Using Children’s Literature to Teach Character Education
in a Third Grade Classroom

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Abstract

Character education is a growing topic for today’s schools. As adults, and educators, it’s our responsibility to prepare students for adulthood by teaching them ethical citizenship through character education. Children’s literature engages students in stories that can connect to their own lives through their learned and/or personal experiences, called transactional theory. This study addresses how character education can be implemented into a third-grade classroom’s reading curriculum by using children’s literature and engaging students in discussions and writing responses. Through evaluating pre and post-surveys, discussions, writing responses, and a comprehension assessment it is evident that student growth in character education occurred. The use of children’s literature in a classroom can be an effective tool to teach reading comprehension strategies and character education.
Using Children’s Literature to Teach Character Education

in a Third Grade Classroom

Character education is the practice of teaching students important social and emotional behaviors and traits that in hopes of setting them up for a successful future. As a teacher, I find it important to not only teach third grade academic skills but to also help develop ethical citizenship within my students. I want them to understand the importance of being responsible and honest, know how to persevere when facing challenges, and how to show kindness and empathy for others. I want my students to succeed academically, but also socially, throughout their school career and beyond into adulthood.

Many states have adopted and implemented legislation in which character education is supported, encouraged, or even mandated (“Character Education Legislation,” n.d.). The state of Minnesota passed legislature in 2005 that urges schools to implement character education into their curriculum. “The legislature encourages districts to integrate or offer instruction on character education including, but not limited to, character qualities such as attentiveness, truthfulness, respect for authority, diligence, gratefulness, self-discipline, patience, forgiveness, respect for others, peacemaking, and resourcefulness” (Character Development Education, 2005). As a classroom teacher, I am expected to teach the state standards in order to promote success and achievement for my students. I am also asked to use certain curricula and teach skills valued by the city, district, and school.

I see the need for character education in my classroom. Many of my students struggle to keep track of assignments and materials, prioritize their responsibilities, persevere when learning gets tough, as well as show kindness and patience towards classmates and adults. I sense that students struggle to see the importance of these life skills. Therefore, I know I need to model and
teach why these characteristics and behaviors are important in the classroom, as well as in the real-world. Students in my classroom need authentic experiences to make connections between the learning objectives and their lives. My hope is that through this action research students will not only learn the meaning of important character traits, but also be able to see how they can be applied to their everyday lives in and out of the classroom.

Many might believe that ethical citizenship can be taught at home, by parents and families, which is possible. However, I know that often I see my students more than they see their own parents over the course of the school year. In addition, there are many students that feel school is their safe place, and they don’t want to be at home where they may face challenges of homelessness, limited food and resources, trauma, and/or dysfunctional relationships. In these instances, from whom are these students going to learn the characteristics of being an ethical citizen and adult? They learn these expectations at school, from me through established expectations and modeling, as well as their community of their peers. I need to be able to provide the support and guidance that not only teaches academics but also how to get along in the world, how to communicate and work with others, how to mindful of themselves and respect their own learning through being responsible, honest, and respectful.

As a third-grade teacher I am faced with the challenge of time. The importance of character education is evident, however finding the time to fit these important life-skills and learning into an already full school year of learning can be difficult. Each state has their own education standards for all subject areas and teachers are expected to teach them, and have students meet the expectations of those standards prior to end of the year state testing. I feel this pressure all year round, especially considering my students will be taking the standardized tests for the first time in their school career while in my classroom. I am often asked to add more
content, more activities, and more assessments to my curriculum in order to make learning more meaningful, effective, and meet the standards. However, there is no balance because as things are added, nothing is removed. I need to provide my students with academics to fit their needs, but also need to be able to support their social-emotional learning and experiences.

That brings me to reading stories. Kids love books. They may not all love to read, but I have yet to meet a student that doesn’t love hearing stories. Stories are an invitation to explore the world in which we live and opens a wide door to experiences, people, settings, and problems in which we can connect to and relate back to our own lives. There are countless stories that have been written and illustrated in which students of diverse backgrounds share their own stories, whether fictional or non-fiction. For these and more reasons, I want to use children’s literature to integrate character education with reading comprehension learning.

