Character Education Through Children’s Literature

Sheryl O’Sullivan
Sheryl O’Sullivan is an associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Azusa Pacific University in Azusa, California. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in reading and children’s literature. Her bachelor and doctoral degrees are from Ball State University, and her master’s degree is from Southern Illinois University. All three degrees are in elementary education with an emphasis in reading.

Before moving to the higher education classroom, O’Sullivan taught several elementary grades and was an elementary principal. She has published and presented numerous items in the subjects of reading/language arts and teacher portfolios. She currently teaches an undergraduate seminar titled “Character Education Through Children’s Literature,” which provided the impetus for this fastback.
Character Education Through Children’s Literature

by

Sheryl O’Sullivan

ISBN 0-87367-694-7
Copyright © 2002 by the Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation
Bloomington, Indiana
# Table of Contents

Introduction .................................................. 7  
What Is Character Education? .......................... 9  
Why Should Schools Teach Character Education? .... 13  
Why Should We Use Books? ............................. 17  
How Shall We Teach? ...................................... 23  
  Choose Good Literature ............................... 23  
  Move Beyond Literal Understanding ................. 25  
  Focus Intentionally on Character Education ...... 27  
What Books Should Teachers Use? .................. 30  
  Courage .............................................. 30  
  Sacrifice ............................................ 34  
  Compassion ......................................... 37  
  Responsibility ...................................... 41  
Conclusion .................................................. 44  
References .................................................. 46
Introduction

Think about the really memorable books you read in your childhood. Now think of the heroes or heroines in those books. What made those characters so memorable? Are there lessons you learned from those characters when you were a child that are still with you today as an adult?

For me, the heroine who comes quickly to mind is Jo March from Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. All of the March girls in that story are strong role models; but Jo was the one I identified with the most, and she is the one I remember best now. I learned from Jo the value of being an individual, even if that individual is unconventional. Jo’s struggles to integrate her assertive, tomboy nature into her larger self led me to place Jo in the heroine category, though she never did a single thing the world would label as heroic. I now realize that I unconsciously follow Jo’s lead in these matters today.

Character education is important for our children, and children’s books are a powerful way to teach character education. This fastback explores the importance of including character education in elementary and middle schools and using high-quality children’s liter-
ature to do so. It also discusses specific techniques and thematic sets of books that can be used for integrating character education into the school.
What Is Character Education?

Education in virtue is the only education which deserves the name.

— Plato

Character education is not a new idea. Over the years there have been different terms for the idea of educating for character. Some of these are moral education, moral reasoning, values clarification, and ethics (Jones, Ryan, and Bohlin 1998). But the basic idea of using schools to produce people of good character has been around for many generations.

Character education was one of the reasons schools were established in the United States. Schools were necessary in a democracy for citizens to be trained in the moral values necessary to govern themselves. Early textbooks freely combined academic and moral lessons. For example, lesson 74 of the Normal First Reader has as its text, “Is it right to tell a lie? No, it is very wrong. We must tell the truth at all times” (Raub 1878).

Character education became more controversial during the 20th century. Beginning with Dewey, char-
acter education began to move away from the didactic method of teaching students a set of right and wrong behaviors to an emphasis on the internal process of discovering right from wrong (Murphy 1998).

Research in the 1930s suggested that character education programs in place at the time were having little influence on student behavior (Hartshorne, May, and Shuttleworth 1930). This paved the way for Kohlberg’s (1981) developmental approach to character education and to the technique of values clarification (Raths, Harmin, and Simon 1966), in which students are not told what constitutes virtuous behavior but are led to clarify their own moral views.

The recent alarm about increasing school violence has brought character education into the forefront again. Numerous states have passed legislation to implement character education (Ryan 1996), and such groups as the Character Counts Coalition and the Character Education Partnership have formed to champion the cause of character education.

However, there still is some confusion over what character education actually is. According to Thomas Lickona, "Character education is the deliberate effort to cultivate virtue. Virtues are objectively good human qualities, such as a commitment to truth, wisdom, honesty, compassion, courage, diligence, perseverance and self-control" (1999, p. 23). Lickona also defines character succinctly as “knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good” (1991, p. 51). Character education, then, includes the intellect, the emotions, and the will. It is not about debating controversial issues, such as
abortion or homosexual rights. It is centered on the cultivation of the commonly held and clearly positive values of our society.

These common values are not nearly as hard to discover as we might think. C.S. Lewis lists many such common values in the appendix of his book, *Abolition of Man* (1947). These common values include the obligation to be kind to others, especially kin, and the necessity to be honest, just, and merciful. The real value of Lewis' list is in the way he is able to show the universal acceptance of these ideals across cultures, times, and religions. Lewis finds evidence of these commonly held values in the writings of such divergent cultures as Ancient Egypt, Babylon, China, and Greece.

