loved how he had a mother who loved him no matter what and made sure she let him know that she loves him and is there for him always. Which in [a] way may have made Bing feel a bit at ease”; and “I am happy that Bing has a supportive group to fall back on.” Three responses mentioned support beyond Bing’s mother in somewhat vague terms, and linked this support to Bing’s being able to express his gender explorations: “Bing had a very accepting and supportive circle of people who let Bing continue exploring his identity.”

Three responses expressed concern that Bing did not receive the support he needed, and four went beyond the book to make connections between receiving support and being able to live as one’s authentic gendered self: “I think the conclusion that I am drawing from this is that gender-identity struggles, wouldn’t be much of a ‘struggle’ if the people around you are supportive”; “His identity was not met with extraneous opposition, but it is important to acknowledge that not every Trans/N-B person will travel along as similar as Bing.”

### ***Theme Three: A Desire for Social Change***

Of the 34 responses, 12 expressed a desire for social change in relation to Bing’s journey, as well as for trans and gender-diverse individuals more broadly. A few respondents wrote about the need for more support like that provided by Bing’s mother: “[T]he way his mother was so proud of him is something I wish more people would be like, open-mindedness is rare.” A few respondents talked about wishing that it was safer for marginalized individuals to express their inner selves: “I think it is very unfortunate that we live in a world where people are not able to openly express their identity in fear of getting made fun of or bullied.” Another participant wrote,

I think his character can portray a life many people face with being a young person and questioning yourself while being scared because ... you don’t have the family support you need, and your religious background does not agree with your natural desires and expressions.

Two respondents wished it wasn’t so hard for individuals to be open to themselves about their true identities and feelings: “I wish it didn’t have to be as much of a struggle for youth and adults alike in real life to reflect on their feelings about their gender and their relationships.”

Four students expressed the need for greater acceptance of trans and gender-nonconforming individuals overall. One student wrote, “I cannot comment on Bing’s struggle from his perspective because I have never experienced it. What I can say is that as a society we are not nearly as accepting as we should be of trans individuals.” Overall, responses reflected that living as one’s genuine gendered self and/or other marginalized identities is something that should be supported, and that there ought to be greater social acceptance for trans and gender-nonconforming individuals.

## Discussion

This exploratory study revealed several insights about student engagement with a fictional narrative that included an exploration of gender. An analysis of the first overarching theme — the importance of living as one’s authentic self — revealed several insights relating to the theoretical frameworks utilized in this study. Bing’s narrative evoked a range of emotions in students, including negative feelings when Bing’s identity exploration was not supported, and positive feelings when it was. Questionnaire queries did not ask students to express their feelings, but simply their thoughts and reflections on Bing’s narrative, so the fact that many students chose to include their emotional responses suggests that Bing’s narrative was evocative and compelling. It also suggests that these students value authenticity in the context of gender diversity, and perhaps also in other areas of identity.

The range of the students’ emotional responses mirrored what Bing felt or appeared to be feeling at various times throughout the book, suggesting that students had an empathetic engagement with Bing’s narrative, at least at the mimicry and automatic response levels described by Hoffman (2000). Some responses included empathetic extensions beyond the book, which may mean that those students engaged in higher-order empathy of mediated association and/or role-taking. While responses did not refer directly to the theoretical concepts presented in class, the concepts were demonstrated indirectly in several of the responses. For example, empathetic engagement with Bing’s journey demonstrates the relational characteristics of “being emotionally present”, valuing “connection and engagement”, and focusing on “love” — all important elements of effective care by child and youth care practitioners (Garfat & Fulcher, 2011). The acceptance by all respondents of gender diversity and of the importance of living as one’s authentic gendered self, demonstrates the central components of the gender affirmation model (Ehrensaft, 2016).

Regarding the second theme — the importance of support — further insights emerged. The emotions evoked in students when Bing did receive support appeared to be fairly strong, with many responses referring to appreciation of his mother’s support by using descriptors such as “very” or “intensely”, as well as terms describing emotions such as “joy” and “love”. This may indicate that students valued support for Bing and gender-diverse explorations overall, or that they took on an imagined role of a child and youth care practitioner in the novel — as required by many course activities and the major assignment — and felt relief when care was provided for Bing. These emotions mirror how Bing could be expected to have felt in relation to the support he received, especially from his mother, suggesting that the students may have been engaging in “mediated association” empathy and/or “role-taking” empathy. Responses indicated support for Bing’s gender journey and demonstrated adherence to the core principles of the gender-affirmation model (Ehrensaft, 2016). These sentiments reflect the child and youth care practice relational characteristics of “love”, “connection and engagement”, “being emotionally present”, and “being family oriented” (Garfat & Fulcher, 2011).

The third overarching theme — desire for societal change — revealed students' wishes that more compassionate and open-minded people were available to support young people, that it was safer for young people to express their true selves, that young people felt more comfortable exploring their identities — especially in situations in which these identities are oppressed — and that trans and gender-diverse people were better accepted. Students appear to have taken their empathetic engagement and applied it more broadly. These responses apply the child and youth care practice characteristics of love and emotional presence to a more general sense of social justice, and further demonstrate central concepts within the gender affirmation model (Ehrensaft, 2016).

