

A Picture Book Is Worth a Thousand Words

Building a Character Literacy Library

MARY KATHERINE DUNCAN

According to the U. S. Department of Education, character education refers to teaching “the habits of thought and deed that help people live and work together as families, friends, neighbors, communities, and nations.”¹

Character education has long been viewed as an essential part of the mission of schools,² and some have even suggested that it may be the primary purpose of education in the future.³ In addition, meta-analytic studies have linked character education to decreased risk behaviors, increased prosocial behaviors, favorable school outcomes, and healthy social-emotional functioning.⁴

Research has also shown that the most effective character education programs include, among other things, professional development, dynamic student interactions, an explicit focus on character, modeling, and community service.⁵ In other words, effective character education programs challenge students to appraise their own and others’ character strengths, craft their lives around identified signature strengths, and use their positive traits in service of others.

To prepare young children to benefit from best practices in elementary and middle school character education curricula, early childhood educators and other school-based professionals are often tasked with introducing young students to the concept of what it means to be a person of good character. Just as early literacy skills such as print motivation, print awareness, vocabulary, and narration lay the foundation for formal academic instruction and achievement, early character literacy skills such as an interest in, awareness of, vocabulary for, and ability to describe character strengths may provide

the basis for meaningful and fruitful character education. Unfortunately, pre-service educators and practicing teachers may feel underprepared to teach character literacy.⁶ To this end, school librarians may play a valuable role in character literacy programming.

Using picture books for psychoeducational or psychotherapeutic purposes (i.e., bibliotherapy) is not new.⁷ Historically, clinical bibliotherapy has been used to help treat physical ailments, repair emotional damage, and restore behavioral health. Similarly, developmental bibliotherapy has been used to support typical development and prevent problems in the context of common psychosocial morbidities. Published research on the effectiveness of bibliotherapy shows that it is widely viewed as a beneficial adjunct therapy across a broad range of outcomes.⁸

Additionally, proponents of bibliotherapy assert that picture books are a safe, familiar, and effective medium for addressing daily hassles and major life events because they afford children the opportunity to identify with story characters, feel validated and understood, vicariously experience the



Dr. Mary Katherine Duncan, PhD, is Professor of Psychology, Joan and Fred Miller Distinguished Professor of Good Work, and Founder/Director, BU Toy Library at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania in Central Pennsylvania.

character's thoughts and feelings, and ultimately gain insight for problem solving and decision making.⁹

Although comparatively less has been written about the use of children's picture books for the explicit purpose of advancing children's mental health and growing their socio-emotional competencies,¹⁰ a recent study of 245 preschool teachers found that 94 percent of the early childhood educators believed that early childhood education is an appropriate venue for teaching character education, and 94 percent of the respondents believed that character education could be supported by picture books.¹¹

Nevertheless, this same study also found that 72 percent of the respondents reported feeling only partially competent to deliver character literacy programming, in part due to difficulty finding or accessing quality picture books to target the many and varied facets of good character.

In a review of thirty-three articles drawn from educational and library information sciences databases, Christine A. Garrett Davis found that bibliotherapy is regarded as a useful tool consistent with school libraries' mission to support students' academic, social, and emotional development and that school librarians are well-positioned to serve as bibliotherapy resource persons.¹² Amy Catalano also noted that education librarians who are familiar with advances in psychological theory, research, and classification can play an important role in creating collections of bibliotherapeutic resources and recommending titles to guide school professionals' selection of relevant books.¹³

Around the turn of the twenty-first century, the discipline of psychology introduced a new perspective, called positive psychology, to balance its traditional focus on repairing damage.¹⁴ Over the last two and a half decades, positive psychology has evolved into the scientific study of what makes life worth living, including positive experiences, positive traits, and enabling institutions.¹⁵ Christopher Peterson, a prominent positive psychologist, asserted that one of the most critical tools for advancing the science and practice of positive psychology is the development of a common vocabulary for talking about the good life.¹⁶ To this end, Peterson and Martin Seligman published *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (CSV) to summarize what is known about the universal human virtues of wisdom, courage, justice, humanity, temperance, and transcendence as well as the twenty-four character strengths that comprise these virtues.¹⁷

To be included in the CSV, each character strength had to meet several criteria, such as being widely recognized and admired across cultures, existing in civilizations across time, contributing to individual happiness, elevating others, and being the deliberate target of societal practices and institutions. Using this classification as a framework, school librarians are well-trained and well-positioned to build special collections of picture books that illustrate each of these character strengths for school libraries as well as curriculum materials centers.