Lewis' list is only one of a multitude of lists of objectively good and commonly held virtues. Groups such as the Center for the 4th and 5th R's, the Josephson Institute, and the Character Counts Coalition have put forward similar lists of virtues. There is some diversity in items on the individual lists, but they are remarkably similar in what they choose to include and not include. All of these lists contain such values as honesty, courage, fairness, compassion, tolerance, self-discipline, respect, wisdom, diligence, responsibility, perseverance, and sacrifice. Notably absent from these lists are controversial issues, such as views on abortion, which tend to be divisive. Also absent are transient values, such as whether men should open doors for women, which tend to change across time and cultures.

If we rule out transitory or controversial values, we are remarkably constant in the core values we hold and
wish to pass on to our children. Character education provides us with the means to transmit these core values to children through a variety of educational methods, with the goal of producing adults who behave in virtuous ways.
Why Should Schools Teach Character Education?

This is the age that a child's conscience is built, or isn't; it is the time when a child's character is built and consolidated, or isn't.

— Anna Freud

Anna Freud spoke of the elementary school years as the "age of conscience." During these years, children build on the foundations they have developed during early childhood under the guidance of their parents.

Some argue that the responsibility for character education should remain with parents or with such community organizations as churches and that schools should not be concerned with this. However, there are many reasons for schools to include character education that works in harmony with parental and community efforts.

One strong rationale for including character education is that a child's character will develop, for good or ill, during the elementary school years. Wynne (1995) notes that the school's rules and policies, the actions of
teachers or other adults, and the very length of time children spend in school will affect the moral character of children. It is unreasonable to expect that schools can remain value neutral during the course of everyday dealings with children. It also is unreasonable to expect that children will cease to develop morally during these years.

Numerous developmental theorists have pointed out that children continue to develop a moral code throughout childhood. Piaget emphasizes that children construct both intellectual and moral understandings out of their experiences with the environment. For example, very young children do not understand lies as deception, but they slowly begin to make the distinction between a mistake and a lie. Piaget further notes that early morality is based on obedience, but later a child develops an autonomous moral code based on internal convictions (DeVries 1998).

Kohlberg’s (1981) work agreed with Piaget’s findings. Kohlberg found that boys move from a preconventional moral stage, which is based on rewards and punishments, through a conventional stage based on societal expectations, and finally to a post-conventional stage based on internalized moral principles. Gilligan (1982) expanded on this work by interviewing girls. Her findings indicated that while girls are more concerned with an ethic of care and the determination to avoid hurting others, they also pass through regular stages in moral development.

Finally, the work of Vygotsky highlights the importance of adult guidance during a child’s developmental
stages. Vygotsky's concept of the "zone of proximal development" states that a child who is operating at one level of development can be assisted in moving to a higher zone if the child is supported and guided by someone already at that level (Tappan 1998).

Thus developmental theory supports the argument that children inevitably continue to mature physically, intellectually, and morally during the elementary school years and that schools inevitably contribute to this development whether they intend to or not. It would be far better to be intentional in our efforts.

A further reason for including character education in schools comes from a feeling of crisis, both real and perceived. It is extremely easy today to find evidence of decay in the moral fiber of our youth. Newspapers and television carry almost daily reports of new and more heinous crimes committed by young people both in and out of school. A 1998 survey by the Josephson Institute on Ethics of more than 20,000 students in middle and high schools revealed that nearly half of these students had stolen something from a store during the last year, and almost 70% had cheated on an exam during that time. Earlier surveys by the same institute had reported a lower percentage in both these areas, and so the trend is disturbing. A deep feeling of childhood in crisis pervades our country today. In such an atmosphere, all facets of society, including schools, must work together to help young people develop the strength of character they will need for a productive adulthood.

The best rationale for character education is that it is effective. A review of the research on 10 character edu-
cation programs (Leming 1999) showed a connection between character education programs and increases in prosocial behavior, self-esteem, and democratic values. Leming points out that while the character education programs of today do have similarities to the programs of the 1920s, the new programs place a greater emphasis on such indirect influences as school climate or the availability of good role models. So while it will be some time before research can provide us with conclusive proof that character education produces people of better character, there is reason to be optimistic about the chances for success.

Thus there are a number of reasons for including character education in our schools. The next question to address is how best to do it.
Why Should We Use Books?

A story is a way to say something that can’t be said any other way.

— Flannery O’Connor

Schools should teach character education in as many ways as possible. The literature on this topic is remarkably agreed that character education should be fully integrated into the entire day, the entire life of the school in order to have the best chance for success (Lickona 1999; Wynne 1995; Ryan and Bohlin 1999). Some of the pieces of this unified program include:

- Strong leadership by the principal and teachers.
- School policies (for example, in discipline and grading) that are conducive to building strong character.
- A shared commitment by parents and community.
- Virtuous and strong role models within the school community.
- A positive moral climate that encourages the practice of virtue.
- The integration of character education throughout the academic curriculum.
Some of these components, such as good role models and strong administrative leadership, are concerned with the hidden curriculum of schools. The influence of the entire school community cannot be overestimated in character education. A literature-based character education program delivered by an uncaring teacher in a school with a negative ethical climate will have little chance for success.

