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# PROMOTE IDENTIFYING WITH CHARACTERS FOR MOTIVATION IN READING STORIES

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There is the story about a child who, having been told by his teacher that he now knows how to read, exclaimed "Good! Now I'll never have to read another book as long as I live!" The anecdote points out vividly what most reading teachers well know. Teaching children how to read is one thing; getting them to read on their own is another.

The importance of fostering a lifetime interest in recreational reading is well accepted by professionals involved in the teaching of reading. So, few would take issue with Huck (1971) when she writes "If we teach a child to read, yet develop not the taste for reading, all our teaching is for naught. We shall have produced a nation of 'illiterate literates'—those who know how to read, but do not read." (p. 37) And, if we accept Ladd's (1977) assertion that children learn to read by reading, motivating children to read becomes even more crucial in the child's reading development. Reading is similar to other skills. If children do not practice reading, they will not fully develop the ability to read. The child who reads frequently will continue to improve in vocabulary, comprehension and other important reading skills. And reading frequently will also help children maintain those reading skills.

There have been many suggestions for encouraging children to read. Among them are the following:

- Allow class time for recreational reading.
- Provide a wide choice of reading materials from which children can choose.
- Suggest books to children that relate to their needs and interests.
- Provide pleasant physical surroundings to create a suitable atmosphere for reading.
- Hold individual conferences with children to discuss their reading.
- Take children to the library weekly.
- Show an interest by reading yourself.
- Share your reading experiences with children.
- Read parts of books and show pictures and illustrations from books to children.
- Read aloud to children daily.

- Let children engage in audience reading.
- Establish a way for children to share what they are reading with others.
- Have children read along with taped stories.
- Decorate the classroom with posters, bulletin boards, book displays and children's projects related to reading.
- Have children write, illustrate, and bind their own books.
- Give praise or tangible rewards to children for reading.
- Help children develop a means of keeping a record of their reading.
- Help children plan specific reading time at home.

Promoting identification with story characters has also been suggested as a way of encouraging children to read. Guthrie (1979) describes a motivation strategy that uses questioning to help children identify with story characters. This motivation technique is based on the following assumptions: 1) The process of identifying with story characters can be learned, 2) Identification with story characters, therefore, can be taught, 3) Questioning based on certain stories can facilitate identification with story characters, and 4) Learning to identify with story characters will increase the desire of children to want to read.

This article provides teachers with generic questions that may be used to help children identify with story characters. The questions can be used with most stories and books, but should not be thought of as a substitute for preparing a variety of questions at various levels of understanding for specific selections.

#### Prereading Questions

The first group of questions might be used to initiate a discussion about story characters before children are assigned the reading selection. The prereading discussion can help facilitate student identification with story characters in three ways. First, it will provoke thought about story characters. It may also provide children with important background information on the specific characters in the story to be read. And, thirdly, asking questions before children read the selection will build student interest in the characters encountered in the selection. Questions asked during prereading discussion might include the following:

1. Do you ever compare yourself with the characters of a story? Explain.
2. Do you sometimes make-believe and see yourself as one of the characters in stories you read? Explain.
3. Look at the illustrations or pictures for this story. What do they tell you about the characters in the story?
4. Read the title of the story. What does the title suggest about the story characters?
5. Read the introduction to the story. What does it tell you about the characters?
6. What do you already know about the characters in this story?

#### Purpose-setting Questions

Teachers can also facilitate student identification with

story characters by providing questions to guide children while reading. This may best be accomplished by having children read to find the answers to questions related to story characters. The following are examples of purpose-setting questions:

1. What happens to the characters in the story?
2. What is the problem or conflict the characters have to work out in the story?
3. How do the characters deal with this problem or conflict?
4. How would you have handled the same problem or conflict?
5. Why do the characters do what they do in the story?
6. Are the characters in this story plausible or realistic? Explain.

#### Follow-up Questions

In a teacher-directed discussion of the story after children have read the selection, opportunities abound to contribute to student identification with story characters. Such questions as the following might be used:

1. Who are the characters in the story?
2. Tell me about the characters in the story.
3. Who is your favorite character in the story? Why?
4. Who do you like the least? Why?
5. How are you like the characters in the story? How are you different?
6. Have you ever been in a similar situation as the characters in the story? Explain.
7. Have you ever felt like the characters in the story? Explain.
8. Would you have done the same thing as the characters in the story? Explain.
9. Were the characters right or wrong in their actions in the story? Explain.
10. What have you learned from the characters in the story?
11. How can you apply the experiences of the characters to your daily life?

Although little scientific evidence is available to support the basic assumptions of this motivation strategy, practical experience would suggest that promoting identification with story characters is a worthwhile goal in motivating children to want to read. In the published highlights from the lectures of Vladimir Nabokov (1980), the following relevant passage occurs: "The more the emotional identification with the book is intensely felt, the more the reader treasures the book." (p. 62) Promoting identification with story characters may contribute to one of the most important and difficult tasks facing teachers of reading—how to help children discover the fun and value of reading so that when they leave our classrooms they will go on reading.

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