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Book Review: Review of Changing Curriculum Through Stories: Character Education for Ages 10-12

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In *Changing Curriculum through Stories*, author Marc Levitt uses, fables, tales, folklore, and everyday stories in an attempt to inspire elementary teachers to create a new type of character education curriculum and transformational education experiences for children ages 10-12. Levitt's book also aims to educate elementary teachers as to why the current curriculum and its delivery methods fail to bring about the needed character education that he believes the world so desperately needs. Levitt proposes that our current courses of study, and the pedagogy used to deliver these lessons, are, in and of themselves, so competitive in nature that they are perpetuating a culture with children who will grow to never understand the importance of cooperation, teamwork, and mutual dependence. Instead, he argues, current pedagogy may lead to a society that values isolationism, competition, and a concern for one's own self-interest over all others. In the opening of the book, Levitt works hard to set
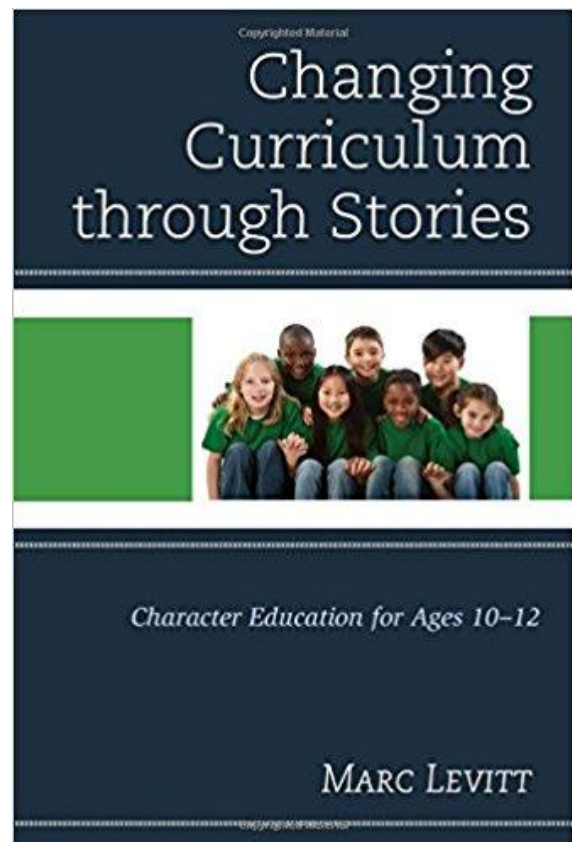
the expectation that if a teacher were to utilize this text, they could change the curriculum through his stories in a transformational learning manner.

Like the original Grimm's fairytales, many of Levitt's short stories have a dark overtone and a less-than-happy ending. Rather than approach the topics of interpersonal relationships, group interaction, and empathy from a positive tone, Levitt's stories take a more macabre approach. Like Cinderella's stepsisters who mutilate their own feet in an attempt to win over the Prince, Levitt's characters backstab, belittle, and even sacrifice their fellow characters in order to get ahead, protect themselves from a terrible fate, or evade a crippling fear. Perhaps these provocative plots are an attempt to create a transformative learning event in the mind of 10-12 year-olds or to convince the preteen to formulate a negative opinion of competiveness at this stage in their development. Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformative learning dictates that a significant or dramatic event must take place in order to move someone to question assumptions or beliefs; perhaps, this is the reason that Levitt used such grim means to teach his lessons. Cranton explains Mezirow's theory in the following way: "It is easier and safer to maintain habits of mind than to change. It may take a significant or dramatic event to lead us to question assumptions and beliefs" (2002, p. 65).

While some may question if the stories Levitt uses are age appropriate for a 10-12-year-old, it is Levitt's hope that educators will utilize his text to combat what he coins as shallow individualism. The author defines shallow individualism as "… our understanding that we are separate and discrete entities making our way in a world of other separate and discrete entities, in which 'nature' is distinct from 'self' and where we are in constant fear of shortage, calamity, and Hobbesian-type chaos" (pg. xii). He instead advocates for mutuality of interest or a guiding principle of interdependence, which he

believes will combat bullying, teasing, bystander behavior, and a general lack of empathy for others in our classrooms and ultimately our society as a whole. Levitt stated the following:

> This book is about helping you create a curriculum and a method for its dissemination that will help your students remember that we are all social beings who need each other to learn, play, survive, and create to reach our fullest potential. (p. xvii)