One reason for integrating character education into core academic subjects is that this increases the likelihood that we will be successful in instilling good values. Leming, in his study of the Heartwood literature-based character education program (2000), found that character education that cuts across all curricular areas is important in the program's effectiveness. Lamme (1996) agreed that the best way to develop character is throughout the school year and in all subjects. Another benefit to integrating character education in this way is that no additional time is required in the school day for character education.

Finally, integrating character education throughout the curriculum demonstrates the value of self-discipline and perseverance. As Sizer states, "A curriculum rich in content will teach young people that important matters of sensitive living have everything to do with hard, substantive, and often agonizingly painful thought" (1999, p. 205). Curriculum is the work of schools; and it is by engaging in this work that students examine, develop, and practice the values they will take into later life.

While character education should be included throughout the curriculum, there is no area as perfectly
suited to character education as is the study of literature. Stories put human faces and specific situations on such abstract concepts as courage, justice, and responsibility. C.S. Lewis, in his book On Stories, says that one function of stories is “to present what the narrow and desperately practical perspectives of real life exclude” (p. 10). Books, then, have a special place in character education and are a good place to begin for a teacher who wishes to include character education in the curriculum.

There are many reasons why children’s books are so well-suited for teaching character. Kilpatrick, Wolfe, and Wolfe, in their work, Books that Build Character, list four compelling reasons.

1. Stories create an emotional attachment to goodness, a desire to do the right thing.
2. Stories provide a wealth of good examples.
3. Stories familiarize youngsters with the codes of conduct they need to know.
4. Stories help to make sense out of life, help us to cast our own lives as stories. (1994, p. 18)

Stories do create an emotional attachment to goodness. Adults and children alike cry when Leslie dies in Katherine Paterson’s Bridge to Terabithia. We feel a sickening revulsion when introduced to the evil It in Madeline L’Engle’s A Wrinkle in Time. These visceral and powerful reactions do not happen to us while we are reading a technical manual or computing our bank balance. But in reading a purely fictitious story about people we can never meet, we come to care deeply about what happens to them. This is what is meant by having
an emotional attachment to goodness. Through stories, children care deeply that good will win out, that the characters they have come to love will prevail, and that, given a similar opportunity, they would be just as heroic.

This brings us to Kilpatrick and his colleagues’ second reason for using literature, the availability of good role models. As Noddings (1997) points out, these role models are available in all sorts of literature, both fiction and nonfiction. Myths and fairy tales will contain strong role models, but so will biographies and historical accounts. These strong role models are not the plastic characters written into superficial children’s stories specially designed to highlight a specific virtue; rather, they are the real, blood-and-guts characters of high-quality children’s literature. In watching Saaski in *The Moorchild* struggle against temper and self-doubt to become her own person, or in traveling with Billie Jo in *Out of the Dust* as she recovers from a debilitating accident that killed her mother, children learn how an imperfect but noble person deals with life. Such good role models are scattered everywhere throughout life, but books give children a pure dose.

The third reason given by Kilpatrick and his colleagues for using books in character education is that they teach children the rules of our society. As Guroian notes, “mere instruction in morality is not sufficient to nurture the virtues” (1998, p. 20). All schools try to help children understand the moral codes of the society in which we live. Sometimes these codes are expressed in a general and abstract rule, such as be kind, and sometimes they are expressed in a very specific and concrete
rule, such as do not hit. Yet merely instructing children in right behavior will do little to help them know, love, and honor right behavior. For one thing, knowing what is good is more complex than just knowing a list of rules.

Stories allow children to debate and reflect on what is right within all the complexities of a specific context. They provide models for how to choose right behavior, and they demonstrate the consequences of whatever behavior is chosen. This intellectual activity, which Sizer calls "grappling" (1999), means that students are more likely to internalize virtue, rather than observe it from the sidelines.

Finally, Kilpatrick and his colleagues point out that reading stories helps children think of their own activities as stories. What might be the benefit of considering our own lives as a story? As Robert Coles (1997) puts it, stories help us develop our "moral imagination." Though children may never travel to the exact places the main character in Barbara Cooney's Miss Rumphius does, for example, they can use this book to think of the ways they have been adventurous or courageous in their own lives. And they can use Miss Rumphius' example of giving something back to the world in their own ways, though they may never plant fields of flowers as she does. When children begin to see their own lives as powerful and important, they are impelled to put into action the moral behavior they have been learning about. Stories can provide a bridge between that learning and doing.

We have discussed many reasons for incorporating character education into the school program in general
and especially for including it in our study of literature. In the next section, we will look at specific ways to use literature for character education.
How Shall We Teach?

It is only with the heart that one sees rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye.
— Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

We know that character education is important to include in schools and that children’s literature is a natural and effective tool for teaching character education. But precisely how can literature be used? In general, there are three principles to guide us in this:

1. Choose good literature.
2. Move beyond literal understanding of this literature.
3. Be intentional in focusing on the development of values.

