

Character Education Using Children’s Literature, Puppets, Magic Tricks and Balloon Art

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Abstract

This article will address teaching character education to students with cognitive disabilities, autism, and related disabilities through the use of children’s literature, puppets, magic tricks, and balloon art as a fun and impressive means to illustrate key points of character education. Using a combination of these methods heightens the chances that students will remember the key character education points addressed. Since students with disabilities tend to have difficulty with generalization, it is important to assist with as many means possible in the comprehension of such important skills as character development.

Keywords: special education, intellectual/developmental disabilities, character education, bullying, balloon art, magic tricks

1. Introduction

Today, the vast majority of Americans share a respect for fundamental traits of character: honesty, caring, respect, responsibility, and fairness. The issue of character education has received much attention in the nation (Baldis, 2004; Brynildssen, 2003). Both the federal government and the National Education Association (NEA) agree that schools have the dual responsibility of not only contributing to students’ academic performance, but also to their character. One example is the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Public Law 107-110), which increased funding to states and districts to train teachers in ways to implement character-building instruction in the classrooms. There is no denying that in today’s complex society, all children face great uncertainties and fears. However, for many children, character traits are not always readily apparent and easy to learn, particularly for children who have cognitive disabilities, autism, and related disabilities.

Therefore our challenge as educators is to prepare children with disabilities with the skills needed to develop their self-esteem, stamina, and other character traits and provide the support they will need to survive, experience success, and mature into competent, caring, and responsible citizens. Equally important is to enlighten all students on the effects of bullying and the importance of respecting others and considering everyone's feelings.

This article will address teaching character education to students with cognitive disabilities, autism, and related disabilities through the use of children's literature, puppets, magic tricks, and balloon art as a fun and impressive means to illustrate key points of character education. Using a combination of these methods heightens the chances that students will remember the key character education points addressed. Since students with disabilities tend to have difficulty with generalization, it is important to assist with as many means possible in the comprehension of such important skills as character development.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, "Character is a set of qualities, or values that shapes our thoughts, actions, reactions, and feelings" (U.S. Department of Education, 2005a, p. 1). Not unlike a democratic government that is governed by the people for the people, the set of qualities or values that shapes how we think and feel as well as how we behave is determined by a society for the society. Educators have a responsibility in determining the set of qualities or values that shapes school children's thoughts, actions, reactions and feelings.

The Office of Communications and Outreach and the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools states that, "Character education teaches the habits of thought and deed that help people live and work together as families, friends, neighbors, communities and nations" (U.S. Department of Education, 2005b, ¶14). Students should be enabled to have strong character in the following areas:

- Show compassion
- Are honest and fair
- Display self-discipline in setting and meeting goals
- Make good judgments
- Show respect to others
- Show courage in standing up for beliefs
- Have a strong sense of responsibility
- Are good citizens who are concerned for their community
- Maintain self-respect

Educators have the added responsibility of creating a safe and supportive learning community for their students. Students deserve to feel safe and supported in school. An extremely important issue that must be addressed for students to feel safe and supported in the school community is bullying. Due to the increase of high-profile cases in the schools concerning bullying, the educational community as a whole is more aware of the repercussions of bullying and the need to address such issues in schools today.

Bullying is an intentional act that causes harm to others, either directly through verbal or physical attacks, or indirectly through exclusion, rejection, or manipulation. Bullying can manifest in various forms: name calling, teasing, physical attacks, severe verbal bullying, imitating, taking belongings, threats, verbal aggression, and making fun of the children with differences. Research indicates that children with disabilities or special needs may be at a higher risk of being bullied than other children (Rigby, 2002). In an article in CEC Today (Council for Exceptional Children, 2008), the issue of bullying was determined to be of particular interest for students with exceptionalities as it can be an unintentional result of inclusion. Therefore, the issue of bullying is of special interest to special educators. Statistics report that 80 percent of children with learning disabilities are bullied at school (National Children's Bureau, 2007), 40 percent of children with autism and 60 percent of children with Asperger's syndrome have experienced bullying as well (National Autistic Society, 2006). Children who have conditions that affect their appearance are also said to be more susceptible to name-calling.

Teaching character education lessons is highly valued among educators and most character education programs that are school-based, primarily involve proactive attempts to foster positive character development. Afterwards, educators are hopeful the children will actually remember the lesson. The authors of this article would like to emphasize that, equal to the lesson and the learning of the lesson, is how the children feel about the message taught in the lesson. The teaching of character education must be fun and memorable.

It is essential that the character education message be paired with positive images so that when they recall the message, they associate the message with a positive experience rather than a negative lecture. If children remember the lesson and associate it positively, it is hoped they will actually implement the lesson and exhibit good character traits.