Is that true? Do we actually need one another? Are we more productive, better versions of ourselves when we embrace the concepts that are pervasive throughout Levitt's book? Levitt certainly isn't alone in his beliefs. Those who have studied small group formation, team building, classroom management, or cooperative education may recognize Levitt's claims about the importance of cooperation as derivatives of Social Interdependence Theory (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). According to social interdependence theory, individuals comport oneself in their relationships in one of three ways: "One's actions may promote the success of others, obstruct the success of others, or not have any effect on the success or failure of others" (Johnson & Johnson, 1989, p. 1). Johnson and Johnson label these three actions as promotive interaction (cooperation), oppositional interaction (competition), or no interaction (individualistic efforts), and they suggest these behaviors together make up social interdependence. They note, "Social Interdependence exists when each individual's outcomes are affected by the actions of others. Within any social situation, individuals may join together to achieve mutual goals, compete to see who is best, or act individualistically on their own" (p. 2).

Social interdependence is a well-documented and well-researched subject with studies dating back to 1898. "Between that time and 1989, over 550 experimental and

100 correlational studies were conducted on social interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 1996, p. 789; for a complete list of the studies, see Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Johnson and Johnson (1996) also reported that there are three major areas of benefit to engaging in promotive interactions: achievement, positive interpersonal relationships, and psychological health.

Positive Interdependence and Achievement

The first benefit is based upon a student group's ability to achieve their goals and outcomes. Utilizing a meta-analysis of 375 studies of social interdependence and achievement, Johnson and Johnson (1989) found that those individuals that engaged in cooperative behavior were more likely not only to achieve or to perform but also to do so while displaying the following:

1. Willingness to take on difficult tasks and persist, despite difficulties, in working toward goal accomplishment.
2. Long-term retention of what is learned.
3. Higher-level reasoning (critical thinking) and metacognitive thought.
4. Creative thinking (process gain). In cooperative groups, members more frequently generate new ideas, strategies, and solutions than they would think of on their own.
5. Transfer of learning from one situation to another (group to individual transfer). What individuals learn in a group today, they are able to do alone tomorrow.
6. Positive attitudes toward the tasks being completed (job satisfaction). Cooperative efforts result in more positive attitudes toward the tasks being completed and greater continuing motivation to complete them.
7. Time on task. Cooperators spend more time on task than do

competitors or students working individualistically. (p. 791)

Johnson and Johnson's (1989) list provides numerous examples and reasons that the authors advocate for cooperative learning, whenever possible. In contrast, those that displayed an oppositional interaction or that tended to discourage or to disrupt one another were much less likely to achieve. Johnson and Johnson (1996) believe this oppositional interaction occurs as individuals "focus both on increasing their own success and on preventing anyone else from being more successful than they are" (p. 790).

Oppositional interaction is a prominent theme in the first narrative story of Levitt's book, *Andrea's Party and How Gary Became Part of a Conspiracy Not to Attend One*. Within the story, the new girl at school, Andrea, inadvertently threatens the social status of school queen-bee, Joyce. Joyce uses her popularity to ostracize Andrea, causing disharmony in the classroom and feelings of loneliness in Andrea. To combat this oppositional interaction, Levitt provides teachers with questions to discuss with students, points to consider for reflection, and pedagogical suggestions for how and when to teach these lessons. These same devices are provided at the end of all 10 of Levitt's chapters.

Positive Interdependence and Interpersonal Relationships

A second benefit derived from promotive interaction is a stronger interpersonal relationship with one's environment or team. Again, Johnson and Johnson (1989) analyzed numerous studies and found that those group or team members who were engaged in promotive interaction behaviors tended "to care more about each other and to be more committed to each other's success and well-being . . . than when they compete to see who is best or work independently from each other" (p. 792). These positive feelings do not only manifest

themselves in homogeneous groups. Johnson and Johnson (1989) found that these strong positive feelings are also present when groups and group members "differ in intellectual ability, handicapping conditions, ethnic membership, social class, culture, and gender. Individuals working cooperatively tend to value heterogeneity and diversity more than do individuals working competitively or individualistically" (Johnson & Johnson, 1996, p.792). Johnson and Johnson (1996) believe some of the reasons for this acceptance include the following: (a) frequent and accurate communication that is not subjected to perception and assumptions, (b) more accurate perspective of other individuals, (c) flexibility and openness to be indoctrinated into a different mindset about people and their backgrounds, (d) personal feelings of acceptance among each person in the group, (e) lack of attacks to the self-esteem, and (f) expectations of future success due to interaction with individuals in the group.