Choose Good Literature

The word, *good*, should be understood in several different ways. For literature, one way to think of it refers to the quality of the book. It is hard to make gold from straw, and a poorly written, superficial book will make character education difficult to do. So the books chosen must be of exceptional quality. Such literary elements
as plot, setting, and theme must be strong. And the characters in the books must be especially well drawn, exhibiting all the complexities of human nature, but with a nobility worthy of a role model. One-dimensional characters who behave in predictable ways when faced with a rather trivial dilemma will provide little grist for students as they think about their own increasing virtue. In addition, the books must be well written with fine, expansive language and high-quality illustrations, if appropriate. The book also must have an internal integrity and should contain no stereotypes and no pandering to our baser qualities.

Besides being good literature in terms of quality, the books a teacher uses also should be suitable for the particular student. Reimer, Paolitto, and Hersh remind us that "placing students in contact with more adequate reasoning levels promotes growth" (1990, p. 222). The characters in books must be close enough to a student's developmental level to be understandable to the student, but function at least partly in the student's zone of proximal development so that growth is encouraged. Not only reading level, but thinking level must be considered when choosing books that are good for character education.

Finally, choosing good literature in this case also means that it is suited to the specific purpose of character education. An alphabet book may be very well written and have many valuable purposes, but it probably would not be very helpful in promoting courage. To facilitate character education, we must choose books in which the traits we hope to instill are displayed in action. If these traits
are in the book, it will be quite easy to bring them into our discussions as soon as we move from a literal to a more critical understanding of the book.

**Move Beyond Literal Understanding**

Literal understanding is the basis for all literature discussions. For example, when discussing Scott O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, it is vital to know when the story takes place, where Karana lives, and why her mother and father are not available to help her. It is only after knowing these facts that students can begin to use Karana to discuss the meaning of courage and self-sufficiency. But if our work with books stops at the literal level, we never get to the critical thinking so necessary for character education. There are countless ways to encourage higher-level thinking about books. A few are listed here.

*Journals.* Journals give students an opportunity to collect their thoughts and reflect on these before being asked to contribute to an oral discussion. Teachers can be more or less directive in their students' use of journals. An example of one journal activity to use with any book dealing with good and evil is to ask students to find three descriptions of good or evil in the text and to draw out the common features in the descriptions. Students also can react to class discussions in their journals, and teachers can enter into this personal dialogue by responding to students' journal entries.

*Quotations.* The actual words a character speaks are often the deep kernel of truth contained in the book.
One way to facilitate a discussion of quotations is to ask each student to write the most important quotation from the book or chapter on an index card. Draw these randomly from the pack and ask the student who chose that quotation to lead the discussion on why it was so important. Asking students to identify a quotation that demonstrates a virtue will further focus the discussion on character education.

Discussions. Use Bloom’s Taxonomy or a similar hierarchical list to direct the discussion away from literal "who, what, and when" questions to higher-level "why and whether" questions. One helpful rule of thumb is to never ask a question for which we know the answer. In The Giver by Lois Lowry, for example, it would be logical to ask, "Was it right for Jonas to kidnap Gabriel?" The story never says explicitly whether Jonas should or should not kidnap Gabe; and, in fact, it is not even clear as to whether Jonas and Gabe survive the kidnapping. This is the sort of question that allows for different interpretations and encourages deep thought and discussion on such issues as fidelity to rules and personal responsibility.

Graphic Organizers. The concepts being addressed in character education are complex and abstract. It often is important for students’ understanding to present these concepts in as concrete a way as possible. There are numerous graphic ways to do this. Students might construct their own diagrams, or the teacher could draw a chart on an overhead projector or chart paper.

Venn diagrams are particularly good for comparisons of two or three characters, stories, or versions of stories. A Venn diagram of two characters would consist of two over-
lapping circles with traits the characters share written in the parts of the circles that overlap and traits that make them different written in the other parts of the circle.

Another graphic organizer involves relating the symbols in a story to something concrete. For example, when discussing Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*, students would list something concrete in the story, such as the king, on a picture of an eye, and the abstract concept it represents, such as the quest for power, on a picture of a heart. These can be displayed in a pocket chart and used to generate discussion.

_Literature Circles_. Encouraging a small group of students to talk about a book they all have read is an excellent way to encourage them to think deeply about a book. Allowing students to take as much responsibility as possible for that discussion puts them in a more active learning posture than if the teacher always takes primary responsibility for leading every discussion. A good way to accomplish both of these goals is through literature circles. With this technique, all students in the group read the same book. Each is assigned responsibility for a specific task in the discussion. For example, one student might make up questions, another might bring in important quotations. A third might summarize the discussion orally or in writing. These jobs can be changed in any way that leads to an organized, intense, student-led discussion of the book.

