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# Character Education in Literature-Based Instruction

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Character Education in Literature-Based Instruction  
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As schools mandate character education, teachers face the dilemma of 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. 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. The principles of character education are an effective match for guided reading activities to enhance reading comprehension and character.

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).

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

- Identification. The reader should be able to identify with the main character and the events in the story.
- Involvement. Following identification with the main character, readers relate to the situation and feel emotional ties with the main character.
- Insight. Insight allows readers the opportunity to analyze the main character and situation and explore effective alternative behaviors to replace old inappropriate behaviors.

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 (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.

<b>Sample 1. Sixth Grade Language Arts Lesson</b>
Children’s Literature Selection: <i>Holes</i> , by Louis Sachar
Character Principle: Caring – Help people in need
Application Character Principle <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Identification.</i> 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.</li> <li>▪ <i>Involvement.</i> 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.</li> <li>▪ <i>Insight.</i> 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.</li> </ul>
Follow-Up Activity: Students prepare chapters 18 and 21 for readers’ theatre and practice reading aloud with partners.

<b>Sample 2. Kindergarten Language Arts Lesson</b>
Children’s Literature Selection: <i>The Tortoise and the Hare</i> (Aesop’s Fables)
Character Principle: Perseverance – Keep on trying
Application of Character Principle <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Identification.</i> Animal characters are universal because their gender and ethnicity can vary so that all children can identify with the characters.</li> <li>▪ <i>Involvement.</i> The teacher will read the book aloud as a shared reading experience, pausing frequently to discuss the reading.</li> <li>▪ <i>Insight.</i> Students understand perseverance at the end of the story when they hear the winner of the race.</li> </ul>
Follow-Up Activity: Role-playing activity with puppets

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