The collection of picture books described below is the newest addition to the author's university-based toy lending library.¹⁸ The toy library is a literacy and play resource center whose mission is to support faculty's, staff's, and students' coursework, research, and pre-professional fieldwork experiences. The character literacy collection was developed to help student teachers, social science practicum students, and allied health clinical students become familiar with widely available trade books for introducing young children to the names, descriptions, and examples of the character strengths described in the CSV. The following titles were identified by reading an extensive collection of children's literature, consulting book reviews on Amazon.com, as well as performing online searches of the Association for Library Service to Children's Notable Books lists, which include Caldecott and Newbery winners, and other award-winning picture book lists, such as the National Education Association's Teachers' Top 100 Books for Children, The Children's Book Council's Children's Choice Book Awards, Young Readers' Choice Awards, Parents' Choice Awards, Cybils Awards, as well as starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly*, *School Library Journal*, and *Kirkus*. The goal was to identify one or two examples of high quality, easy-reader books with relatable characters, good illustrations, and an engaging storyline.

According to the CSV, the virtue of wisdom refers to acquiring and using information for the good of the Good. This virtue is considered the foundation of all others and it includes the character strengths of creativity, curiosity, love of learning, open-mindedness, and perspective. Individuals who demonstrate creativity are often characterized as inspired or imaginative as they evidence this character strength in innovative and adaptive thoughts or actions. Books such as *Willow* by Denise Brennan-Nelson and Rosemarie Brennan and Antoinette Portis' *Not a Box* portray characters thinking in original and productive ways; whereas, Hervé Tullet's *The Book with a Hole* prompts readers to exercise their creativity with the turn of every page.

Individuals who demonstrate curiosity are interested in new experiences and intrigued by the world around them. Jacqueline Woodson's *The Other Side* portrays characters who question the world as it is, whereas Tullet's *Press Here* prompts readers to explore and discover as they turn each page of the interactive book. Individuals who demonstrate open-mindedness are critical thinkers who weigh all of the evidence to achieve a clearer sense of the world. Time and again, the characters in Kevin Graves' *Chicken Big* change their minds in light of new information and observations; whereas, Amy Krouse Rosenthal and Tom Lichtenheld's *Duck! Rabbit!* and Brendan Wenzel's *They All Saw a Cat* challenge readers to see things in a new way.

Those who demonstrate perspective show the ability to use knowledge and experience to provide sound advice to others. In Mac Barnett's *Telephone*, for example, a wise owl cuts through the "noise" of a game of telephone to clearly relay a message from a mother to her son. Finally, individuals

who demonstrate a love of learning show a strong desire for acquiring skills or knowledge. In *Abe Lincoln: The Boy who Loved Books* by Kay Winters and Nancy Carpenter, the main character and future President of the United States demonstrates an insatiable appetite for knowledge.

The CSV describes the virtue of courage as the will to accomplish goals despite internal obstacles such as fear, boredom, frustration or external opposition such as peer pressure or task difficulty. This virtue includes the character strengths of bravery, persistence, integrity, and vitality. Bravery, or valor, involves voluntarily confronting an actual or perceived threat. It manifests as physical, psychological, or moral bravery and may be demonstrated in ordinary or extraordinary ways. *Courage* by Bernard Waber captures the many faces of bravery and illustrates how bravery elevates others both in its modeling and in its giving away. Persistence, also known as perseverance, refers to finishing what you start. Books such as *The Most Magnificent Thing* by Ashley Spiers as well as *Sam and Dave Dig a Hole* by Mac Barnett portray main characters who do not give up or lose heart.