**Focus Intentionally on Character Education**

Eventually, most discussions of compelling literature will get around to matters of character education. How-
ever, these nuggets of insight can be overlooked in the wider discussion if the teacher fails to draw them out and focus on them specifically. For example, students may notice that Mafatu in *Call It Courage*, Annemarie in *Number the Stars*, and Wanda in *The Hundred Dresses* all display courage. However, they may fail to consider the larger question of what it means to be courageous unless the teacher very intentionally helps students realize that these three characters all display very different types of courage and then encourages students to reflect on the nature of courage itself.

In order to be intentional in the integration of character education, the use of text sets is helpful. Text sets are merely collections of books that are organized around a common theme, such as courage. The books treat this common theme in various ways and through various genres. The stories themselves may have as little in common as the three stories listed in the last paragraph, but they all deal with the theme. The use of text sets is valuable not only because it helps the teacher be intentional in including character education, but also because different reading levels and interests of students can be accommodated. For example, one student could read a picture book, another an early chapter book, and a third a young adult novel; but all of them still could take part in a discussion of what it means to be compassionate.

Since text sets are a good way to choose literature and organize discussion for character education, the next section of this fastback will present four different text sets suitable for use with elementary and middle school
students. All of the general techniques mentioned above can be used with the books in the text sets presented in the next section.
What Books Should Teachers Use?

I doubt whether we are sufficiently attentive to the importance of elementary text-books.

— C.S. Lewis

The text sets in this section are organized around the four themes of courage, responsibility, compassion, and sacrifice. Each set is divided into two parts, picture books and chapter books. Grade levels are not given, as many picture books are suitable for use with older students, and chapter books often can be used with younger students if the book is read aloud by the teacher. It is up to teachers to judge the suitability of any book for their own students. The general activities provided in the previous section can be used with any of these books. At the end of each annotation, there is a list of additional character traits that could be the focus of work with that book.

Courage

Picture Books

A small badger named Frances faces the normal array of nighttime fears as she tries to get to sleep. Finally, despite tigers, giants, and noises at the windows, she gathers her courage and goes to sleep. *Compassion, responsibility.*


An Ashanti myth about the trials of Anansi the spider, who is helped by all six of his sons in their own ways. The tale tells how the moon came to be. *Resourcefulness, gratitude.*


A young girl is helped by her grandmother to overcome her fear of thunderstorms. She does this by facing all sorts of dangers in order to gather the ingredients for a thundercake. *Trust, perseverance, love.*


Very intense and moving book of actual poems and drawings made by children imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. Demonstrates how heroic children can be when faced with unspeakable circumstances. Not for very young readers. *Compassion, hope, faith.*


A small boy is going to spend the night at his friend’s house and faces the dilemma of whether to take his teddy bear. His sister goads him into not taking the sleep toy, but he eventually is true to himself and goes back to get it. *Self-respect, friendship.*

The story of a Japanese boy who is an outcast at school until a kind teacher reveals the boy's talent of doing bird calls. The boy faces many hardships to come to school but still perseveres in coming. Perseverance, acceptance, tolerance, respect.


William wants a doll to play with and love, but everyone tells him this is a girlish toy to want. He tries to be content with the basketball and electric train he has, but he is satisfied only when his grandmother buys him a doll. Self-respect, gender roles.

**Chapter Books**


This is a true story about Sadako Sasaki, who died at 12 as a result of the Hiroshima atomic bomb. She folded hundreds of origami paper cranes because there was a legend that a person folding 1,000 paper cranes would be granted a wish from the gods. Perseverance, caring.


Three children are left alone in Ireland during the time of the great famine. They must survive and also make a long trip to a distant town to find relatives they have never met. Perseverance, responsibility, compassion.


Anpao is a handsome brave who must go on a dangerous journey to earn the hand of a beautiful girl who belongs
to the sun. This is a classic hero myth taken from many Native American tales. *Fidelity, self-reliance.*


The story of a boy who lives in the world of gangs but aspires to something better. Gang rivalries culminate in several tragedies before the boy and his brothers begin to rebuild their lives. *Integrity, honesty, self-reliance.*


Two children go in search of their father, who is being held captive by the evil It on the distant planet of Camazotz. They are helped by a school friend and various wise and magical adults. A good vs. evil story in which evil is vanquished by love. *Compassion, responsibility, perseverance.*


The story of a 14-year-old Navaho girl living in the mid-1800s at the time of the Long Walk, in which the Navaho people were forced to leave their homes and walk to Fort Sumner in New Mexico. The girl survives Spanish slave-traders and the Long Walk to make a life with her husband and son. *Resourcefulness, fidelity.*


A survival story about a boy who survives an airplane crash in the Canadian wilderness but must then learn to live alone for many months before he is rescued. During his months alone, he learns many things about himself and also begins to make peace with his parents’ divorce. *Determination, resourcefulness, perseverance.*


Four children are abandoned by their mother in a mall parking lot. They must make their way across country to
find the only relative they have ever heard of. They do this without food, shelter, or money under the guidance of the oldest child, 13-year-old Dicey. Resilience, unity, compassion.