The character education lessons proposed in this article involve multiple means of making the lesson memorable: children's literature, puppets, magic tricks, and balloon art. By utilizing a variety of methods to emphasize the character trait(s) highlighted in the lessons taught, the more apt a child, particularly a child with special learning needs, is to make meaning of the content presented.

2. Review of Literature

Use of Children's Literature to Teach Character Education Principles

The use of children's literature to teach skills across the curriculum is a common practice in schools today. With the renewed interest in character education, some educators believe that using children's literature to enhance a character education program is a practical choice and can be a very powerful tool (Brynildssen, 2003; Kilpatrick, Wolfe, & Wolfe, 1994; O'Sullivan, 2002). The use of children's literature can effectively address the growing concerns about bullying in schools. The use of children's literature provides an opportune method for teachers to approach the subject of bullying in a safe and age-appropriate way, without stigmatizing either victims or bullies (Entenman, Murnen, & Hendricks, 2006). According to Lamme (1996), quality children's literature contains many ethical concepts and democratic principles that illustrate important values. Many fairy tales (Bettelheim, 1989), fables and parables, and popular children's books revolve around tenets of character education and pose moral dilemmas that can be used to enhance discussions on character.

In a response to the rise in bullying statistics, members of the International Reading Association Children's Literature and Reading Special Interest Group examined books and provided a list of children's books that addressed bullying in some fashion with the intent of changing children's perceptions of bullying (IRA, 2012). According to Mullin (2011), children's literature provides a neutral opportunity to discuss issues that are sensitive, such as bullying, and promotes problem-solving and role-playing. Baldis (2004) states that one of the most effective instructional strategies in teaching character education is direct teaching of the character trait in conjunction with a short story that depicts or applies the trait. Since fables are typically short stories, the use of fables to teach character is a viable approach. Table 1 provides some examples of fables that can be used for character education.

Use of Puppets in Teaching Character Education Principles

Puppetry is another powerful medium to use with children to teach character education principles. According to Brown (2004), questions about a character puppet's actions help young children understand that one's actions relate to character education traits. Having children talk about their ideas helps them clarify their thinking and develops their reasoning skills (Mercer, Dawes, Wegerif, & Sams, 2004). Puppets can be used to bring concepts and actions to life and allow for a unique and effective brand of communication. Puppets not only entertain, but educate children as well. Children typically are drawn to puppets and generally tend to feel safe to ask questions of a puppet where they may not otherwise feel comfortable asking an adult or peer. In the field of education, puppets have been used to promote inclusion, teach children about abuse and safety issues, and enhance discussions in the classroom (Naylor, Keogh, Downing, Maloney, & Simon, 2007; PACER, n.d.; The Kids on the Block, n.d.a).

Two popular puppet groups, The Kids on the Block and the PACER Puppets, were introduced in the late 1970s to educate children about their peers with disabilities and support schools in their efforts of implementing inclusive programs. In addition to the original disability awareness programs, puppet scripts have since been developed that address social issues, abuse prevention, and school safety issues, such as bullying. The Kids on the Block safety program "is designed to create awareness of what constitutes bullying, present problem solving strategies, encourage empathy for the targets of bullies, and explore ways that students may be involved in promoting safety in their school" (The Kids on the Block, n.d.b, p. 1). In addition to their puppet program, PACER also has a website called *Kids Against Bullying* where children can participate in games, vote, and learn about the bullying prevention.

The website now includes a section on puppet role plays where instructions for making stick puppets can be downloaded and several skits are provided for acting out various scenarios about bullying with follow-up script for discussion purposes. The puppet role-play site is located at: <http://www.pacer.org/bullying/bpaw/scripts.asp>.

Several research studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of using puppets and scripts in teaching. Results of the research range from participants developing a more positive feeling about their peers who had disabilities (disability awareness programs), more disclosures being made after attending a puppet presentation (abuse awareness program) and knowledge concerning safety skills increasing following puppet presentations (social and school safety issues) (The Kids on the Block, n.d.), and increasing prosocial behaviors in a generalized setting (Gronna, Serna, Kennedy, & Prater, 1999). All of these results strongly suggest that the use of puppets and scripts may represent an effective medium through which children can learn and retain important content.

Overall, the use of puppets and scripts can engage and motivate children and enhance character education programs. If children are involved in making their own puppets for role-playing, another possible benefit could be that they learn more about each other and how to work collaboratively with their peers. Through the use of puppets, children can learn valuable character education concepts, such as kindness, caring, responsibility, and honesty and learn to respect one another.