I feel that students do not fully engage with the stories read from the provided reading curriculum textbook. They want books they pull off a bookshelf; books they can explore the covers and pictures in a more easily accessed format. They want books in which they can connect to the characters, recognize or learn about the authors and illustrators, or books that they know they could read again by exploring the classroom, school, or public library. The students in my classroom enjoy read alouds and discussing texts. They often don’t realize that these stories I read are teaching them different skills, not just reading comprehension skills but also life skills. Through conversation around books, I feel my students will learn a great deal about character education as they see relatable characters face challenges and solve problems that may relate to situations in which they might experience in their own lifetime.

My reading curriculum and classroom routines already include time for a class read aloud at the start of the week. During the read aloud, we discuss the book and then throughout the week
we use the book, as well as other resources and stories, to practice and learn about different reading comprehension skills. Therefore, making an adjustment to find different read alouds that focus on a story in which I can teach a character education trait will be an easy change to our already well-established routines.

As a teacher, I am expected to teach my students all the standards in order to help make their futures successful. I am often asked to add more and more to my curriculum, classroom, and routines that at times I feel crunched for time, and valuable learning is sacrificed and no longer meaningful and authentic. I want my students to have learning opportunities that are engaging and relevant to their lives. Children’s literature is a resource that many students enjoy interacting with. Students love reading, and I want to foster an environment where students enjoy reading for enjoyment and not only because it is required. In addition, children’s literature is a great way to introduce students to stories and characters to which they can relate. When students read, they are welcomed in a world full of wonder and awe, or experience stories of the world in which they live which provides opportunities to make connections to their own lives. This brings me to my research question.

How can I, a mainstream third-grade teacher, integrate carefully selected children’s literature into my reading curriculum to teach character education and comprehension strategies?

**Literature Review**

**Character Education**

Character education is the opportunity for students to learn important values, morals, and traits that are revered in society and the communities in which students are citizens (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Students should have opportunities to see adults engaged in good character behavior, as well as discuss examples of characteristics valued by society. Some
of these characteristics include being kind, honest, fair, responsible, and being respectful (Edgington, 2002). Additional character traits include empathy, citizenship, cooperation, perseverance, and leadership. These character traits are often valued and deemed important by people from all backgrounds, regardless of religious or cultural differences (Almerico, 2014).

Learning about character has long been valued, since humans started teaching younger generations (Tsai & Agboola, 2012). In the United States, an honored education reformer, Horace Mann, once worked to include character education instruction as he understood the value and importance for students in classrooms across the nation. The reality is that students spend a lot of their time learning and growing in classrooms. Therefore, teachers and schools should provide opportunities that allow students to learn, discuss, and apply positive, and appropriate, behaviors socially, and within the community (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). The main goal for character education in schools is to provide examples of positive characteristics that members of the community employ. A second goal of character education “is to decrease problem behaviors and increase academic engagements in schools” (Tsai & Agboola, 2012).

From both a psychological and philosophical view, using effective pedagogy makes teaching character education possible. Teachers should encourage students to use positive traits while also modeling and reinforcing character in meaningful scenarios and applications (Tsai & Agboola, 2012). Schools across the country have begun to teach character education through different means. Some schools have adopted character education curriculum and purchased pre-made kits of resources to implement in schools (Edgington, 2002). There are a variety of other ways to implement character education in classrooms including using children’s literature as read alouds. The benefits of using children's literature and read alouds to teach character education include the fact that literature is easily accessible for all grade levels. In addition, the stories and
characters are relatable for students (Edgington, 2002) which makes the learning meaningful and engaging.