Integrity, also known as authenticity, is demonstrated by individuals who speak the truth and take the high road even if it comes at personal sacrifice. *The Empty Pot* by Demi illustrates this character strength through a child who behaves with honor when everything is on the line and no one is watching. Integrity is also demonstrated by individuals who present themselves in a genuine, sincere way as in David Shannon's *A Bad Case of Stripes*. Vitality, or zest, is demonstrated by individuals who are passionate and energetic. Both *Exclamation Point* by Amy Krouse Rosenthal and Tom Lichtenheld and *The Dot* by Peter Reynolds depict main characters who discover their *joie de vivre* and share their enthusiasm with others.

The CSV notes that the virtue of humanity includes positive traits that orient us toward one another and are evident in caring one-on-one relationships. This virtue includes the character strengths of love, kindness, and social intelligence. Love is demonstrated through reciprocated relationships such as those found in friendships, families, mentoring, and teammates. Both the Caldecott Award-winning *A Sick Day for*

Amos McGee by Philip Stead as well as Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*, for example, remind readers that the true power of love is love returned.

Kindness is the tendency to be nice to others. It is characterized by a sense of common humanity, manifest in compassion for others, and demonstrated by good deeds. Books such as *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* by Mem

Fox and *Sophie's Masterpiece* by Eileen Spinelli illustrate acts of altruistic grace. Social Intelligence is the ability to understand, appreciate, and respond to one's own and others' thoughts and feelings. Patrick McDonnell's *The Gift of Nothing* and Mo Willems' *Edwina: The Dinosaur Who Didn't Know She Was Extinct* highlight characters who understand, appreciate, and respond to others' unspoken needs and deepest desires.

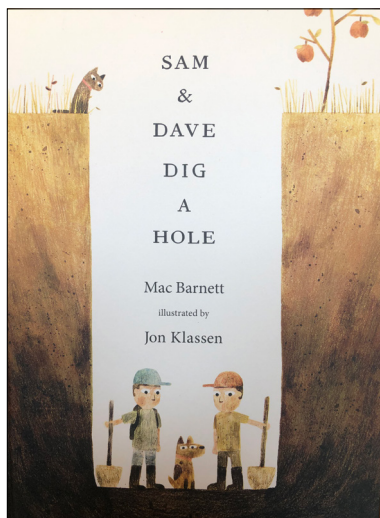
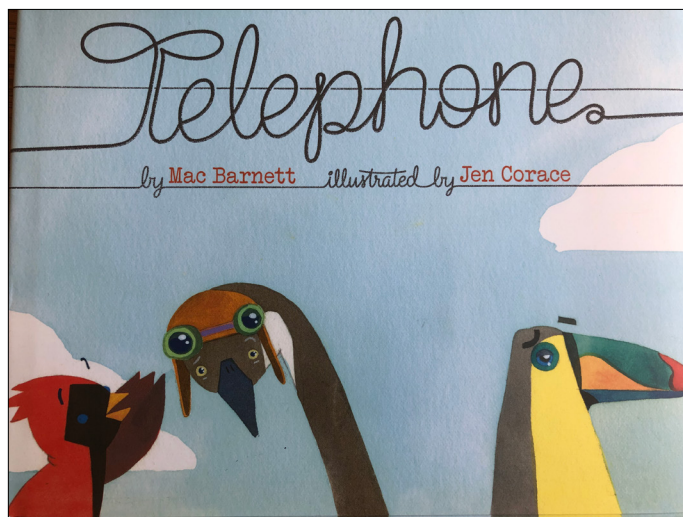
According to the CSV, temperance protects individuals from excess emotional extremes and includes strengths such as forgiveness/mercy, humility/modesty, prudence, and self-regulation. Forgiveness/mercy involves giving people a second chance and not being vengeful. Derek Munson's *Enemy Pie* tells the story of a young boy who learns to let go

of a grudge in order to reclaim a friendship. Modesty/humility involves not seeking the spotlight or elevating oneself above others. In books such as *The Tower* by Richard Paul Evans and *The OK Book* by Amy Krouse Rosenthal and Thomas Lichtenheld, the main characters learn modesty and demonstrate humility, respectively.