Use of Magic Tricks to Teach Character Education Principles

Another innovative technique to use in teaching character education principles is the use of magic tricks. Although no research has been conducted in the area of using magic tricks to teach character education principles, it is reasonable to assume that teaching a character education lesson using magic tricks can make the lesson be both fun and memorable. Have you ever asked a group of elementary students if they would like to see a magic trick? At the mere mention of seeing a magic trick, the students are immediately engaged. Magic tricks are a unique way to gain and maintain students' attention in addition to emphasizing specific character education principles within a lesson.

Another benefit to using magic tricks in teaching character education is its impact on children's self-esteem. Individuals with disabilities are susceptible to being teased and bullied (Broer, Doyle, & Giangreco, 2005; Horner-Johnson & Drum, 2006). Educators should do everything possible to protect children from bullies. One thing that can be done is to raise the self-esteem of those who are victims of bullying. Research concludes that victims of bullying have low self-esteem (Moore, 2000; Moore & Kirkham, 2001; Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaistaniemi, & Lagerspetz, 1999). Educators should participate in activities that have promise of raising self-esteem. All children, particularly children with disabilities, need to be empowered and feel good about themselves and increase their self-confidence and self-esteem. Frith and Walker (1983) convey that the inherent benefit of using magic tricks with children with disabilities lies in their increased self-concept and self-confidence. A research study on the use of magic tricks indicated that children with disabilities, after learning and performing magic tricks, increased their perception of self-image, which included self-esteem and self-confidence, as measured by pre-and post-test measures (Ezell & Klein-Ezell, 2003). While it is not reasonable to assume that all educators will feel comfortable with incorporating magic tricks in their classroom, it is important to note that children are more engaged when programs are presented in a fun manner. Incorporating magic tricks in teaching character education principles can enhance students' engagement in the lesson and affect their self-confidence, which can reduce their chances of being victims of bullying.

Use of Balloon art in Teaching Character Education Principles

The authors of this article found the research on the use of balloon art in teaching character education to be non-existent. Even so, it is logical to believe that any type of creative outlet used to enhance the understanding of character education would be beneficial to use. Balloon art is simple to learn, even for young children. Even though balloon art is for the most part simple, it provides much satisfaction and builds self-esteem as children gain confidence in creating something unique and meaningful. When others admire and appreciate the balloon creations, this adds a further self-esteem boost for children, in addition to their having fun learning about a specific character trait or story characters.

Even though the use of balloon animals can enhance character education programs, certain precautions should be taken. Some children with disabilities, particularly children with autism spectrum disorders, may be somewhat reluctant to participate in making an animal balloon because of sensory sensitivities.

Particular care should be taken when introducing the balloon project so children will not feel forced to participate in what may be perceived as an unpleasant experience. The teacher should approach the activity in a fun manner by using pleasant voice tones and positive body language including positive facial expressions. Showing the example of the finished animal (e.g. *Nora the Nonapus*) is one possible motivator. Allow the children to simply hold one balloon at first and move slowly from step to step; being careful not to provide more sensory stimulation than what the children can handle. The authors of this article believe that encouraging children to tolerate activities they would normally avoid may lead to successfully meeting sensory integration needs of the child in other areas. Accomplishing these types of sensory challenges with balloons may prove to be beneficial in many areas.

When using balloon art in character education lessons, it is essential to know if any student has an allergy to latex, since most balloons are made of latex. Several alternatives to latex balloons are provided in Table 2 along with other tips that may actually enhance the use of balloon art in character education lessons.

Enhancing Character Education Lessons Using Technology

Another way to enhance character education lessons is by using technology. Using technology, such as Microsoft's Photo Story 3, can enhance the presentation of a character education lesson by having the story animated in a slideshow instead of having the teacher read the story aloud. Microsoft Photo Story 3 is a free Windows-based program and can be downloaded to create slideshows with digital pictures. Photo Story 3 and similar software can be an effective tool to use when developing or presenting character education lessons. The program allows one to edit the pictures, create a story, and add music, motion, narration, and special effects to enhance a lesson slideshow. Once a specific children's book or lesson has been selected, digital pictures can be taken of the book's pages, uploaded to Photo Story 3 where music, narration and other special effects can be added. The slideshow of the character education story can then be used in a large group setting instead of reading the story to the students or can be used in a small group or individual setting after the teacher has presented the story orally, depending on classroom needs. By incorporating technology, such as a narrated slide show developed with Photo Story 3 to teach a character education lesson, students may become more engaged and attentive than more traditional forms of teaching.

