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Reading for Character: Principles of
Bibliotherapy Applied to Children's
Literature.

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READING FOR CHARACTER: PRINCIPLES OF BIBLIOTHERAPY APPLIED TO CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Abstract

In the past decade, interest has revived in character education, a facet of American education from the earliest days of the nation's history. Bibliotherapy, the process of reading books with a therapeutic intent, is an effective means to implement character education within the curriculum. Bibliotherapy is a child-friendly and noninvasive technique that can be used in various groupings, settings, and ability levels. Book selection, active dialogue, and follow-up activities are critical elements in the successful classroom implementation of a bibliotherapy lesson.

Character education has been a facet of American education from the earliest days of the nation's history. 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.

Principles of Bibliotherapy

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

For the intervention to have the optimum effect on character education, the reader should experience the following elements in the bibliotherapy 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 application of bibliotherapy, it is vital to maintain an active dialogue with the students. A variety of follow-up activities should also be used because a single bibliotherapy 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).

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 bibliotherapy in order to facilitate the principles of identification, involvement, and insight. According to Jim Trelease (2001), 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) describes four types of books that meet the criterion for "deeper and richer literature" and states that "the stronger the characters, the easier it will be to include character education naturally" (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 Treasury of Read-Alouds published in Trelease's well-known *Read Aloud Handbook* (2001) provides the recommended grade level, the number of pages, and a brief annotation for each book.

Sample Lessons

Including children's literature and character principles in language arts lessons provides an effective initiation of bibliotherapy in the classroom without infringing on academic class time (Maich & Kean, 2004). "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 following sample lessons (figure 1) demonstrate the principles of bibliotherapy applied to children’s literature for the purpose of character education.

Figure 1. Sample Sixth Grade Lesson

Sample 1. Sixth Grade Language Arts Lesson

Children’s Literature Selection: *Holes*, by Louis Sachar

Character Principle: Caring—Help people in need

Application of Bibliotherapy Principles

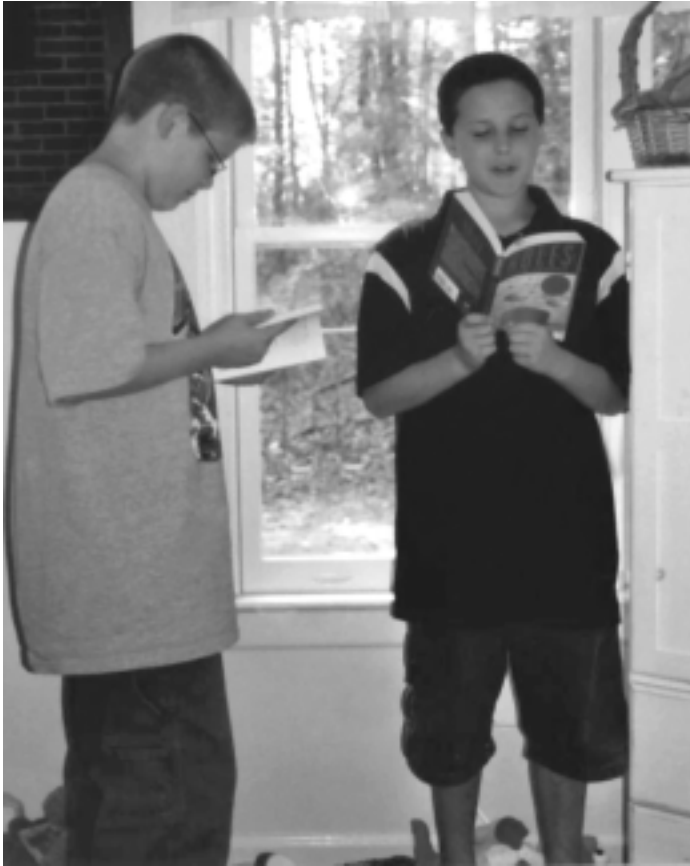
- *Identification*. A story map is used to introduce the characters and setting and track the plot. Sixth-graders identify with boys their own age who have been sentenced to dig holes at a detention camp. The struggles are similar to the everyday problems faced in the middle grade classroom.
- *Involvement*. Discussion circles are based on reading journal entries. The elements of adventure and humor draw the students into the story and provide a wealth of topics for discussion during the reading.
- *Insight*. Cause-Effect Charts emphasize the consequences for the behavior of the characters. Understanding of the character principle for each day is developed during the review of the chapter content at the end of the daily discussion circles. Students compare the choices faced by the characters to situations in their own lives.