**Transactional Theory**

Ways of teaching reading have changed and developed since schools and learning began. Many noteworthy scholars have researched education and reading instruction existed for teachers and researchers alike to realize the importance of comprehension strategy instruction (Pressley & Allington, 2015). One researcher who contributed greatly to comprehension instruction was Louise Rosenblatt and her transactional theory. The main foundational position of transactional theory is that readers respond to texts, not only through comprehension strategies, but by also applying and considering their own personal experiences and background knowledge (Pressley & Allington, 2015). When readers respond to the texts in different ways, we consider their reactions a *transaction* between the reader and the text (Martinez, Yokota, Temple, 2017).

Readers create meaning from texts in different ways due to having their own personal experiences and thoughts (Raines, 2005). This way of reading is known as aesthetic reading (Raines, 2005), and can be an important strategy when teaching literature. Reading from an aesthetic stance is about the personal response and experience when interacting with a text. The way in which a reader understands a text is going to be different from reader to reader (Raines, 2005). Reading aesthetically helps build critical thinking skills (Raines, 2005) and reading critically is an important goal for twenty-first century readers (Martinez, Yokota, & Temple, 2017). For a teacher to foster an aesthetic reading stance in their classroom, they need to allow students the opportunities to converse with each other and discuss the texts that they are reading.

Through conversations, students are allowed to have differing perspectives which creates opportunities for debate and conversation. During these conversations students will use textual
evidence from their reading to support their reasons and discuss their points of view (Raines, 2005). These textural and personal connections create more meaningful and deeper comprehension of the text (Raines, 2005). In addition, students who partake in conversations about aesthetic reading understand see the value in others’ own thoughts and understandings as they contribute to their own learning (Raines, 2005). Galda (2013) states that an important aspect of reading is allowing students an opportunity to first understand a text on their own, using their own background knowledge. This is vital before any other learning about the text can occur. The transactional approach to instruction embraces the idea that students interpret meanings of a text differently due to different personal experiences and prior knowledge. “Students are taught that part of the joy of reading is sharing these differences” (Pressley & Beard-Dinary, 1992 p. 525). Students’ experiences are pieces of who they are and that contributes to their meaning-making of a text while also considering the thoughts and ideas from other readers (Galda, 2013). Students learn to listen to each other and respect each other’s opinions and thoughts when they are allowed opportunities to discuss in an environment which fosters positive interactions with classmates and texts.

Transactional theory is about how students interact with a text, but is also about how teachers respond to students. Through discussions around a text with students, a teacher’s reaction and instruction will change depending upon how the students are responding and engaging in the conversation (Pressley & Allington, 2015). Teachers will address the needs and make adaptations throughout the text to expand upon or help develop student knowledge, understanding, and application of strategies. Transactional theory allows students to realize that a teacher’s connection to a text is not the one true interpretation and right answer (Raines, 2005).
While teachers are there to guide and support, students also realize that they can have their own opinions of a text which creates engagement and students find enjoyment from reading.

An important aspect of transactional theory are student conversations, but also that teachers use direct strategy instruction to provide learning opportunities for how to comprehend texts. Students use background knowledge to make meaning of a text, but also apply various comprehension strategies in order to understand and interpret what they’ve read. In a classroom, a teacher will instruct, model, and guide students through different strategies that aid in the understanding of texts. The teacher encourages students to use these strategies, as well as their own knowledge and experiences, to make connections and make meaning of a text (Galda 2013).

In order for students to make connections to a text and improve comprehension, an important process of reading, students need to access and activate their prior knowledge (Morrison & Wlodarczyk, 2009).

Reading is social. One of the great joys of reading is that there is not one right interpretation of a text. Students are provided an opportunity to see the world when they are encouraged to voice their interpretations and understandings of a text based upon their own experiences (Galda 2013). Morrison and Wlodarczyk (2009) state that social interaction with a text through discussion allows collaboration, and the opportunity to see different perspectives, which contributes to cognitive growth. Literature holds so much power that enables students to learn and grow. Sharing and discussion “allows us the opportunity for transformation, for a shaping and reshaping of how we view ourselves and the world around us” (Galda, 2013, p.11).