Example Character Education Lesson

To illustrate how to use children's literature, puppets, magic tricks, and balloon art as a fun and impressive means to illustrate key points of character education, a sample lesson plan is provided in Table 3. The children's book, *Nora the Nonapus*, can be used to illustrate a lesson on bullying. *Nora the Nonapus* was written and illustrated by fifth-grade students of Estes Hills Elementary in Chapel Hill, North Carolina and published by Scholastic, Inc., which is an important fact to tell students when teaching the lesson. *Nora the Nonapus* is a story about Nora who is a unique octopus with nine tentacles. She is afraid to let her friends know she is different and goes to great lengths to hide her extra tentacle. When Boyd, the Bullypus joins her class, things get out of control! Sample objectives are provided in the sample lesson plan provided in Table 3.

The lesson begins by discussing the meaning of "integrity." Explain to the students that integrity means doing the right thing even when no one is watching. Start a discussion by asking students, "What are some of the top ten problems in the United States?" Some of the more common responses tend to be global warming, the economy, gas prices, endangered species, and pollution. After responding to students' answers, state that "bullying" is also one of the top ten problems in the country. Reemphasize the importance of having integrity. Activate the students' background knowledge before reading *Nora the Nonapus* by asking specific questions such as those listed in the sample lesson plan provided in Table 3.

The next step of instruction should include previewing the book to the class, referring to the title, cover page, and having students make predictions about the story line. The story can then be presented to the class by either reading the story or having the story "read" using Photo Story 3 software. At the end of the story, reemphasize that Nora's character had lots of integrity. Query the students about the events of the story using some of the example questions listed in the sample lesson plan in Table 3. Be sure to ask students what lessons were learned after hearing the story of Nora. Reemphasize the importance of having integrity, and at this point, the "You have integrity" card trick* is suggested.

To emphasize the various characters in the story, balloon animals can be formed for Nora, her classmates, the teacher, and Boyd, the Bullypus. Be sure to add the extra tentacle to Nora's character balloon.

To continue student engagement in the storyline, a simple rope and palm tree trick can emphasize the importance of not demeaning someone by making comments that may make someone feel bad – “No cut downs allowed”.

To end the lesson, the authors suggest a meaningful message, such as the “folded heart” message* be presented. The “folded heart” message emphasizes that when someone’s feelings are hurt by negative comments, it puts a scar on their heart that will never go away. Even upon apologizing and even saying positive comments, the scar will not go away. Even though positive comments help the heart feel better, it will never completely remove the scars made by the negative comments.

For extension activities, the balloon animals can be used as “puppets” for the students to recreate the story and develop new scripts that dramatize character education principles. In addition, finger puppets can be developed from patterns found online or classroom puppets can be used to act out scenes. For specific directions and picture illustrations on how to make balloon animals of Nora and other book characters, magic tricks, and “folded heart” message mentioned in the lesson, visit the website, <http://www.MagicForTeachers.com>.

3. Summary

To succeed in school and feel comfortable and secure, students need a safe environment in which to learn (Bullock, 2002). For many students, however, being the target of bullying and teasing from other children shatters their safe environment and in turn, impedes their learning. They may react by skipping school, claiming to be sick, or in some cases, retaliate against their persecutors. The effects of bullying can lead to low self-esteem, loneliness, difficulty making friends (Bullock), anxiety, and suicide (Council for Exceptional Children, 2008).

Research indicates that children with disabilities or special needs may be at a higher risk of being bullied than other children (Rigby, 2002). Students with cognitive disabilities may not fully understand, be able to identify, or report bullying when it occurs (Council for Exceptional Children, 2008). Generally, individuals who bully do so to be funny and don’t realize the harm they are causing (Council for Exceptional Children). It is important for educators to provide character education lessons for all students. Character education lessons can empower those who have been victimized to have a “voice” and enlighten those who have bullied to understand the effect of their bullying.

Teaching character education principles using children’s literature, puppets, magic tricks, and balloon art is a fun and impressive means to illustrate key points of character education. Using a combination of these methods heightens the chances that students will remember the key character education points addressed. For students who tend to have difficulty with generalization, it is especially important to assist with as many means possible in the comprehension of such important skills as character development. Important to note is that although this article particularly addresses students with disabilities, the activities described in this article were implemented in inclusive classrooms and both students and teachers’ responses were favorable.

Some of the students’ responses about “lessons learned” after participating in the “Nora” lesson include:

- It’s ok to be different.
- People who are teased can be brave.
- The bully can change.
- People should be kind to everyone.
- Everyone is different.
- People who are different can do great things.
- Nora has integrity. I want to have integrity too!
- Anyone can be a hero.

Teachers responded favorably as well. One specific teacher applauded the high engagement-factor of the Nora lesson. She indicated that her class had recently attended a school-wide presentation on character education and noted how boring the presentation was so much so that one of her students actually fell asleep. The teacher reported that the Nora lesson not only engaged her students, but also generated a discussion about bullying and integrity unlike the school-wide presentation.

The above student and teacher responses validate that character education principles should be taught with the intention of students remembering the lesson and applying the principle in their everyday lives.

