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Comprehension with Character: Lessons from Newbery Books

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Character education has been a facet of education from the earliest days of ancient civilization. Plato said, "Education in virtue is the only education that deserves the name" (O'Sullivan, 2004, p. 640). Commitment to a moral foundation was considered essential to the success of democracy by leaders such as Thomas Jefferson, who argued for early instruction in the democratic virtues of respect for the rights of individuals, regard for the law, voluntary participation in public life, and concern for the common good (Lickona, 1991). In the early days of American history, the Puritans used the hornbook to establish virtue-based literature as a cornerstone of American education, a tradition carried on in the next century through the McGuffey Readers (Leming, 2000). The continued popularity of virtue-based literature is demonstrated by the sale of over two million copies of the *Book of Virtues* by William Bennett (1993). The revived attention to character education in the schools is evident in the educational literature of the past decade (Bennett, 1998; Elliot, 2000; Kilpatrick, 1992; Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000; and Schmidt & Palliotet, 2001).

As schools mandate character education, teachers face the dilemma crowding another requirement into their teaching schedules while continuing to meet increased accountability for academic performance. Therefore, teachers are seeking the most effective approach to teaching character education and one that conserves time in their classrooms.

Character Lessons

Character instruction can benefit from the principles of bibliotherapy, which is the process of reading books with a therapeutic intent. Both character education and bibliotherapy have been applied extensively for students with significant learning and behavior problems who often experience peer rejection, poor social skills, and low self-esteem. The perceived success of the approach has made it popular in the classroom. All students in the classroom can benefit because they are likely to encounter similar situations during their school years.

For intervention to have the optimum effect on character education, the reader should experience the following bibliotherapy elements in the character lesson (Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000):

- *Identification.* The reader should be able to identify with the main character and the events in the story. The main character should be perceived at a similar age as the students, display similar behaviors, and face events with which the students can identify.

- *Involvement.* Following identification with the main character, readers relate to the situation and feel emotional ties with the main character. When readers become emotionally involved, literature can have the effect of changing their perceptions of behavior.

- *Insight.* The realization occurs when readers become aware that the problem they are experiencing, like that of the characters in the story, need not remain static. Insight allows readers the opportunity to analyze the main character and situation and subsequently develop opinions regarding behaviors or actions adopted by the main character in his or her attempts to deal with the problem. Readers also develop problem-solving skills by exploring effective alternative behaviors to replace old inappropriate behaviors.

"Bibliotherapy is a child-friendly, noninvasive method that employs reading – a context familiar to students. Incorporating bibliotherapy into the academic curriculum is a natural process that will also augment reading skills" (Sullivan & Strang, 2002/03). Throughout the character lesson, it is vital to maintain an active dialogue with the students. A variety of follow-up activities should also be used because a single lesson is not sufficient to produce the genuine change which is the goal for character education. Activities that can be used to bridge the gap between the lesson and application to their lives include discussion, role-playing, creative writing, and artistic expression (Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000; Sullivan & Strang, 2002/03).

Character Counts (Lickona, 1991) is a well-known character education curriculum that promotes shared values in the school and community. The curriculum emphasizes six pillars of character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship (www.charactercounts.org). Integrating character lessons with academics is essential, because effective character development initiatives must be purposeful, pervasive, repetitive, consistent, creative, and concrete.

Application to Children's Literature

Children's literature provides an effective vehicle for interweaving character education into existing curricula to address problems in everyday life (Schmidt & Palliotet, 2001; Forgan, 2002). Book selection is a critical element for successful character education in order to facilitate the principles of identification, involvement, and insight. According to Jim Trelease (2006), a book not worth reading at age 50 is not worth reading at age 10. Children have no more appetite for boredom than we do, and perhaps they have less. O'Sullivan (2004) states that "the stronger the characters, the easier it will be to include character education naturally" and

describes four types of books that meet the criterion for "deeper and richer literature" (p. 641):

- Well-written books containing moral dilemmas
- Books with enough depth to allow comprehension beyond literal level
- Books with admirable but believable characters about the same age as the students
- Books across a wide range of cultures with both boys and girls as lead characters.

