THE BIG RED PICTURE BOOK OF GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP
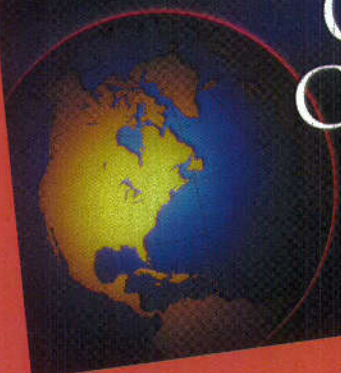
Linking Character Education and Global Understanding through Children's Picture Books

by Valeri R. Helterbran

Starting at the elementary level, educators must take an active role in children's development as moral, decent persons and citizens of the world.

> "If we are to reach real peace in this world . . . we shall have to begin with the children."
>
> —Mohandas Gandhi

The quest to instill children with the knowledge, ability, and willingness to be moral citizens dates to antiquity. Plato maintained it is during youth that elements of character are formed. Aristotle echoed this belief, adding that character is reinforced through practice. In more contemporary times, Thomas Jefferson argued that loyalty to democratic ideals must be impressed on children in their early years, and Theodore Roosevelt called for childhood education of intellect and morals. Though some consider character education to be primarily a parental responsibility, formal schooling and other societal entities have traditionally and willingly assumed an active role in the overall moral or character education of children.

Interest in teaching children good character endures; and, as research mounts supporting a positive correlation between teaching moral development and increased academic achievement (Viadero 2003; Berkowitz and Bier 2004; Benninga et al. 2006), attention to character education has become even more compelling. Whether called moral education, character education, peace education, or other permutations of this theme, educators continue to seek ways to respond to this need.

According to Ryan and Bohlin (1999, 95), character education is "the vehicle for both personal and societal development." With this in mind, consider various occurrences in recent history that have coalesced to further highlight the need to promote moral education in the schools. Recent examples include a spate of disreputable actions in the business community, scandals in the personal lives of public figures, and seemingly random acts of violence in society at large. Ignominious character traits such as greed, dishonesty, unfaithfulness, unscrupulousness, and irresponsibility have almost always contributed to displays of poor character. In a similar way, negative character traits are argu-

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Valeri R. Helterbran, a former teacher and principal, is currently an Associate Professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania where she teaches undergraduate and graduate students and coordinates the Master of Education program. Her interests include pedagogy, leadership issues, and lifelong learning. She is a member and former counselor of the Beta Gamma Chapter of Kappa Delta Pi.

ably central, or at least contributory, to patterns of global discord evidenced by terrorist acts, genocides, incidents of sectarian violence, and other instances of what poet Robert Burns lamented as "man's inhumanity to man."

Modifying and extending character education for the purpose of advancing global understanding and cooperation is often referred to as "global citizenship" (Davies 2006) and has become more widespread in light of the aforementioned and similar misfortunes of humankind. To that end, it has become increasingly apparent that the teaching of character education in schools may be a positive tool for finding ways to build unity, peace, and common ground among the peoples of the world.

The pursuit to develop character-driven, responsible, and humane citizens requires gazing beyond national borders with the essential questions posed: Will our students have the skills and attitudes necessary to live and work successfully in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world? Will our students embody the capacity to interact with others with sensitivity, tolerance, and respect?

The Role of Teachers

The core premise of character education involves the learning of those things taught by word or deed that encourage children to be good people (Lickona 1991; Robinson, Jones, and Hayes 2000; O'Sullivan 2004). A comprehensive approach to character education in schools is the preferred and recommended stratagem, preferably integrated with the school's curriculum, classroom management plan, provisions for parental involvement, and the like (Lamme 1996; Lickona 1999; Ryan and Bohlin 1999; Leming 2000; Berkowitz and Bier 2004). However, the current state of character education is better characterized by a limited common core of practice (Leming 1997); schools typically must decide individually or district-by-district how to approach the curriculum and instruction of moral education.

