A Schoolwide Program to Help Children Analyze Story Characters

Gerald L. Fowler
School District of Carlisle, Pennsylvania

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation
A SCHOOLWIDE PROGRAM TO HELP CHILDREN ANALYZE STORY CHARACTERS

Gerald L. Fowler

SCHOOL DISTRICT DIRECTOR OF READING, CARLISLE, PENNSYLVANIA

"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 inscrutable
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 cooperative 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 shocked calm
happy playful confused eager ashamed guilty
silly homesick upset embarrassed impatient delighted
afraid angry unhappy 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.

REFERENCES