**Sacrifice**

*Picture Books*


A classic story of a girl who is mocked because she is different. She pursues her own talents and remains kind to the other children. It is only after she has moved away, however, that the children realize how shamefully they have treated her. A cross between a picture book and a chapter book. Courage, resilience, remorse.


A very old, yet timeless tale about a young bunny who puts aside her ambitions to mother her large family. Eventually, her family is so well-raised that the mother can pursue her dream. In pursuing this dream, she acts in courageous and compassionate ways to her own children, as well as to others. Courage, responsibility, perseverance, caring.


A hilarious story of a family with seven children with very finicky appetites. The mother and father sacrifice in order to keep the children happy, but in the end the children learn to be giving for their parents, too. Good humor, individuality.

A retold folktale about two sisters, one who is kind and giving, and the other who is self-centered and mean-spirited. The kind sister suffers greatly, but never loses her nobility. She is eventually rewarded when all her dreams come true. *Kindness, positive outlook.*


One of many, many versions of the Cinderella story in which the younger stepsister is mistreated. She is helped by the spirit of a fish and maintains her gentle, loving ways. In the end, she is rewarded by marrying the king. Cinderella stories often show many admirable character traits and can be used in a variety of themes. *Courage, positive outlook, humility.*


A Native-American Cinderella story in which two older sisters are found unworthy to marry the Invisible Being, but the youngest sister is worthy to marry him because she can see him. *Humility, resourcefulness, confidence.*


A translation of a Japanese tale about a couple who rescue an injured crane. The crane becomes a girl who delights and supports the couple, rewarding them for their kindness until they become too greedy and the crane maiden must fly away. *Honesty, diligence.*

*Chapter Books*

The story of a young girl during medieval times who rises above her orphan status to become a midwife’s apprentice. She learns to trust and respect herself, as well as how to help women in childbirth. *Resilience, compassion, self-respect.*


A whimsical tale of a prince who comes from another planet and the pilot who befriends him. Both the pilot and the prince learn much about what is essential in life before the prince goes back to his home. *Courage, self-respect.*


An honest, admiring biography of a valiant woman. A chapter book, but heavily illustrated with photographs. Biographies of heroic people often show a variety of character traits and can be used with many themes. *Courage, responsibility, self-respect.*


Four unlikely students band together to make a winning sixth-grade academic bowl team. The story is about their individual stories, the making of their friendship, and their effect on their teacher. A provocative book about taking life’s challenges. *Courage, wisdom, trust, perseverance.*


A fantasy story of a boy growing up in a Utopian society where everyone is controlled but carefree. The boy is selected to be the next keeper of the community’s memories, and he must decide whether he and his entire com-
munity are better off staying in their innocent state or whether they should embrace self-direction. Responsibility, courage, trust.


Set in Denmark during World War II, a young Christian girl must take desperate measures to save her Jewish friend from the Nazis. A historically accurate portrayal of Danish resistance told through the life of a fictitious family. Courage, compassion, perseverance.


A white boy and a black West Indian man are shipwrecked on an island during World War II. The boy is blinded during the accident and is dependent for survival on the man. The man teaches him to be self-sufficient before finally giving his life so that the boy can survive. Courage, respect, tolerance.


The true memoir of the author's childhood in California during World War II, including the time when she and many other Japanese-Americans were imprisoned in U.S. concentration camps. Courage, diligence, hope.

**Compassion**

**Picture Books**


This is a fictional encounter of the child in the story with Emily Dickinson. The child reaches out to Emily in an act of friendship and receives friendship in return. Also ex-
explores matters of individuality and tolerance for others. Care, self-respect, tolerance.

A young girl is grieving over the death of her great-grandmother by remembering their many good times together. The grandmother was an Avenaki Indian and taught the girl many things about nature and life. Resilience, respect for environment, love.

A very simple, loving story of a girl and her father who make a window-sill flower box for the mother’s birthday. Suitable even for preschoolers. Diligence, love.

Fox, Mem. Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge. Illustrated by Julie Vivas. La Jolla, Calif.: Kane/Miller, 1985.
A young boy lives next to an old people’s home and becomes friends with the residents. They teach him about life, but he helps them be more alive. Respect, wisdom.

A conversation between a Native American boy and his grandfather. They are reviewing the boy’s life and the many acts of courage and strength he has already done to live a full life though he is blind. Courage, perseverance, resilience.

A simple, loving story about the visit of relatives from far away. Shows the love of family through everyday happenings, such as hugging and eating. Tolerance, helpfulness.