Character education lesson need to be fun, memorable, and presented in such a manner that the message is perceived as a positive experience. It is hoped that students will exhibit good character traits because of the lessons presented. To demonstrate what an impact the *Nora* lesson has had on students, the following actually occurred after presenting in a fifth-grade classroom:

While the class was making the *Nora* character balloons, a fifth-grader asked, “*Do I have to roll up Nora’s ninth tentacle?*” When told he did not have to, the fifth-grader responded, “*Good, I’m going to leave it out because Nora is not ashamed of it anymore!*” This is truly an inspiring example of the spirit of using children’s literature, puppets, magic tricks, and balloon art in teaching character education principles.

Over a period of five years, the authors have conducted three different presentations (one of which was *Nora the Nonapus*) within an academic school year span in 42 classroom settings resulting in 126 anti-bullying character-building presentations. Each subsequent classroom visit the authors evaluated knowledge of previous presentation by asking comprehensive questions. When given a visual prompt of the book, balloon art, magic trick, or puppet that related to the character education message, each classroom, collectively, could 100% recall the main character education message from the previous presentation(s). The authors contribute these results to presenting the anti-bullying character building lessons in a variety of fun and memorable ways.

Our ultimate goal is to make character education lessons as engaging and easy to understand as possible so that all students will know the effects of bullying and the importance of respecting others and considering everyone’s feelings. By using a variety of creative methods to emphasize character traits in lessons can make the content more meaningful to students and perhaps reduce the occurrence of bullying in the future.

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Table 1: Examples of Fables that can be used for Character Education

A Fable of Respect for Others

The Boatman - A Sufi Story from the Middle East

A scholar asked a boatman to row him across the river. The journey was long and slow. The scholar was bored. "Boatman," he called out, "Let's have a conversation." Suggesting a topic of special interest to himself, he asked, "Have you ever studied phonetics or grammar?"

"No," said the boatman, "I've no use for those tools."

"Too bad," said the scholar, "You've wasted half your life. It's useful to know the rules."

Later, as the rickety boat crashed into a rock in the middle of the river, the boatman turned to the scholar and said, "Pardon my humble mind that to you must seem dim, but, wise man, tell me, have you ever learned to swim?"

"No," said the scholar, "I've never learned. I've immersed myself in thinking."

"In that case," said the boatman, "you've wasted all your life. Alas, the boat is sinking."

A Fable of Self-Respect

You Are Beautiful As You Are

There was once a crow who did not like his feathers.

"I wish I were a peacock!" he would say.

"You are beautiful as you are!" the other crows insisted.

"How plain and dull you seem to me!" he'd complain, and fly off to admire peacocks.

The peacocks strutted about with their colorful tail feathers outstretched. To the delight of the crow, some of the peacock feathers lay on the ground when the peacocks left.

Crow flew down to the ground and stuck the feathers into his wings and tail. He attached a few sticking up from his head.

"Now I am as beautiful as a peacock," he said.

But, when he went to join them in their strutting, the peacocks poked him and pecked him. What a fuss!

"You are not a peacock," they said, "Don't imitate us!"

Bruised and still dragging some broken peacock feathers in his tail, he returned home.

After all his insults, no one wanted his company!

As he sat alone, the other crows said, "It's foolish to try and be what you're not. Learn to love the feathers you've got!"

Unity

The Father and His Sons

A father had a family of sons who were perpetually quarreling among themselves. One day, he told them to bring him a bundle of sticks. When they had done so, he placed the bundle into the hands of each of them in succession, and ordered his sons to break the bundle in pieces. They tried with all their strength, but were not able to do it.

He next opened the bundle, took the sticks separately, one by one, and again put them into his sons' hands, upon which they broke the sticks easily.

He then said, "My sons, if you are of one mind, and unite to assist each other, you will be as this bundle, uninjured by all the attempts of your enemies. But if you are divided among yourselves, you will be broken as easily as these sticks."

The Eagle, the Cat, and the Wild Sow

An eagle made her nest at the top of a lofty oak; a cat, having found a convenient hole, moved into the middle of the trunk; and a wild sow, with her young, took shelter in a hollow at its foot. The cat cunningly resolved to destroy this chance-made colony. To carry out her design, she climbed to the nest of the eagle, and said, "Destruction is preparing for you, and for me too, unfortunately. The wild sow, whom you see daily digging up the earth, wishes to uproot the oak, so she may on its fall seize our families as food for her young."

Having thus frightened the eagle out of her senses, she crept down to the cave of the sow, and said, "Your children are in great danger; for as soon as you go out with your litter to find food, the eagle is prepared to pounce upon one of your little pigs."

