

10-1-1993

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Recommended Citation

Wilson, P., & Kutiper, K. (1993). Ribtickling Literature: Educational Implications for Joke and Riddle Books in the Elementary Classroom. *Reading Horizons*, 34 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol34/iss1/3

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Ribtickling Literature: Educational Implications for Joke and Riddle Books in the Elementary Classroom

Patricia Wilson
Karen Kutiper

During a recent visit to an elementary school we delighted in the number of classrooms which featured writing and reading centers. One innovative third grade teacher went a step further and provided her students with a lively outlet for their creative skills in the "Humor Corner." As we entered the classroom, two youngsters were enjoying jokes produced by classmates and browsing through a few of the riddle books on display. Holding *The Biggest Riddle Book in the World* (Rosenbloom, 1976), one student greeted us with: "I bet you can't answer this one! What does an envelope say when you lick it?" Before we had time to come up with an answer, the giggling youngster popped out with: "Nothing, it just shuts up!"

The professional literature often overlooks joke and riddle books because of the lack of instructional value attached to them. Teachers and library media specialists tend to ignore the high circulation figures in these categories. A comment by one librarian at a recent literature workshop on humor sums up this ambivalence among librarians and teachers toward joke and riddle books: "The joke and riddle books are

among my highest circulated books (even without promotion), but it seems that the kids just check them out because they're quick reads and fun. I don't see that they offer much educationally." Rather than ignoring the enormous interest of children for these books, educators can take advantage of their natural attraction by using them to involve children in reading and to provide worthwhile learning experiences.

Developmental levels of humor

The type of humor individuals enjoy is influenced by their stage of human development. Therefore, knowledge of the developmental stages of humor through which children progress can help teachers better understand the appeal of joke and riddle books to young readers and the desirability of giving children an opportunity to explore these works.

When children reach the age of four, they begin to enjoy simple riddles and word play, especially with their own names or the names of friends. With their blossoming senses of humor, these preschoolers find body functions, body noises, taboo words, misnaming and exaggerations of size and shape funny and delightful. As youngsters reach seven or eight years of age, several characteristics of their senses of humor begin to emerge. They relish repeating jokes and riddles over and over and find them just as humorous the tenth time as they did the first time. They begin to realize that language cannot always be taken literally.

Preadolescents in the age range of nine to twelve years enjoy concrete puns, conventional jokes, and word plays. The ever-popular knock-knock jokes rate high on their list of favorites. For example, the following joke is sure to result in laughter among upper elementary children: "Knock knock!" "Who's there?" "William." "William who?" "Williamind your own business!" (Brandreth, 1979). The creation of, and

responses to, such jokes call on higher level thinking skills. During this time framework, we begin to see the emergence of sympathetic humor, verbal humor rather than physical humor, and a delight in things that adults might find disagreeable (Cornett, 1986). Examination of the developmental stages through which an elementary child progresses explains the inherent appeal of joke and riddle books in grades K-6. Knowledge of these stages can assist teachers in appropriate selection of joke and riddle books to meet their classroom needs.

Humor as an instructional tool

Surely when humor invades our classroom, it enhances the learning environment. A child's enjoyment of these humorous books is a natural phenomenon, and educators can help youngsters develop and nourish their senses of humor by being knowledgeable about the previously discussed stages. While some picture storybooks, folk literature, and fiction can also promote humor in the classroom, library circulation figures indicate that the joke and riddle books are among the most popular. Three educationally sound reasons exist for using these ribticklers in the elementary classroom: to promote interest in reading, critical thinking skills and creativity, and vocabulary and language development.

To promote interest in reading. What better way to interest children in reading than by giving them something they will enjoy? After all, the various types of joke and riddle books need very little promotion. Young people are likely to continue going back for more once they have experienced old-time favorites such as "Why are fish so smart? — They are always in schools!" (Hall and Eisenberg, 1983). Early experiences with jokes and riddles will help maturing young people appreciate the more sophisticated humor of James Thurber, Mark Twain and countless other humorists. And, most

importantly, these books provide a scaffold which will help move children into enjoyment of other forms of literature and into a lifelong love of reading.

To promote critical thinking skills and creativity. "What can be measured but has no length, width or thickness? — The temperature" (Rosenbloom, 1976). In order to solve that riddle, consider the thinking that occurred. You probably made some guesses based on your own background knowledge, then narrowed your choice of possibilities. You might have considered all of the ways we measure — for example, with rulers, thermometers, scales. If you had read or heard the riddle before, you probably searched your memory for the answer. Perhaps you tried mentally to picture the riddle before you came up with an answer. Did you see a scale, a ruler, or a yardstick in your mind? All in all, you were using your critical and creative thinking skills in order to be a successful reader of this riddle. According to Cornett (1986), several possible levels of thinking occur: problem solving, prediction, decision making, and visual imaging.

Higher level critical and thinking skills provide some of our greatest instructional challenges. Jokes and riddles can provide us with some ideal materials to promote such thinking skills because children are motivated to read and listen to stories that amuse them and automatically use those higher level thought processes in order to comprehend. Jokes and riddles force students beyond the literal level of thinking. When children are involved in listening to, reading, or creating their own jokes and riddles, they are unconsciously using their higher level thinking processes. Quite simply, jokes and riddles can stimulate intellectual growth. After reading these books, youngsters can move to the creative process. This natural classroom extension requires students to analyze,

synthesize, and evaluate their accumulated knowledge about jokes and riddles in order to create their own.

