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A SCHOOLWIDE PROGRAM TO HELP CHILDREN ANALYZE STORY CHARACTERS

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"What kind of person do you think this character is?" A familiar question which, more than occasionally, results in answers such as, "nice, happy, mean, good, etc." Discussion with many teachers indicate that such superficial responses persist through the grades with some children, especially those who encounter problems when reading.

Understanding the problem

Herber & Nelson (1970) wrote that questioning, in general, does not inherently help children develop comprehension skills. For example, if a child cannot answer a question to show that s/he has some insight into a character's behavior, the question does not give clues on how to gain such insight. Durkin (1977) describes such questioning as assessment since it really tells a teacher whether or not a skill implied by a question was mastered previously. Her research suggests that these types of questioning sessions occur regularly in elementary classrooms.

Bloom (1976) feels that new learning cannot take place unless the child has the necessary prerequisite knowledge, and just as important, that this prerequisite knowledge is available "at the time it is required in the specific new learning task." (p. 33) For Bloom availability essentially means that children can remember and use applicable prior learning. To move beyond questioning strategies perhaps we need to identify, in a more systematic manner, the prerequisite knowledge a child will need to answer specific questions. In the case of understanding characters, it seems reasonable that this knowledge would include that of the vocabulary used to describe behavior and emotions along with some appropriate response models for answering teacher questions.

Developing the vocabulary and making it available

Most children have some vocabulary which they use to discuss story characters. To gather a master list of vocabulary words, teachers in each classroom of an elementary school can be asked to conduct brainstorming sessions. During these sessions, children try to think of as many words as possible that can be used to describe how characters behave in stories. Teachers accept and record all responses and they can add words of their own. These class lists are combined and edited, and all the words are subjectively grouped to facilitate their use. This same process can

Character Traits List—Example 1

fun	sad	scary	selfish	cranky	weak
playful	happy	friendly	frightened	unselfish	strong
fair	mean	unfriendly	gentle	sneaky	clumsy
unfair	unkind	sweet	jealous	nosy	greedy
bossy	nice	dishonest	foolish	lucky	grumpy
tidy	funny	honest	clever	polite	jolly
sloppy	bad	helpless	bashful	lazy	grouchy
messy	shy	loving	curious	quiet	bright
silly	odd	brave	merry	noisy	careless
good	angry	smart	proud	cheerful	lonely

caring	strict	patient	gossipy	lenient
thoughtful	stubborn	mannerly	lively	boisterous
thoughtless	loyal	humble	daring	creative
likable	popular	dull	bold	vain
generous	mischievous	sincere	mulish	heartless
naughty	terrible	warm	excitable	treacherous
gabby	horrible	cowardly	mysterious	meek
cruel	grateful	lovable	hateful	spiteful
nasty	worried	wild	understanding	inquisitive
rude	trusting	forgetful	respectful	stern
impolite	eager	nervous	organized	studious
strange	obedient	talented	graceful	prejudiced
weird	considerate	witty	responsible	anxious
pleasant	cooperative	energetic	decent	conceited
moody	joyful	boastful	sensible	casual

Emotions List—Example 2

scared	cheery	thankful	puzzled	relieved
sad	surprised	amazed	ashamed	disappointed
glad	pleased	excited	horrified	concerned
mad	dumb	eager	furious	glum
happy	playful	confused	shocked	calm
silly	homesick	upset	embarrassed	guilty
afraid	angry	unhappy	impatient	delighted
kind	jolly	jealous	discouraged	dejected
lucky	proud	bored	heart broken	startled
disgusted	annoyed	envious	exasperated	
tense	dumbfounded	outraged	disoriented	
depressed	nauseated	overwhelmed	shattered	
astonished	inspired	petulant	distraught	

be used to gather words that describe how characters might feel.

Once classrooms receive copies of these master lists, teachers can begin to make them accessible through the use of charts, word banks, individual copies, and so forth.

Providing appropriate response models

Knowing how to respond to a question is not always clear to a child even when s/he has some of the information needed for the answer. Using the schoolwide vocabulary lists, a teacher can

begin building personal vocabularies. Children learn to match vocabulary words from the lists with specific behaviors, etc. Discussions of fairytales and other familiar stories can be helpful when used in conjunction with these matching activities. Next, children can match vocabulary words with characters from stories they are currently reading, justifying their choices by describing appropriate character behaviors.

As children become comfortable finding and isolating the specific actions of characters that give clues to traits and emotions, more general comprehension strategies can be utilized. Those strategies that children can eventually learn to use on their own are especially useful. Some suggested strategies are as follows:

1. Think Links/Semantic Webbing (Wilson 1981) This strategy shows children how to gather and organize their ideas on paper. It facilitates easy self-evaluation and revision as information is processed. It can be used at all levels.
2. Personal Outlining Strategy (Wilson 1981) This strategy requires children to decide what is most important about a topic and find evidence to support their choices. It is especially effective in grades four and above.
3. Story Frame Approach (Fowler 1982) Using the structure of a paragraph, children gather information that could make sense with the story frame model. This model remains constant so that children can use it repeatedly with new stories. It can be used at all levels.

Summary

Analyzing story characters can be a difficult task, especially for children who encounter problems when reading. By providing a systematic study of characters that goes beyond individual stories, teachers can help children develop skills that may be prerequisites for the task. Schoolwide participation in activities such as developing vocabulary banks and teaching general comprehension strategies are some of the ways that this goal may be accomplished.

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