In addition to an increase in friendly feelings toward one's classmates, Johnson and Johnson (1996) also found that student "cooperators give and receive considerable social support, both personally and academically" (p. 792). They also found that the classmates were supportive in ways that promoted (a) productivity, (b) physical health, and (c) coping with stress and adversity (Johnson & Johnson, 1996, p. 792).

The benefits of interpersonal relationships and the consequences of what goes wrong when the relationships fail are the themes in the short story *How the Grouse Earned Their Name.* Within this, Levitt tackles themes of betrayal, bullying, selfishness, and competition. Through these negative behaviors, Levitt is attempting to show what society is like without positive interpersonal relationships. Within the story of the Grouse, numerous birds are captured by hunters, while the other birds are too busy focusing on their own gluttonous meals to be bothered by the disappearance of their friends. Only after their

numbers began to dwindle did the birds unite to protect one another. When the birds worked in harmony and cooperation, they were able to escape the hunter's net. But when a petty argument leads the birds down an argumentative and combative road, the hunter is able to catch, boil, and eat the remaining birds. Levitt makes the point to write a story where at first the birds died as a result of their colleagues' callous indifference and later due to competition between the surviving birds. The only time they are able to outsmart the hunter is when they are working in harmony. Levitt provides teachers with several reflective prompts to affect behavioral change in students who might display these same negative behaviors in their own character.

Positive Interdependence and Psychological Health

Finally, Johnson and Johnson (1989) found one last major correlation for those individuals that engaged in promotive interaction. Unlike the first two findings, which were benefits to the group or class, the final correlation seems to be more of a realization about members who are engaged in cooperation versus those that insist on being competitive or individualistic. Johnson and Johnson reviewed numerous studies on social interdependence and psychological health. Their conclusions follow below:

> Cooperativeness is positively related to a number of indexes of psychological health, such as emotional maturity, well-adjusted social relations, strong personal identity, ability to cope with adversity, social competencies, and basic trust in and optimism about people. Personal ego-strength, self-confidence, independence, and autonomy are all promoted by being involved in cooperative efforts. (as cited in Johnson & Johnson, 1996, p. 792)

Conversely, those people who displayed an inability to cooperate and tended toward

individualistic behaviors were found to display characteristics of "emotional immaturity, social maladjustment, delinquency, self-alienation, and self-rejection" (Johnson & Johnson, 1996, p. 792). Those who tended toward competitiveness were found to have a mixture of some of the positives and negatives of each of the other two behaviors (Johnson & Johnson, 1996).

An example of positive interdependence and psychological health can be seen in Levitt's tale *Two Woodchucks and the Art of Forgiving.* Within the story, one of the woodchucks is trapped by a farmer and is displaced many miles away in the "land of no return" with the hope that the woodchuck would not return to eat from the farmer's garden. However, the woodchuck defies all odds by crossing stream, road, and countryside to find his way back. This thought-to-be-impossible feat is accomplished because the woodchuck desperately wishes to return to his friend, the other woodchuck. Levitt points out that this longing to return to that friendship and positive interdependence allowed the first woodchuck to cope with adversity and overcome an insurmountable task. Unfortunately, the first woodchuck comes back to find that the second woodchuck had betrayed him to the farmer to save himself, a device that Levitt uses to discuss the importance of learning to forgive. That said, a teacher could alter the story to provide either the psychological health or the forgiveness lesson.

While Levitt's book does meet its goal of shining a light on the importance of social interdependence, it does so by presenting stories that themselves have a number of flaws. For example, several stories present the issue of relatability. Case in point, it is difficult to believe that a 10-year-old can truly comprehend the "it gets better"-esque ending of *Andrea's Party,* which fast forwards from Andrea being a humiliated elementary school student to being an adult now married and happy as a mother, in mere sentences. The story *The Tickle Karate Master* in its attempt to condemn bullying instead seems to advocate for the victim of bullying changing their behavior in an attempt to win over the bully, rather than the bully changing his behaviors. Finally, in *How the Grouse Earned Their Name*, the author uses pejorative language and imagery of the fat and lazy birds that comes very close to fat shaming.

Those educators that are willing to set aside the stories, adjust them for their audience, or substitute their own versions may find that the reflective discussions on topics ranging from how to forgive betrayal to why some people are teased for being themselves are actually quite helpful. In fact, the thoughts for teachers and questions for student's sections found at the end of each chapter represent some of the most purposive and practical portions of Levitt's book. Teachers looking for examples of questions and reflective exercises may find these sections helpful as a roadmap for how to create their own reflective practices.

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