To promote vocabulary and language development. Joke telling involves various language skills. For example, in the joke above, you had to consider the concept of measurement and all of its related vocabulary. You had to access your schema for measurement. With children, the desire to be a riddler or to understand jokes and riddles will often encourage the development of language and vocabulary. For instance, a response to the following riddle (Bernstein and Cohen, 1986) requires a rich vocabulary: "Why are umpires so fat? — They are always cleaning their plates."

But consider the following riddle: "Who is married to Uncle Beetle? — Aunt Ant." This is just one of the many riddles in *Eight Ate: A Feast of Homonym Riddles* (Terban, 1982). To understand this riddle students must go beyond surface level vocabulary and use their higher level thinking skills to comprehend. To do so, they must understand the concept of homonyms. Cornett (1986, p. 12) emphasizes that puns, figurative language, homonyms, and homophones provide us with the "staples of jokes and riddles." Thus, exposure to tradebooks and activities which encourage language development is important.

Classroom use of joke and riddle books

By incorporating joke and riddle books into the elementary classroom, we can provide worthwhile learning experiences which enrich and supplement the educational program. As mentioned previously, joke and riddle books can certainly be integrated into the reading/language arts classroom to promote language development. For example, Giulio Maestro's *What's mite might?* (1986) and *What's a frank frank: Tasty homograph riddles* (1984) are packed with language

experiences. Likewise, Marvin Terban involves children in the delight of language as they enjoy his *Too Hot to Hoot: Funny Palindrome Riddles* (1985), *The Dove Dove: Funny Homograph Riddles* (1988), and *Eight Ate: A Feast of Homonym Riddles* (1982).

Why not also consider using joke and riddle books to promote reading in the content areas? For example, one fourth grade teacher uses joke and riddle books to spice up the science curriculum. During a unit on animals his classroom filled with smiles as students sampled *Creepy Crawly Critter Riddles* (Bernstein and Cohen, 1986) as well as Hall and Eisenberg's *Fishy Riddles* (1983), *Grizzly Riddles* (1989), and *Snaky Riddles* (1990). What better way of adding a spark of humor to the study of insects than by sharing a few ribticklers from *Buggy Riddles* (Hall and Eisenberg, 1986)! Kids will delight in responding to "What kind of seats do bugs have in their cars? — Bugget seats." Likewise, joke and riddle books that focus on historical topics can put giggles into the social studies classroom. In David Adler's (1987) *Remember Betsy Floss and Other Colonial American Riddles* Betsy Floss is given thread to sew a flag but cleaned her teeth instead. David Adler's wacky riddle collection, *Wild Pill Hickok and Other Old West Riddles* (1988) is filled with laughs galore, and Charles Keller's *Remember the A La Mode* (1983) uses a famous Texas historical event to answer the riddle: "What did the piece of pie say to the man who was about to eat it?"

The selected bibliography of joke and riddle books appearing after the list of references contains resources which are popular among elementary youngsters and can be used, along with the titles discussed in this article, to highlight humor throughout the school day. While we have no problem attracting children to humorous books, various activities can make them more aware of the importance of

humor in everyday life. Why not try starting off the school day with a joke from *A Joke-a-Day* (Brandreth, 1979)? Some teachers choose to use a joke or riddle to end the school day; what better way to send your classroom of youngsters home than filled with laughter? Bulletin board and book displays, sharing of jokes and riddles during a special time of the day, discussing the history behind jokes and riddles, using the indexes of joke and riddle books to promote reference skills, and organizing "riddling" contests are just a few strategies that can be used to put laughter into the classroom.

A "Joke and Riddle Center" in the classroom offers teachers an opportunity to take advantage of the ideas discussed in this article. Teachers can develop a corner of the classroom into a special center by arranging a display of various joke and riddle books and by placing a decorative box in the center. Such centers encourage children to read jokes and riddles and then to create their own. Students can then place their creations in the joke and riddle box and share them with classmates. Some teachers may choose to highlight a certain type of joke ranging from elephant to knock-knock jokes. On the other hand, they may choose to focus on a specific author/compiler such as Joseph Rosenbloom or a particular topic such as "School Jokes." The center can also provide teachers with an excellent means of sharing background information on humor and identifying the various types of jokes and riddles. One teacher went a step further and added a tape recorder to the center. She encouraged children to record their jokes and riddles for others to enjoy. The "Joke and Riddle Center" is likely to be a popular spot in any elementary classroom.

Teacher resources for joke and riddle books

Teachers will find several resources particularly helpful in promoting joke and riddle books and developing fun-filled

activities and centers. Alvin Schwartz's humor-packed book, *Unriddling* (1983), acquaints teachers and students with various types of jokes and riddles collected from American folklore as well as background information and history on the origin of the various types of jokes and riddles. For example, did you know that hundreds of years ago royalty had "riddle wars" which decided upon the best riddler? Teachers can use jokes from this work as models to help students create specific types of jokes. One teacher ignited interest in creating elephant jokes among students after providing them with a sample from *Unriddling* (Schwartz, 1981): "How do you get down off an elephant? — You don't. You get down off a goose or a duck." *Witcracks* (1983), another valuable resource by Schwartz, provides a collection of jokes from American folklore and provides more background information on the various types of jokes which teachers will want to share with students. In this one, you'll find the answer to such questions as "Why did the girl put her bed in the fireplace? — She wanted to sleep like a log."

Conclusion

As we look for ways to develop the literacy skills of our young students, we should not ignore the power of jokes and riddles. The pleasure they offer young readers, the means they provide to increase critical thinking, and the scaffold they build to a life-long love of reading are reasons enough for classroom teachers to make them a regular part of their instructional day.

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