A young Polish girl does beautiful work with her hands. Her father boasts of her abilities, which makes all kinds of trouble. In the end her kind heart is rewarded when Elijah, the prophet, teaches her to make beautiful silver pieces. *Diligence, honesty, self-respect.*


An urban family loses everything in a fire. They slowly rebuild their lives but never have enough money to buy a comfortable chair. Together, the mother, grandmother, and daughter save the money and finally buy the chair. *Diligence, resilience, self-reliance.*

**Chapter Books**


A young boy is overwhelmed by the chaos in his life, which includes a move to a new house, the illness of his baby sister, and his parents’ preoccupation with the baby. The boy finds a creature in the garage that is part human but also something else. He and his friend help save the creature’s life and learn much in the process. *Hope, love, honesty, self-reliance.*


The story of how the Benson family grieves and recovers from the sudden death of their father. Mattie, the oldest child, decides that a gold pin will help her mother recover; and she sets about earning the money needed to buy it. *Courage, responsibility, honesty.*

This book tells two intertwining stories at once. Both involve the disappearance of a mother. In one story the girl is reconciling herself to her mother’s death. In the other, the mother returns. *Love, resilience, hope.*


A gently written story about a mail-order bride who comes from her home in Maine to the prairie to join a family whose mother has died. The journey that they all take in order to become a new family is loving and insightful. A short chapter book with deep topics suitable for older students with lower reading abilities. *Wisdom, adaptability, courage.*


A young boy becomes friends with a new girl who moves to town. Both children are misfits in the town and school. They find acceptance with each other, especially in the magical kingdom they build, called Terabithia. When the girl dies suddenly, the boy must find a way to deal with his grief. *Self-respect, courage, wisdom.*


A young girl lives with her aunt and uncle when the aunt dies. The story is about how the girl and her uncle grieve and come to peace with the death. *Resilience, love, self-respect.*


The story of an orphan boy who manages to be accepted
in both the white west end and the black east end of his town. He becomes a legend in his own time; and through his courage and guidance, the two sides of town are brought together. Compassion, courage, self-reliance, tolerance.

**Responsibility**

*Picture Books*


The story of a woman who sets out to do three things in life: visit faraway places, retire by the sea, and make the world more beautiful. She accomplishes all three and then passes on these goals to her young niece. *Respect for environment, self-reliance, self-respect.*


A beautifully illustrated version of Frost’s poem that speaks of being tempted to linger in the woods, but remembering that others are depending on him. *Respect for environment, love.*


Tells the story of a year in the life of a New England family as they depend on themselves to make nearly everything they need to live. The father takes the excess they have and sells it at the market to buy the few things they can’t make. Then the year begins again. *Diligence, caring, self-reliance.*


A gentle, poetic story about the cycle of life. A young farmer comes to a new place, raises a family, becomes a
grandfather, and finally dies, leaving his children to continue the circle. Love, self-reliance.

The story of a mouse family preparing for winter. Most of the mice gather food, but Fredrick gathers more ethereal provisions for the winter, which turn out to be just as important as food. Self-confidence, diligence.

Written in verse, this book tells the story of a little boy who did not care about anything. After a run-in with a lovable, but hungry, lion, the boy changes his mind and learns to care. Love.

A young Quaker boy is embarrassed to have a seagull follow him around everywhere. At first he wishes the bird would go away, but later he learns the value of friendship, even with so unlikely a friend. Compassion.

Chapter Books

Written in the format of a girl’s diary, the story tells how Catherine copes with the many changes in her life, including the deaths of her mother, infant brother, and best friend and her father’s remarriage. The style of writing is in old New England speech and would be difficult for struggling readers. Courage, perseverance, humility.

A young boy deals with his parents divorce by writing to an author for advice on writing. Using the format of letters or journal entries, the boy comes to grips with the problems of life in a single-parent family. Courage, resourcefulness.

A girl living in Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl must learn to accept the death of her mother, her own disfiguration, and the grief of her father, all while living in desperate times. The book is written in free verse. *Self-reliance, resilience, perseverance, courage.*


The story is set in a Shaker community in the early 1800s. A young girl is taken to live there by her father after her mother dies. She longs to leave but has pledged to help one of the younger girls, and she gives up her chance to go in order to fulfill her promise. *Courage, resilience, sacrifice.*


This is the story of the coming of age of a young girl after her mother dies. She goes to live with a wise aunt. Deep questions of life are explored through everyday happenings as the girl matures. *Self-reliance, compassion, humility.*


A child who is half human and half fairy is exchanged for a human baby. As the child grows, she feels more and more different from her peers and is especially sad that she can find no way to make her mother joyful. She is helped to accept herself by a wise woman and by a friend who is also a misfit, and finally she makes her mother happy. *Tolerance, self-reliance, self-acceptance, compassion.*
Conclusion

All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.

— Edmund Burke

The word "character" comes from a Greek word that means "to mark or engrave." Literally, a character trait is an impression made on a person, an impression that later makes itself known by the way the person acts. Society, parents, schools, and teachers constantly make these character engravings on children. Our children are learning character traits from us whether we mean for them to or not. Our work as educators is to decide which character traits we want to impress on children and to make sure that happens.

The decision about which character traits to instill turns out to be a relatively easy one, as there is general agreement across time, culture, and religious divisions about the core values we hope to pass along to our children. However, teaching these values in a way that is developmentally appropriate and fits into an already over-full school curriculum can be more of a challenge. Children's literature is uniquely suited to meet this challenge.