Classroom teachers are vitally important to the process of infusing desired character traits or dispositions in school-aged children. They are expected to "serve as positive role models, to seize opportunities to reflect on moral issues within the content of the curriculum, to create a moral classroom climate, and to provide students with opportunities outside of the classroom to practice good character through service programs, clubs, and peer tutoring" (Milson and Mehlig 2002, 47). Correspondingly, findings by Milson and Mehlig suggested that teachers consider themselves to be capable and confident in being role models students need and deserve, yet can benefit from assistance and advice in planning and infusing character education into the curriculum (Collins 1999).
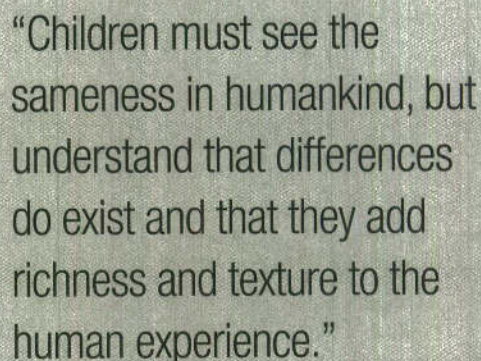
What to Teach

First and foremost, it is foundational to identify traits deemed "good" or "worthy" of learning. Dispositions associated with human decency and functioning effectively in a democratic society (Swick 2001) and the world at-large are many and varied. Kinnier, Kernes, and Dautheribes (2000) argued that the notion of universality can coexist within a framework of diversity. They proffered certain moral values considered acceptable by the majority of the world's people regardless of culture, religion, or national origin. Included are the Golden Rule (do unto others as you would have them do unto you), seeking truth(s), justice, self-respect, self-discipline, personal responsibility, respecting others, caring for the environment, and serving humankind. Equally important is the avoidance of selfishness, self-centeredness, and hurting others by word or deed. However, as a cautionary note, interpretations of these values vary widely depending on the group or individuals or cultures practicing them.

Additionally, if identified traits are to be taught effectively, it is equally necessary to seek differentiated instructional strategies designed to appeal to the learning styles and preferences of a variety of students, allowing them to draw and build on their knowledge and experience, as you would for lessons in other subject areas. In a carefully planned, student-centered environment, the use of inquiry, problem-solving, and self-awareness provide opportunities for students to make connections between the curriculum and their own lives. Tomlinson (2000, 8) succinctly summated, "Curriculum tells us *what* to teach: Differentiation tells us *how*." Using children's picture books in this regard offers teachers one method of how.

Why Use Children's Picture Books?

If teachers utilize character education as a pedagogical strategy to foster understanding domestically and internationally, it is crucial to design instruction aimed at motivating children and with which they can make reasonable connections in comparing or contrasting their own lives with those of others. Children must see the *sameness* in humankind, but understand that differences do exist and that they add richness and texture to the human experience. As observed by British author Aidan Chambers (cited in Tomlinson 1998, 3), "It is through literature that we most intimately enter the hearts and minds and spirits of other people. And what we value in this is the *difference* as well as the human similarities of others." There is no substitute for authentic human interaction and the development of relationships or concrete dialogues with others (Noddings 2005); naturally, this is not always possible or practical. Using picture books provides an avenue to simulate these experiences.

Children's picture books provide an ideal genre to integrate character education for global understanding. Because reading and language arts–related activities often consume an appreciable period of time daily in an elementary school, infusing this goal into day-to-day operations makes good sense, especially because using children's literature in varying forms is a time-honored and powerful way to teach character education (O'Sullivan 2002).

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Selecting Books

The careful selection of books is the first step in linking character education to global understanding. Ideal books exemplify most, if not all, of the following qualities:

- Children of different cultures, ethnicities, genders, races, or religions are featured in leading roles.
- Main characters are of a similar age (or slightly older) to the children in the classroom.
- Main characters are realistic enough for the reader to make reasonable personal connections.
- The storyline develops moral dilemmas or situations with which children can identify.
- Character traits viewed as admirable and universal are introduced, reinforced, compared, or contrasted.
- An emotional attachment develops where doing the right thing or making good choices is desired and hoped for by children.

Picture books can and do bring great joy to young children. Selecting books that "captivate young readers . . . enlighten, entertain, and move our students" (Ryan and Bohlin 1999, 102) is essential in forging the link between character development of self and in relationships with others—often distant others. Story characters are often

Table 1. Examples of Picture Books that Promote Global Understanding

Picture Books	Character Traits	Country/Culture
The Empty Pot, Demi	Honesty, Courage, Trustworthiness	China
Buffalo Woman, P. Gobel	Persistence, Courage, Love, Care for environment	Native American
Fire on the Mountain, J. Kurtz	Courage, Personal integrity, Endurance, Optimism	Ethiopia
A Carp for Kimiko, V. Kroll	Respect for tradition, Persistence, Independence	Japan
The Day Gogo Went to Vote, E. B. Sisulu	Determination, Citizenship, Responsibility	South Africa
The Princess and the Beggar, A. S. O'Brien	Empathy, Honor, Courage, Respect, Tolerance	Korea
The Fisherman and His Wife, R. Wells	Avoiding greed, Giving to another, Self-management	Norway
Koi and the Kola Nuts, V. Aardema	Independence, Courage, Generosity, Work ethic	Liberia

memorable and make lifelong impressions. Books selected for this purpose must be wonderful in their own right and instrumental in paving the way toward using higher reading and listening skills when chapter books are introduced in subsequent grade levels.