Representative lists of books for character education have been compiled by the following authors:

- DeLong and Schwedt (1997) organized a book list by genre and included content applications and values at the end of each annotated entry;
- Kilpatrick, Wolfe, and Wolfe (1994) prepared a categorical list of books selected for moral imagination that were "test driven" on their own children;
- Sridhar and Vaughn (2000) listed books by grade level that address everyday problems faced by children, such as self acceptance, teasing, and sibling rivalry;
- Sullivan and Strang (2002/03) provided age appropriate bibliographic information for social relationships;
- The Giant Treasury of Read-Alouds, published in Trelease's well-known *Read Aloud Handbook* (2006), provides the recommended grade level, the number of pages, and a brief annotation for each book. The annotated list is arranged by the following categories: wordless books, predictable books, reference books, picture books, short novels, full-length novels, poetry, anthologies, and fairy and folk tales.

Newbery Books

Newbery books are another source for book selection that meet the criteria cited by O'Sullivan (2004) for effective character education: well-written with moral dilemmas, depth beyond the literal level, admirable but believable characters, and lead characters with varied culture and gender. "Newbery heroes and heroines meet their problems head-on at the crossroads. These characters are dynamic, learning, and maturing protagonists who weigh and consider options and evidence as they resolve dilemmas" (Friedman & Cataldo, 2002, p. 111). Criteria for book selection facilitates character lessons as well as the elements of effective bibliotherapy. Admirable but believable characters contribute to student identification with the story characters, which provides the foundation for involvement and insight.

Comprehension Strategies

Including children's literature and character principles in language arts lessons provides an effective initiation of character education in the classroom without infringing on academic class time. "Infusing literature study with character education is more a matter of a slight change of emphasis rather than a new topic" (O'Sullivan, 2004). The Summary Report of the National Reading Panel (NICHHD, 2000) stated that teaching comprehension can be effective in the context of specific academic areas, such as social studies. The NRP Summary Report also identified seven types of explicit comprehension instruction that appear to have a solid scientific basis:

- comprehension monitoring
- cooperative learning
- graphic and semantic organizers (including story maps)
- question answering
- question generation
- story structure
- summarization

The 2008 Newbery Medal book provides a social studies context for lessons in character and comprehension, *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village* (Schlitz, 2007). The book is a collection of dramatic narratives, both monologues and two-voice readings. Each narrative introduces young inhabitants who represent various vocations and roles in medieval life.

The sample lessons below demonstrate the application of character education and comprehension strategies in the context of the 2008 Newbery Medal book. Each lesson focuses on one of the seven effective comprehension strategies identified in the NRP Summary Report.

Sample Lesson 1. *Question answering* is the strategy chosen from seven scientifically-based comprehension strategies identified in the NPR Summary Report. For the first lesson (see Sample 1), QAR is the specific question answering strategy, Question Answer Relationships (Raphael & Au, 2005; Fiene & McMahon, 2007; Gill, 2008). The lesson provides explicit instruction to teach students how to identify and answer literal and inferential questions. The following are the core relationships for QAR:

- *In the Book,* which includes "Right There" and "Think & Search," and
- *In My Head,* which includes "On My Own" and "Author & Me."

In the Book aspects of QAR are the focus of Sample Lesson 1.

The literature selection for the first lesson is a two-voice reading which also provides the follow-up activity at the end of the lesson (Figure 1). Schlitz's two-voice readings are reminiscent of an earlier Newbery book, *Joyful noise: Poems for two voices* (Fleischman, 1997). While Fleischman's two-voice poems provide scientifically accurate information about insects for fascinating science integration, Schlitz's readings bring medieval history alive for social studies integration. The two-voice format is an entertaining classroom activity that is similar to a choral reading, with sections assigned to voices to be read alone or together. However, the two voice reading is presented in two columns that are read concurrently. It can be introduced as a whole class activity with half of the class assigned to one voice in the first column (in this reading, Jacob) and the other half of the class assigned to the second column (Petronella, in this reading). As the readers proceed down the page, those assigned to the part of "Jacob" are the only ones who read when the lines are in the first column only, and when the lines are only in the second column, only those assigned to the part of "Petronella" would read. When lines appear in both columns, they are read simultaneously by both "voices," even though the words may be different for each "voice." It may be helpful to assign a leader for each group when introducing two-voice readings. After the students understand the format of the activity, they may divide into pairs to practice the two-voice reading independently.