Excellent children's books have numerous features that make them valuable in instilling good character in
children. These books show moral dilemmas in rich complexity through circumstances that are understandable to a child. They show noble people, usually close to the reader’s own age, engaging in these moral dilemmas and emerging stronger, wiser, and victorious in some way. Through stories, children learn what is expected of them to lead a virtuous life and how they might go about doing this. They also can learn vicariously the consequences of the choices they make for good or ill.

All of this moral development can take place during the normal course of language arts instruction if teachers routinely use trade books in classrooms. Arranging these books into text sets around specific values means that a value can be emphasized while regular instruction in reading skills and comprehension takes place. In addition, since most books embody more than one value, character education through literature provides a spiraling effect in which virtues are revisited again and again in different vicarious situations. Character education done in this way becomes nearly effortless at the same time as it becomes more intentional.

It is important that we become more intentional in teaching values. As the Edmund Burke quotation at the beginning of this section suggests, our inattention or inactivity can invite evil to claim our children. Teachers have not only a unique opportunity, but also a special duty to work intentionally and with vigor toward helping children develop good character. Children’s literature is a natural vehicle for this important work.
References

Children’s Books


Teacher Resources


Helpful Websites

www.cde.ca.gov/character
www.character.org
www.charactercounts.org
www.giraffe.org
www.heartwoodethics.org
Recent Books Published by the Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation

100 Classic Books About Higher Education
C. Fincher, G. Keller, E.G. Bogue, and J. Thelin
Trade paperback. $29 (PDK members, $21.75)

A Digest of Supreme Court Decisions Affecting Education, Fourth Edition
Perry A. Zirkel
Trade paperback. $32.95 (PDK members, $24.95)
CD-ROM edition.* $69.95 (PDK members, $52.95)
Set (1 book, 1 CD) $87.95 (PDK members, $69.95)
*CD is compatible for PCs and Macs.

Flying with Both Wings:
Inventing the Past to Teach the Future
Neil Brewer
Trade paperback. $17.95 (PDK members, $13.95)

Environmental Education: A Resource Handbook
Joe E. Heimlich
Trade paperback. $22.95 (PDK members, $17.95)

Care for Young Children in
Four English-Speaking Countries
Jo Ann Belk et al.
Trade paperback. $17.95 (PDK members, $13.95)

Use Order Form on Next Page
Or Phone 1-800-766-1156

A processing charge is added to all orders.
Prices are subject to change without notice.
Complete online catalog at http://www.pdkintl.org
Order Form

SHIP TO:

STREET

CITY/STATE OR PROVINCE/ZIP OR POSTAL CODE

DAYTIME PHONE NUMBER

PDK MEMBER ROLL NUMBER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUANTITY</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>PRICE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ORDERS MUST INCLUDE PROCESSING CHARGE

Total Merchandise     Processing Charge
Up to $50            $5
$50.01 to $100       $10
More than $100       $10 plus 5% of total

Special shipping available upon request. Prices subject to change without notice.

SUBTOTAL

Indiana residents add 5% Sales Tax

PROCESSING CHARGE

TOTAL

☐ Payment Enclosed (check payable to Phi Delta Kappa International)

Bill my ☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard ☐ American Express ☐ Discover

ACCT # __________________________ DATE __________________________

EXP DATE ______/____/____ SIGNATURE __________________________

Mail or fax your order to: Phi Delta Kappa International, P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402-0789. USA
Fax: (812) 339-0018. Phone: (812) 339-1156

For fastest service, phone 1-800-766-1156 and use your credit card.
Phi Delta Kappa Fastbacks

This series, published each fall and spring, offers short treatments of a variety of topics in education. Each fastback is intended to be a focused, authoritative work on a subject of current interest to educators and other readers. Since the inception of the series in 1972, the fastbacks have proven valuable for individual and group professional development in schools and districts and as readings in undergraduate and graduate teacher preparation classes. More than 450 titles in the series have been published, and more than eight million copies have been disseminated worldwide.

For a current list of available fastbacks and other publications, please contact:

Phi Delta Kappa International
P.O. Box 789
Bloomington, IN 47402-0789 U.S.A.
1-800-766-1156
(812) 339-1156
http://www.pdkintl.org
The Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation is focused on the future. Contributions to the Educational Foundation support scholarships, educational publications, and professional development programs — resources needed to promote excellence in education at all levels.

The Educational Foundation is pleased to accept contributions of cash, marketable securities, and real estate, as well as deferred gifts. The Educational Foundation is tax exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, and contributions are tax deductible. PDK is more than willing to work with your estate planner, attorney, or accountant to find a plan that best meets your needs.

For more information about the Educational Foundation and how to make a contribution, please contact:

Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation
P.O. Box 789
Bloomington, IN 47402-0789
USA

Toll-free: 1-800-766-1156
Voice: (812) 339-1156
Fax: (812) 339-0018
E-mail: headquarters@pdkintl.org
http://www.pdkintl.org

ISBN 0-87367-694-7