Having instilled these fears into the sow, she pretended to hide herself in the hollow of the tree. When night came she went forth with silent foot and obtained food for herself and her kittens, but feigning to be afraid, she kept a lookout all through the day. Meanwhile, the eagle, full of fear of the sow, sat still on the branches, and the sow, terrified by the eagle, did not dare to go out from her cave. And thus they both, along with their families, perished from hunger, and afforded ample provision for the cat and her kittens.

The Trees and the Axe

A man came into a forest and asked the trees to provide him a handle for his axe. The trees consented to his request and gave him a young ash-tree. No sooner had the man fitted a new handle to his axe from it, than he began to use it and quickly felled with his strokes the noblest giants of the forest. An old oak, lamenting when too late the destruction of his companions, said to a neighboring cedar, "The first step has lost us all. If we had not given up the rights of the ash, we might yet have retained our own privileges and have stood for ages."

A Fable of Compassion

An Ant

An Ant, going to a river to drink, fell in, and was carried along in the stream. A Dove pitied her condition, and threw into the river a small bough, by means of which the Ant gained the shore.

The Ant afterward, seeing a man with a fowling-piece aiming at the Dove, stung him in the foot sharply, and made him miss his aim, and so saved the Dove's life.

A Fable of Good Judgment

The Wolf and The Goat

A wolf saw a goat grazing at the edge of a high cliff. The wolf smacked his lips at the thought of a fine goat dinner.

"My dear friend," said the wolf in his sweetest voice, "aren't you afraid you will fall down from that cliff? Come down here and graze on this fine grass beside me on safe, level ground."

"No, thank you," said the goat.

"Well then," said the wolf, "aren't you cold up there in the wind? You would be warmer grazing down here beside me in this sheltered area."

"No, thank you," said the goat.

"But the grass tastes better down here!" said the exasperated wolf, "Why dine alone?"

"My dear wolf," the goat finally said, "are you quite sure that it is MY dinner you are worrying about and not your own?"

Table 2: Tips for Balloon Art

Tip #1: TYING A KNOT. Although making the actual animal balloon designs are quite easy, some may be surprised to find how difficult it is to tie a knot with balloons. It is important to spend time practicing this apparently easy task. Each person will find his/her own unique way that feels comfortable, but it is important to explore various methods to find a preferred method. The most important tip is to burp the balloon prior to tying the knot. Burping the balloon means to release a tiny bit of air from the inflated balloon so there is enough deflated tip at the end of the balloon to easily tie the knot. After mastering this technique, making animal balloons can begin.

Tip #2: SAFEGUARDS. When working with balloons around young children, specific safeguards should be taken. Deflated or broken fragments of balloons may present a choking hazard for young children and for this reason warnings should be explained to all who are involved with a balloon project. Even older children may be tempted to place balloons in their mouths so it is important that supervision be maintained at all times. To help discourage putting balloons in mouths, the teacher may choose to only use hand held balloon pumps when inflating the balloons. If the teacher inflates the balloon using his/her mouth, the children may model this behavior by putting the balloons in their own mouths.

Tip #3: LATEX ALLERGY. Another precaution to take when working with balloons around children (and adults) is latex allergies. Traditionally animal balloons are created with latex. It is important to ask ahead of time to be sure not to harmfully expose a child to latex balloons. It is assumed that parents would notify the teacher of such an allergy, but precautionary measures should be taken to avoid an allergic reaction.

Tip #4: NON-LATEX ALTERNATIVES. While the alternatives are limited, non-latex balloons are available. Round plastic balloons come in various sizes and colors. These plastic balloons are similar to the well-known beach ball. Finding an alternative for the twister 260Q balloons is extremely challenging, but there are at least two alternatives: poly tubing and bongo sticks. Some balloon artists use poly tubing instead of twister 260Q latex balloons. The poly tubing can easily be found on the Internet. Poly tubing comes in various thickness and widths. It is on a roll so you can make any length that is needed. The inconvenience occurs when attempting to tie the ends. It is virtually impossible to tie the ends securely enough to be airtight. To make the ends airtight requires a heat sealer. After the poly tubing is sealed, it will twist similarly to the latex 260Q balloon, but glue dots may have to be used to keep the twists in place. Another concern is that most of the poly tubing is clear and it is hard to find poly tubing in colors. Inflatable bongo sticks can also be used as an alternative to 260Q latex balloons. Bongo sticks are difficult to twist, but do come in a wide variety of colors. When using the bongo sticks, glue dots will also be needed to keep the twist in place. While alternatives to latex present a unique set of challenges, it is important to know there is a way to make animal balloons without using latex balloons.