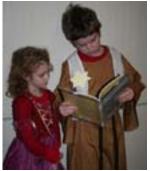| Sample 1. Fifth Grade Language Arts Lesson (Social studies integration) |
|---|
| ***Children's literature selection***. Two-voice reading from *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!*
Jacob ben Salomon, the moneylender's son, and
Petronella, the merchant's daughter |
| ***Character principle***: *Respect.* Be tolerant of differences. Be considerate of the feelings of others.
Application of bibliotherapy principles *Identification*. Fifth-graders identify with daily chores and routines. The struggles are similar to the everyday problems faced in the classroom. *Involvement*. The elements of racial and religious prejudice draw the students into the story and provide a wealth of topics for discussion during the reading. Students compare to situations in their own lives to the challenges that Jacob faces due to his Jewish heritage. *Insight*. Understanding that we are all more alike than we are different. "For one half-hour, I forgot, standing there in the water's shoal, who she/he was and my duty to God: I never told a living soul." (Schlitz, 2008, p. 57). |
| ***Comprehension strategy***: QAR (Question Answer Relationships)
This lesson will focus on the *In the Text* aspect of QAR including: *Right There* (literal comprehension) Students are instructed to put their finger on the answer. *Think and Search* (inferential comprehension) Students are instructed to put their finger on the clues. |
| ***Follow-up activity***: Students are introduced to the two-voice reading as a whole class activity. Then they prepare the two-voice reading for readers' theatre and practice reading aloud with a partner. |

Figure 1. Jacob ben Salomon and Petronella

Sample Lesson 2. *Graphic organizer* is the strategy chosen from the seven scientifically-based comprehension strategies identified in the NPR Summary Report. The dilemma worksheet developed by Friedman and Cataldo (2002) is the specific graphic organizer strategy selected for the second sample lesson (see Sample 2). The class will be divided into two groups. One group will answer the questions on the dilemma worksheet from Isobel's perspective and the other group will answer from Barbary's perspective. After the students have completed the dilemma worksheet, each student in the Isobel group will partner with a student from the Barbary group to compare and contrast their answers from the two perspectives.

The literature selection for Sample Lesson 2 consists of two dramatic monologues that are related in content. Isobel, the lord's daughter, tells of her experience when someone threw muck on her dress while she was walking through the village. Then Barbary describes the drudgery of a peasant's life and her jealousy of Isobel's fine clothing and leisure (Figure 2).

Sample 2. Sixth Grade Language Arts Lesson (Social studies integration)
Children's literature selection. Two individual narratives from *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!* • Isobel, the lord's daughter • Barbary, the mud slinger
Character principle: *Fairness*. Be open-minded; listen to others. Don't take advantage of others. Don't blame others carelessly. Application of bibliotherapy principles ▪ *Identification*. Sixth-graders identify with conflict among siblings and differences in economic backgrounds. ▪ *Involvement*. The issue of bullying is encountered by middle schoolers in their classrooms. Students compare the choices faced by the characters to situations in their own lives. ▪ *Insight*. Realization of ways that we are all alike. "It made me think how all women are the same – silk or sackcloth, all the same" (Schlitz, 2007, p. 49).
Comprehension strategy: Graphic organizer – Dilemma worksheet Students work in pairs to fill in the dilemma worksheet for their assigned character: • What is the important dilemma faced by each (Isobel or Barbary)? • What are two choices for each (Isobel or Barbary)? • What information, evidence, or expertise does each character (Isobel or Barbary) have to support her first choice? • What information, evidence, or expertise does each character (Isobel or Barbary) have to support her choice? • Evaluate the decision and action of each character (Isabel or Barbary). How does she justify her choice? Can she ever be certain that she made the best decision? Why or why not?
Follow-up activity: Students prepare the two narratives for readers' theatre and practice reading aloud with their partners.

Figure 2. Barbary and Isobel

In both sample lessons, readers' theatre is the follow-up activity, selected to increase long-term effects on reading comprehension and genuine development of character. Readers' theatre does not require costumes, props, or memorization of the script, although minimal props can be used. As students rehearse the dramatic reading with partners, their oral reading fluency and comprehension is increased. Repeated reading and read-aloud are beneficial, especially for older students with poor reading ability. Role-playing is another aspect of the follow-up activity that demonstrates understanding of the character principle through the dialogue. Oral rehearsal aids in retention of the character lesson and increases the application of the character principle in real-life situations. The music score that is provided in the book for Alice's song, the shepherdess, offers another option for artistic expression in the follow-up activities.

Conclusion

Teaching character principles that apply to children's literature is a character education strategy that conserves classroom time because it does not infringe upon the academic schedule. As demonstrated in the sample lessons, the principles of bibliotherapy - identification, involvement, and insight - are an effective parallel for guided reading activities to enhance reading comprehension and character education.

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