

*The Experience of Empathy in 10th Grade Students With the LGBTQ+ Community  
Through Narrative Transportation: A Qualitative Investigation*

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**Abstract**

This research explores secondary school students' experiences of empathy while engaging with a TV series featuring LGBTQ+ characters. The study, conducted with grade 10 students aged 15-16 in Japan, aimed to uncover perspectives through a generic qualitative inquiry. Thirty-one participants completed a reflection survey, leading to the identification of ten emergent themes related to 1) Enjoyment and Relatability, 2) Positive Impact and Learning, 3) Emotional Connection, 4) Respect for LGBTQ+ Struggles, 5) Inclusion of LGBTQ+ texts in Classroom, 6) Combatting Homophobia, 7) Applicability to Real Life, 8) Discussion Importance, 9) Changing Opinions, 10) Impact on Assumption. The investigation underscores the importance of LGBTQ+ media in education, specifically examining the impact of narrative transportation and empathy on social and cognitive aspects.

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## **1. Introduction**

### ***1.1 Background of the Study***

The LGBTQ+ community confronts ongoing challenges globally, with discrimination, violence, and mental health issues prevalent (Parks, 2014; Nadal, 2019). Samantha Allen (2018) highlights concerning trends in the United States, suggesting a potential stalling of LGBTQ+ acceptance. The role of educators, role models, and non-LGBTQ+ allies is crucial in fostering inclusivity and combating discrimination (Day et al., 2020; Dhupa, 2016; Tiburcio & Baker, 2023). However, despite imperatives, LGBTQ+ themes often face neglect in classrooms (Batchelor et al., 2018; Bryan, 2017; Page, 2017). McPhail's (2022) research emphasizes the positive impact of LGBTQ+ literature on empathy, prompting an extension of this investigation to secondary students.

### ***1.2 Need for the Study***

This study is rooted in the significance of theory of mind and empathy in child development (Bialecka-Pikul & Bialek, 2021; Wellman, 2018). The relationship between narrative transportation, empathy, and theory of mind within the context of LGBTQ+ media is explored, aiming for a comprehensive understanding of these psychological constructs.

### ***1.3 Purpose of the Study***

The study explores secondary students' experiences with a LGBTQ+ TV series, particularly the show "Heartstopper," through the lens of narrative transportation theory. Building on McPhail's (2022) research on empathy while reading LGBTQ+ texts, this investigation aims to contribute insights into the empathetic experiences of secondary students.

### ***1.4 Research Question***

- What is the experience of empathy in secondary students when watching a TV series focused on LGBTQ+ characters and themes?
- How can LGBTQ+ texts be effectively implemented in secondary classrooms?

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1 Narrative Transportation***

Narrative transportation theory (Gerrig, 1993) conceptualizes the detachment from the reader's world into the narrative world, focusing on narratives, vicarious experiences, emotions, enjoyment, and potential persuasion (Green, 2021; Van Laer et al., 2019). This study explores the empathetic experiences of participants by qualitatively examining the connection and identification with characters during the viewing of "Heartstopper."

### ***2.2 Empathy***

Empathy, defined as the ability to understand others' thoughts and feelings, plays a vital role in this study (Flournoy et al., 2016). The investigation adopts a broad definition of empathy, encompassing the understanding and sharing of others' emotions (Baron-Cohen, 2011; Flournoy et al., 2016).

### ***2.3 LGBTQ+ TV Shows in the Classroom***

Mainstream media's integration of LGBTQ+ themes, including shows like "Glee," "Modern Family," and "Heartstopper," is noted (Kies, 2016). "Heartstopper" is particularly recognized for its portrayal of diverse queer identities and challenges within the LGBTQ+ spectrum, justifying its selection as the study's focus (Trivette, 2022).

The study addresses the use of TV series, as authentic materials, in English as a Foreign Language classrooms (Rivas, 2021). While existing research acknowledges the positive impact of LGBTQ+ media, a research gap remains concerning the empathic experiences of secondary students engaging with such content.

### **3. Research Design**

This generic qualitative study employed surveys to collect data from 31 grade 10 participants after watching "Heartstopper." The research aligns with generic qualitative inquiry principles (Percy et al., 2015). The data analysis utilized inductive and thematic analysis, grouping anonymous survey responses into ten identified themes.

### **4. Target Population and Sample**

The target population comprised grade 10 students in an English Language Acquisition classroom, aged 15-16 in Japan. Participants self-reported gender and sexuality, and there were heterosexual, cisgender, bisexual, and transgender students. Inclusion criteria specified enrollment in the English Language Acquisition class, while exclusion criteria excluded students from other classes or schools.

### **5. Procedures**

Participants were recruited from the grade 10 classes taught by Shawnee McPhail and Alison Ozawa, with the option to participate provided to all students. Informed consent, voluntary participation, and anonymity were emphasized. Demographic questions were optional, and participants were assured of no rewards, punishments, benefits, or hindrances tied to their responses.

### **6. Protection of Participants**

Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of their involvement through consent forms in Japanese and English. Anonymity was maintained through alphanumeric codes, and data confidentiality was assured. The principal's consent was obtained, and data will be kept confidentially for seven years before destruction.

### **7. Data Collection**

Surveys were administered via Google Form, collecting reflections from participants after watching the TV series. The reflection was unrelated to grades or the unit, ensuring an authentic expression of experiences. Data anonymization followed participant consent.

## **8. Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed to categorize survey responses into emergent themes. A qualitative approach allowed for rich insights into participants' perspectives. The analysis combined inductive methods, capturing recurring words and themes to form a comprehensive interpretation.