### ***Limitations and Important Considerations***

The study had several limitations. The dataset was restricted: the material was rich but derived from a small number of entries ( $n = 34$ ). More data are required to draw comprehensive conclusions. The students who chose to answer the open-ended questions about Bing may have been especially compelled by this narrative or already very supportive of gender diversity. Data from students who struggle with these questions are needed to ensure a more comprehensive analysis. No respondents reported that they were gender diverse and information from individuals who do so identify is needed in future research. Future studies would also benefit from the inclusion of individuals who identify as racialized and gender diverse; these scholars and community members should be included in developing the study, validating data, providing critical conceptual frames, and identifying sentiments not detected by a more privileged, white, heteronormative and cisgender gaze. Racialized scholars and community members should similarly be involved in the creation, collection, and analysis of data from racialized students. This study did not address the intersecting social locations and related oppressions that Bing faced, such as racism, poverty, and homophobia. The questions included for analysis focused on the idea of struggling with one's gender identity, thereby possibly influencing how responses were framed, and omitting concepts of joy in gender exploration. The responses reveal support for gender diversity and empathetic engagement with Bing's gender exploration, but one cannot tell if *Scarborough* helped forge a perspective shift towards gender diversity, if such a perspective already existed, or if students who already had this perspective were the ones to complete the open-ended questions. Finally, the frameworks of transformative learning, as well as Hoffman's notions of empathetic development, may be too limited to be meaningfully applicable to all adult learners.

There are two important points of consideration regarding engagement in fiction about gender diversity within the helping classroom. First, it is important to note that developing deep cognitive and emotional understanding in relation to gender diversity is one small aspect of being able to competently serve young gender-diverse people. Understanding issues of structural oppression and gender affirmation, and awareness of the related resources, are also among the important factors required. This paper therefore offers insight only into how engagement with a novel may impact the development of empathy in relation to gender diversity, with an understanding that further research is required and several more components are needed to develop child and youth care

practice competency in this area. Second, engaging in one fictional narrative of a gender-diverse person entails a risk of tokenizing this experience — generalizing this narrative as giving a sufficient understanding of all gender-diverse people, despite great diversity of experiences, social locations, and intersectionality, and, through empathetic engagement, ironically coming to minimize the experiences of gender-diverse individuals. For example, a cisgender reader might come to assert that because they have also experienced not revealing an aspect of their genuine internalized identity, they know, and share a similar oppression with, a gender-diverse person. It is therefore very important to bear in mind that empathy is but one small aspect of child and youth care practice competency in this area, that there is considerable diversity within gender diversity, and that the experiences of marginalization can never be fully known — especially if one is situated in a place of privilege.

### **Conclusion**

This preliminary study revealed that some students experienced the type of empathetic engagement that leads to distress and anger, that some students demonstrated the principles of child and youth care practice relational care and the gender affirmation model — even if they did not articulate these connections, and that some social justice motivations started to emerge. The struggle to understand, be supported for, and live as one’s authentic self may be a key empathetic connection point for students in the context of learning about gender diversity. Fictional narratives may be one way of cultivating meaningful empathy along these pathways. More work is needed to investigate these issues, especially regarding how connections to theoretical concepts can and are being made via engagement with fictional material, what elements of empathy are occurring for students engaging with compelling narratives, and how these two elements converge and affect learning about supporting gender diversity.

Future research about the use of fiction in adult education and its impact on empathy must use broader conceptual frameworks and analysis in order to include the experiences of all learners. The data revealed a study population that was highly supportive, sensitive, and empathetically attuned in relation to a narrative about a young person exploring gender. Higher-order empathy was expressed by several respondents; many affectively detected and responded to mistreatment, and there was evidence that students were applying this higher-order empathy more broadly to other social justice contexts. For these students, a perspective shift as delineated by transformative learning theory may not be applicable, and understanding how fiction impacts the development or expression of existing social justice orientations, if at all, may be more appropriate for these learners. Such students may have entered the classroom experience with higher-order empathetic pathways already forged. Instead of looking at how fiction induces or helps develop these pathways, it may be more appropriate to understand how fiction impacts already existing empathetic skills for such students. While demographic data were not gathered, it is likely that many study participants had experienced some degree of marginalization. The impact of both

privilege and marginalization on empathetic engagement with fiction in adult learning must be understood.

Studies on the use of fiction in adult education must incorporate not only how empathy can be developed in privileged learners for marginalized communities, but how privileged learners can engage critically with similarly positioned characters in order to understand their own privilege and its impact on others. Studies must examine not only how perspectives shift but how ideologies are forged, and how existing social justice orientations are impacted through engagement with fiction in adult learning. It is important to understand how empathy and fiction interact for students with the same or similar lived experience as the characters, how existing empathetic pathways and engagement with fiction interact, how empathy is translated — or not — across social locations, and how fiction impacts internalized oppression and privilege. The impact of engaging with fiction in this context for students who struggle with bias must be further understood, as well as how that impact intersects with students' social locations. Overall, the literature about adult education and the use of fiction reveals a narrow and biased focus that is both problematic and not applicable to many of the participants in this study. More work is needed in order for these investigations to be inclusive of all learners and critical of social injustice.



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### **Biography**

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