Many picture books embody the characteristics described here and are available from school and public libraries. Some suggested books are presented in Table 1.

Designing **Questions**

Designing specific questions to encourage children to think deeply about the characters and their situation or dilemma is a requisite next step. Elkind and Sweet (1997, 56) suggested a strategy called Socratic questioning:

In this time-honored technique, the teacher asks a series of questions that lead the students to examine the validity of an opinion or belief. This is a powerful teaching method because it actively engages the learner and forces critical thinking, which is just what is needed in examining ethics, values, and other character issues.

Depending on the character traits focused upon, questions could be designed to highlight similarities between the experiences of the characters and situations students have or may face. Alternately, teachers may choose to use scenario-oriented questions based on classroom, school, or current events to impart a more interdisciplinary approach. Regardless of the focus, it is absolutely and unequivocally important that questions

be planned in advance. Advanced planning helps guard against becoming ensnared in the common trap of limiting learning to literal meaning, character identification, setting, and other comprehension fundamentals. Rather, planning questions in advance focuses the character lesson and helps ensure that the specific character education intentions of the lesson are met.

For example, Demi's *The Empty Pot* (1990), tells the story of a young Chinese boy named Ping who acts honorably and tells the truth despite pressure to do otherwise. Personal character is built in this story by portraying honesty as its own reward and key to Ping's winning the Emperor's favor—and, therefore, the kingdom. Ping's honesty also serves as an object lesson to others in the story who failed in their quest as a result of their conniving and dishonest behaviors.

After reading *The Empty Pot* in class, suggested questions to pose may include:

Opening Question:
- What one word pops into your mind when you think about this story? (round robin)

Core Questions:
1. Describe Ping. How is he like you? How is he different?
2. Why did Ping feel shame and distress about his empty pot?
3. Did Ping's father give him good advice about his empty pot? Why or why not?

4. How were the other children able to grow flowers? Was this a wise decision?
5. What would you have done if you were Ping?

Closing Questions:
1. To choose the *next* Emperor, why do you think the Emperor selected a test of growing the best flowers?
2. How does this story apply to *your* life?

Follow-Up Writing Assignment:

What advice will the other parents give their children after the aging Emperor announces that Ping will be his successor?

Teachers undoubtedly will ask students questions as the story is read to ensure understanding of the plot and other conventions. The teacher also will likely ask additional questions for clarification purposes, coupled with the questions noted here, depending on the students' maturity, experience, and thinking skills. Conducting a Socratic discussion requires the use of exceptional listening, encouragement, and respecting skills by the teacher as well. Adding a writing assignment brings closure to the session by having children formalize their thinking, speaking, listening, and writing skills. Children who are pre-literate or unable to express their thoughts in writing may deliver their thoughts verbally. By engaging in this planned discussion, the teacher will encourage children to think critically about the consequences of certain actions and, in the process, highlight an important set of character traits (both positive and negative) and exemplify the universality of good character.

Conclusion

Character education has been part of the educational and societal landscape for millennia. Through consensus, school communities teach and model traits that influence the character and moral development of children. Children learn character traits from others—both good and bad—whether that is intended or not. To avoid leaving character education to chance, it behooves schools to actively plan for it by encouraging children's development as moral, decent persons and citizens of the world.

In this age of globalization, communication and transportation advances have made the world a seemingly smaller place to live. This adds impetus to energize and expand the traditional focus of character education endeavors to include development of admirable traits for the good of the individual, community, and nation. The concepts of civility, tolerance, and respect as the foci of

character education programs have outgrown the borders of individual countries and are now considered vital considerations in living cooperatively in a multicultural and international environment. Educators play a vital role in making this responsibility viable by honing their instruction in ways to build positive character in their students and to broaden character education to encompass a global focus.

To accomplish this, a good place to start is at the elementary school level. Through the use of children's picture books that depict children from all parts of the globe, students are able to see other children striving to be good people and good citizens in their native lands. Exploration and understanding of those commonalities shared between countries and cultures can be accomplished only through developing strategies that foster tolerance and respect, both key to living harmoniously in a diverse and interdependent world. ◼

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