## **9. Presentation of Data and Results**

Ten themes emerged from the survey responses, categorizing participants' experiences: 1) Enjoyment and Relatability, 2) Positive Impact and Learning, 3) Emotional Connection, 4) Respect for LGBTQ+ Struggles, 5) Inclusion of LGBTQ+ texts in Classroom, 6) Combatting Homophobia, 7) Applicability to Real Life, 8) Discussion Importance, 9) Changing Opinions, 10) Impact on Assumption.

### ***Enjoyment and Relatability***

Participants consistently expressed enjoyment, attributing it to the relatability of LGBTQ+ experiences portrayed in the show. Participant 7 highlighted, "I had fun watching the show because it was easy for me to understand how they feel about themselves and what they are struggling with." Similarly, Participant 15 noted, "I enjoyed watching a show with LGBTQ+ characters and themes because I was in a similar situation with characters who appear in the show."

### ***Positive Impact and Learning***

The positive influence of the show on participants was evident, leading to increased awareness and understanding of LGBTQ+ issues. Participant 31 emphasized, "I knew about LGBTQ but watching this was a huge influence on me, and I was able to learn many things." Learning about the struggles faced by the LGBTQ+ community prompted a shift in perspectives, as articulated by Participant 21: "It felt like watching a normal school drama without feeling strange. I thought I might be annoyed, but I didn't feel anything and rather it was really good relationship and I need to emulate."

### ***Emotional Connection***

Emotional connection emerged as a recurring theme, with participants expressing strong feelings toward the characters. Participant 12 stated, "I think watching LGBTQ+ has a big impact on us. I was moved by the way the characters live their lives while valuing relationships with other people despite being LGBTQ." Key scenes evoked strong emotions, fostering a deeper connection. Participant 18 shared, "When there were flashbacks to how Ben treated Charlie, I felt strong things and wanted to help him. I understood his pain."

### ***Respect for LGBTQ+ Struggles***

Participants underscored the importance of respecting the struggles faced by the LGBTQ+ community. Participant 8 expressed, "It is hard to come out because some people will not feel good, and I think it is okay to have those feelings, but people need to understand LGBTQ+ even if they do not agree." Participant 28 echoed this sentiment, stating, "I think there are many people like Ben and Harry who think negative things about LGBTQ+ people. I think

they can have those opinions, but they should not say it because it hurts people." The show played a pivotal role in fostering empathy and respect for diverse identities.

### ***Inclusion of LGBTQ+ Texts in Education***

A significant theme revolved around the incorporation of LGBTQ+ texts in the classroom. Participant 10 emphasized, "I thought learning about LGBTQ+ as a unit is good for education." Participant 11 elaborated, stating, "I enjoyed watching the Heartstopper because every year we learn some SDGs and we search about gender, but I didn't watch real drama so I was interested and want to learn and understand real life." Participants advocated for LGBTQ+ education to promote understanding, support, and diverse perspectives.

### ***Combating Homophobia***

The show was perceived as a tool to combat homophobia, especially in regions less familiar with LGBTQ+ topics. Participant 1 shared their cultural experience in Japan, stating, "In Japan, we don't have these kinds of shows much because LGBTQ+ is not that familiar than western countries. I genuinely felt it was a really good show, and people in Japan should watch this show and notice the problems in LGBTQ+ communities." Participants highlighted the show's potential to challenge discriminatory attitudes and promote societal tolerance.

### ***Applicability to Real Life***

Participants found the show applicable to their lives, either through personal experiences or gaining insights into the lives of others. Participant 29 said, "I have a friend who is transgender, and I learned more about them from this show." The perceived realism of the show contributed to a sense of connection and relevance, even for students who did not identify with the characters or themes directly.

### ***Discussion Important***

Discussions surrounding the show were deemed essential by participants. Engaging in conversations about characters' feelings and different situations allowed for diverse perspectives and enriched the viewing experience. Participant 29 highlighted, "I enjoyed the discussion, thinking of emotions in each character's various situations. This time, I had a discussion with 3 people and I knew that people each have their own value for love, so I got some new different ideas from those people. It was a very significant discussion."

### ***Changing Opinions***

The show played a role in altering participants' opinions about the LGBTQ+ community. Participant 9 shared that their preconceived notions were challenged: "I had an image that transgender people were people who had been abused and would abuse other people. By watching this show, I realized that my understanding of trans people was not correct." Preconceived notions and biases were challenged, leading to a more informed and empathetic understanding of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.

### *Impact on Assumptions*

Participants acknowledged that the show influenced their assumptions about LGBTQ+ individuals. Participant 21 shared, "I learned coming out is very scary and that you cannot tell by looking at someone if they are LGBTQ+." Participant 12 echoed this sentiment, saying, "I learned we have to change the assumptions we make about other people." Learning not to make assumptions and understanding the complexity of coming out were highlighted as key takeaways from the viewing experience.

The identified themes underscore the multifaceted impact of the show on viewers, promoting understanding, empathy, and positive societal change. The participants' diverse experiences collectively contributed to a positive and rich empathetic engagement with the LGBTQ+ TV series.

### **10. Conclusion**

This study contributes valuable insights into the empathetic experiences of secondary students engaging with LGBTQ+ literature and TV series, shedding light on the potential positive impact of such content in educational settings. The findings offer implications for the effective incorporation of LGBTQ+ texts in classrooms, emphasizing the significance of narrative transportation and empathy in the educational context.

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