Table 3: Sample Lesson plan for Nora the Nonapus

SUBJECT: Nora the Nonapus (UDL and Extended Standards Embedded)

GRADE LEVEL: 3 – 5th grade

Overview

This lesson is designed for all students grades 3rd through 5th and embeds opportunities for access to the activities for students with special needs in the overall lesson design. This is a Universally Designed Lesson (UDL) that uses literary elements found in literature to teach concepts of character education.

Rationale

Students often encounter situations in which they are bullied, but may not have the skills to deal with this issue. Some students who look differently, act differently, or have special needs, may encounter teasing and bullying more often than other students. Many times they do not tell an adult. Consequently, the situation may worsen and potentially foster feelings of low self-esteem or even anger. Skills to deal with bullying need to be taught and discussions about feeling differently from one another need to be addressed in a positive atmosphere.

Teaching character education to students through the use of children's literature, puppets, magic tricks, and balloon art is a fun, yet impressive means to illustrate key points. Using a combination of these methods heightens the chances that the students will remember the key character education points addressed. Since students with cognitive disabilities, autism, and related disabilities tend to have difficulty with generalization, it is important to provide multiple means for them to recognize what is being taught, flexible opportunities for them to express/show how they know the material, and meaningful ways to engage their interest to help them comprehend the material.

Materials

Nora the Nonapus (Scholastic ISBN: 0-439-71898-8). The theme is taught through the book, "Nora the Nonapus". The book was written by 5th graders as part of a Scholastic Writing Contest. The story will guide discussion on two areas to help describe character and appropriate behavior on two issues: 1: celebrating individual differences and 2: bullying

Photo Story 3 for Windows (free download from Microsoft website)

"Qualtex" Balloons to make the octopus:

- (9 legs - Nora) (8 legs – other characters) -260Q Balloons
- (1 head)-9"round (If making the bully, use black)
- (2 eyes)-5" friendly eyeball

Hand Pump or Electric Pump for inflating balloons (if assistance is needed)

Literary Focus

Understanding character traits and theme

Standards

Content Standards (can be matched to similar state standards):

- **Standard 1:** Students read, comprehend, and respond to a range of materials, using a variety of strategies for different purposes.
- **Standard 4:** Students demonstrate competence in speaking and listening as tools for learning and communicating.
- **Standard 6:** Students read, analyze, and respond to literature as a record of life experiences.

Extended Standards:

For students in Alternate Assessment Level I (LAAI), refer to the following extended standards for this lesson:

- **ES-8/5:** Identify story elements, including character and theme
- **ES-17/14:** Demonstrate understanding of information in texts, including identifying main idea and sequencing events
- **ES-42/37:** Use listening strategies

Interdisciplinary Standards:

- **Arts: Creative Expression:** Students develop creative expression through the application of knowledge, ideas, communication skills, organization abilities and imagination

Education Technology Standards:

- Use technology resources to assist in problem-solving, self-directed learning, and extended learning activities.

Behavioral Objectives

Reading and Responding

- When prompted, The Learner Will (TLW) orally identify story elements including: character and theme with 100% accuracy (ELA-4-A)

Speaking and Listening

- When asked, TLW correctly clarify and enhance oral presentations through the use of appropriate props (e.g., objects, pictures, charts) (ELA-4-E4)

Character Trait Objectives:

- When asked, TLW orally identify two characteristics about themselves that makes them the same as others with 100% accuracy.
- When asked, TLW orally identify two characteristics about themselves that makes them different from others.
- When asked, TLW orally identify correctly the definition of a bully.
- When asked, TLW will orally identify two reasons some people bully others.
- When asked, TLW orally identify two things they should do if someone is bullying them.
- When asked, TLW orally identify two ways to avoid becoming a bully.

Literacy Objectives:

- After listening to a story read aloud, TLW orally identify and discuss story characters, setting, theme, and plot with 100% accuracy.
- When prompted, TLW orally identify the main characters in the story with 100% accuracy.
- When prompted, TLW manually recreate a character through balloon art with 100% accuracy.
- When prompted, TLW orally retell or dramatize a selected portion of the story using a character puppet with 100% accuracy.