Follow-Up Activity: Students prepare chapters 18 and 21 for readers’ theatre and practice reading aloud with partners.

The Newbery Award book, *Holes* (Sachar, 1998), was selected for literature study in the first sample lesson. The students have read assigned chapters of the book for homework, and the teacher has used a story map to introduce the characters and setting and to track the plot developments as the assigned chapters are discussed in class. The story map is an effective tool for promoting comprehension of narrative text and also enhances student *identification* with the story characters. As students read the chapters they fill in a Cause-Effect Chart in their reading journals and bring them to class for discussion circles. In addition to strengthening students’ critical thinking skills, the Cause-Effect Chart utilizes student *involvement* to emphasize that there are consequences for the choices that students make, an *insight* which is the foundation of character education. The insights can be shared as each discussion circle reports the conclusions reached by their group.

Readers’ theatre (figure 2) is a follow-up activity to increase long-term effects on reading comprehension and genuine development of character. The students adapt chapters 18 and 21 into a script with two characters and

Figure 2. Readers' Theatre Enhances Fluency and Reinforces Character Lessons for Middle School Students



a narrator. 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 is increased. Chapters 18 and 21 were selected to emphasize the character principle of Caring—Help others in need. In Chapter 18 Stanley, the main character in the book, discovers that Zero cannot read or write. In Chapter 21, the boys reach an agreement that Zero will help Stanley dig his holes each day if Stanley will teach Zero to read and write. At the conclusion of the entire literature study, the teacher will show the movie version of *Holes* (Sachar, 1998) that was produced and released by Disney.

Figure 3. Sample Kindergarten Lesson

Sample 2. Kindergarten Language Arts Lesson

Children's Literature Selection: *The Tortoise and the Hare* (Aesop's Fables)

Character Principle: Perseverance—Keep on trying

Application of Bibliotherapy Principles

- *Identification.* Animal characters are universal because their gender and ethnicity can vary so that all children can identify with the characters.
- *Involvement.* The teacher will read the book aloud as a shared reading experience, pausing frequently to discuss the reading.
- *Insight.* Students understand perseverance at the end of the story when they hear the winner of the race.

Follow-Up Activity: Role-playing activity with puppets

The Tortoise and the Hare, one of Aesop's Fables, was the children's literature studied for the sample kindergarten lesson (figure 3). The book was selected for the character principle and also for the animal characters to facilitate *identification* through their universal characteristics.

The teacher will read the story aloud so that everyone can experience *involvement* in the literature study, including younger students who are unable to read the books independently. The read-aloud technique can also be used for older students with poor reading ability. During the shared reading ex-

Figure 4. Young Children Enjoy Role-Playing with Puppets to Emphasize the Character Principle and Strengthen Comprehension of the Story



perience, the teacher reads the page aloud, shows the picture to the class, and guides discussion to promote listening comprehension. When the winner of the race is announced, students experience *insight* as they realize that the turtle won the race through perseverance, one of the character traits.

In order to enhance the long-term effects of the lesson, role-playing can be implemented as a follow-up activity. Role-playing is especially effective using puppets (figure 4), because students may feel more comfortable speaking and acting through a puppet. They also demonstrate their understanding of the character principle through the dialogue and oral rehearsal aids in their retention of the character lesson and increases their application of the character principle in real-life situations.

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 are an effective match for guided reading activities to enhance reading comprehension and character education.

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