Prudence refers to refraining from saying or doing things that might lead to regret. P.D. Eastman's *Sam and the Firefly*, for example, introduces readers to a prudent owl who teaches his reckless friend how to have fun while exercising concern for the consequences of his actions. Self-regulation refers to controlling what one feels and does in order to live up to personal, social, or cultural standards. In *Perfect Square* by

Michael Hall, for example, a square is cut into pieces, poked through with holes, torn into scraps, shredded into strips, crumpled, ripped, and wrinkled. Day by day, it reinvents itself into something even more exceptional.

According to the CSV, the virtue of justice includes character strengths relevant to the optimal interactions between an individual and a group such as fairness, citizenship, and



leadership. Citizenship, or teamwork, includes a sense of solidarity and doing one's share. Individuals who demonstrate citizenship look beyond their own self-interests, demonstrate loyalty, and take on additional duties and responsibilities for the benefit of the group. In John Vernon Lord's *The Giant Jam Sandwich*, villagers rise to the occasion of doing what they do best in order to rid the town of a swarm of wasps. Fairness refers to the equal or equitable treatment of others without allowing personal feelings to bias decisions. In *The Day the Crayons Quit* by Drew Daywalt, a child named Duncan appeases his crayons' "calls" for fairness by creating an A+ piece of art.

Leadership involves motivating members of a group to work together to achieve success. In the classic *Swimmy* by Leo Lionni, a single small fish leads a group of other small fish to explore the ocean. Like a good leader, Swimmy knows the way, shows the way, and goes the way.

According to the CSV, the virtue of transcendence includes the strengths that help individuals find meaning and purpose in their lives. These character strengths include appreciation of beauty, hope, gratitude, humor, and spirituality. Appreciation of beauty refers to a sense of awe or wonder that connects individuals to excellence in the form of physical beauty, skill or talent, and moral goodness. In *Grandpa Green* by Lane Smith, a child navigates his great grandfather's garden, which is adorned with horticultural tributes that memorialize a life well-lived. This book encourages readers to savor their own experiences and the wonders of the world around them.

Hope refers to expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it. In *Silent Music* by James Rumford, a young child in war-torn Baghdad expects that good things will come and his goal can be achieved as he strives to write the word for *peace* in calligraphy. Gratitude refers to the thankfulness that individuals experience upon realizing that they are the beneficiary of a tangible or intangible, intentional or accidental gift. Books such as Matt de la Pena's *Last Stop on Market Street* touchingly illustrate the fulfilling nature of recognizing and appreciating one's positive life circumstances and experiences.

Humor refers to laughing, amusing others, and seeing the bright side of an otherwise difficult situation. In Mo Willems'

Are You Ready to Play Outside? and *We Are in a Book*, humor brings levity to a disappointing situation and connects the characters to the reader, respectively. Spirituality refers to beliefs about a higher purpose and the meaning of life. *Here We Are* by Oliver Jeffers, for example, offers an inspiring message about each human being's place in the world, connectedness to others, and potential to contribute to something beyond ourselves.



If the goal of character education is to cultivate good citizens who model living well with others, then character literacy is the means by which school libraries, early childhood educators, and other school-based professionals introduce children to what it means to be a good citizen. To this end, carefully selected picture books may be valuable tools for familiarizing children with the positive traits by which societies around the world and across time have identified people

of good character. Through shared reading and story-related activities, children may seek, find, and appreciate character strengths that comprise human diversity and kinship and contribute to a good life.



Future initiatives will be geared toward familiarizing school librarians, early childhood educators, and other school-based professionals with the CSV as well as consulting with them to brainstorm multiple intelligences-inspired story-related activities to support the emergence of early character literacy skills (i.e., interest in, awareness of, vocabulary for, and descriptions of character strengths). Future research will survey school librarians, early childhood educators, and other professionals who provide library services to children in order to create a more extensive bibliography of award-winning picture books, including wordless picture books and non-fiction picture books (e.g., biographies and autobiographies) that highlight the CSV's twenty-four character strengths. Finally,

future community outreach projects will involve creating character literacy tote bags to distribute picture books that feature the CSV's character strengths to support children's exploration of who they are and discovery of what they have to offer as good citizens in their homes, schools, and communities. &

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