Sequence/Procedures

1. The Teacher Will (TTW) introduce “integrity” by asking these specific questions and providing the following explanations:
 - *What does integrity mean?* After listening to several responses, recap by providing the following definition: *Integrity means doing the right thing even when no one is watching.*
 - Give examples and non-examples of integrity.
2. TTW introduce “bullying”
 - *What are some of the top 10 problems in the United States?* Anticipated answers will be: global warming, pollution, endangered animals, the economy, gas prices, etc.
 - *Did you know that bullying is one of the top problems in the country today? That’s one of the reasons integrity is so important to have. If you have integrity, you will try to do the right thing even when no one is watching. In our story today, we will learn about the integrity of one of the characters and the lack of integrity of one of the other characters in the story.*
3. TTW activate background knowledge of the student by asking these specific questions:
 - *Who can describe how they are the same as others?*
 - *Who can describe how they are different from others?*
 - *Do you think that everyone has differences?*
 - *If someone feels different from the rest of the group, could that make him/her feel sad? Why?*
 - *What is a “bully”?*
 - *Give me some examples of some things you may see a “bully” do.*
4. TTW preview the book to the class by saying the following:
 - *The title of the story is "Nora the Nonapus".*
 - *Who thinks they might know what a nonapus is?*
 - *What word can you think of that sounds like “nonapus”?*
 - *What is an octopus? How many tentacles does an octopus have?*
 - *If “octo” is a prefix that means eight...what do you think “nona” means?*
 - *Let’s listen and learn about Nora and find out what is a nonapus.*
5. TTW read the *Nora the Nonapus* story to the class or the teacher could use the Microsoft Photo Story 3 version created (refer to details in article).

6. TTW ask the following questions:

- *Did you like the story about Nora?*
- *Why do you think Nora felt different from her classmates?*
- *How did the other students feel about Nora?*
- *How did the bully make the other students feel?*
- *What are some things that you could do if you are being bullied?*
- *What are some lessons we learned from the story?*

7. TTW reemphasize the importance of integrity

- *What does integrity mean?*
- *Did Nora have integrity?*
- *Did Boyd have integrity?*
- Perform the “I have Integrity” card trick.* During the performance of the trick, continue to reinforce the tenets of integrity. Elicit student input throughout the entire magical experience. This particular trick requires the student to select the cards of their choice. As each card choice is made, remind students of the message being taught. After the trick, review the definition of integrity and give different examples and non-examples. Use the magic cards as the reminder of the important points to remember. Review the magical effect and pair it with the message.

8. TTW model how to create the Nora story characters balloons and instruct the students on how to do it themselves.*

9. TTW perform two magic tricks* to emphasize the importance of saying kind things about others (no cut downs):

- *What does it mean when I say, “no cut downs”? What are “cut downs” or “put downs”?*
- Give different examples and non-examples
- Perform the “Magic Palm Tree” trick and the “No Cut Down” rope trick.* After the tricks, reemphasize the importance of not putting anyone down by saying mean things and making someone feel bad about him/herself. Review the magical effect and pair it with the message of “no cut downs.”

Closure:

10. TTW ask the students specific review questions to ensure that the lesson’s objectives were met.

- *What is a nonapus?*
- *What are some characteristics of a bully?*
- *How was Nora different from Boyd?*
- *How did Nora’s “difference” enable her to overcome Boyd?*
- *In your own words, describe the plot of the story.*
- *What is the theme of the story?*
- *What are some things you can do if you are being bullied?*

11. TTW close the lesson with the “folded heart” message.* This short message reemphasizes the importance of being kind to others and how hurtful negative comments can be for another person.

Suggested Activities:

12. Using the balloon, a student will act out the part of Nora in the beginning of the story describing how she felt about being different.
13. TTW have a student act out how Nora felt by the end of the story.
14. TTW have a student act out the part of Boyd the bully at the beginning and end of the story.
15. TTW use a story map to chart the sequence of events acted out by the students.
16. TTW use a character map to compare and contrast the specific characteristics of Nora and Boyd.
17. TTW orally discuss the theme of the story and have the students write about what they believe the authors’ message to be.

Homework:

TLW write a different ending to the story; however, the different ending should not change the theme of the original story.

Special Needs:

1. Students who are unable to physically manipulate the balloons can participate by blowing up the balloons for the other students with the electric pump. Students who use a switch, can activate the pump if it is connected to a Power Link (www.ablenet.com).
2. Students who have difficulty writing will be paired with a peer tutor who will transcribe the student's responses. For homework, this student will be allowed to illustrate a different end to the story.

Extension Activities:

Have the students read the following stories and describe the character traits of each of the characters.

1. Little Red Hen by Florence White Williams
2. Spider and the Fly by Toni DiTerlizzi
3. Shelia Ray The Brave by Kevin Henkes
4. The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein
5. Frederick by Leo Lionni
6. Swimmy by Leo Lionni
7. Bear Feels Sick by Karma Wilson
8. Giraffes Can't Dance by Giles Andreae

Assessment

Assessment methods:

- Observation, monitoring, and oral responses (for assessment of oral discussions, reenacting, and following directions)
- Written responses (for assessment of character & story maps)

**For specific directions and picture illustrations on how to make balloon animals of Nora and other book characters, the magic tricks, and "folded heart" message mentioned in the lesson, visit the website, <http://www.MagicForTeachers.com>.*