**Children’s Literature and Read Alouds**

Read alouds refer to the method in which a teacher reads a text aloud to students. There are many benefits for children who are read aloud to. Some benefits include vocabulary
progression and increased comprehension (Morrison & Wlodarczyk, 2009). In addition, reading aloud to children provides opportunities to introduce high quality literature and introduce students to different genres. Reading aloud helps students learn the value of literature as well as creates motivation to pick up a book and read (Martinez, Yokota, & Temple, 2017). Throughout the read aloud a teacher can engage students in questioning, discussion, and modeling the use of comprehension strategies (Serafini & Moses, 2014).

While teachers want to allow students to make their own connections and have personal responses to literature, teachers also are expected to teach students how to read texts for understanding. Goals of teachers include fostering environments to make personal connections to texts, but also teaching students to read deeply for understanding, read critically, and identify the structure of texts in order to better comprehend (Martinez, Yokota, Temple, 2017). Using children’s literature is an excellent way to teach these important skills.

Teachers facilitate learning by selecting important targets and deciding when to teach them, while allowing opportunities for collaboration and sharing (Almerico, 2013). Many states have established standards or adopted the Common Core State Standards Initiative to outline and guide schools and educators to ensure all students would be successful beyond high school graduation. These standards set goals as to what students should be able to do at the end of each grade level in core subjects (College- and Career-Ready Standards). English language arts standards set expectations to ways in which students should be able to demonstrate their understanding of a text through identifying details and main ideas to an integration of knowledge and ideas from texts (Martinez, Yokoto, Temple, 2017). These standards often require students to read deeply into a text in order to make meaning and comprehend.
As a facilitator it is important that teachers share literature that is interesting and exciting for students while also being of great quality. In addition, the literature children are exposed to should be meaningful and relevant, as well as have a purpose when used in the classroom (Serafini, 2011). Read alouds create motivation because they provide an opportunity to expose students to different genres, some in which students may struggle to independently read due to the complexity and sophistication, but otherwise might enjoy (Serafini, 2011; Serafini & Moses, 2014).

Teachers are often provided with curriculum materials and resources which can guide their instruction. However, ultimately, teachers decide what they want to use in their classroom to instruct students. It’s important that teachers consider (Serafini, 2011). Serafini simply states in *Creating Space for Children’s Literature* (2011), “Not every lesson provided in a core program is effective for our students, and to simply follow the demands of a commercial scope and sequence is to give up our responsibility as teachers and as advocates for our students” (p. 32).

Teachers can create personalized learning experiences for students by selecting read alouds that are challenging, interactive, and with the goal for students to make meaningful connections to texts that draw upon real-world experiences (Almerico, 2013). Using read alouds in this nature allows readers to experience and know the world in which they live and can bring literature to life (Serafini, 2011). This occurs when the books students read or listen to include opportunities in which they see themselves in the characters, often called “mirrors,” as they encounter various situations. From there, the students are then able to make important, text-to-self connections, and prompt emotional, unique responses to the text (Almerico, 2013).

Read alouds also teach knowledge about the real-world that is important for student success (Martinez, Yokota, & Temple, 2017). They are a great avenue to which students can
experience and explore, through a window, the world (Serafini & Moses, 2014). Reading aloud high-quality children’s literature provides an easy way to teach, promote, model and connect to character education. Through illustrations and story plot, students relate to the characters. These connections help students understand difficult concepts, especially character education (Tsai & Agboola, 2012). By experiencing situations through characters in books, students can learn about empathy and make meaning of their own personal lives (Serafini & Moses, 2014). Galda (2013) said, “if we support readers as they read aesthetically… and allow them time to think, write, and talk about their experiences, reading a powerful book can become an event that might just change the world, one reader at a time” (p. 12).

In conclusion, character education is an important component of a school’s curriculum. It’s essential for adults to demonstrate and educate children about ideal characteristics citizens employ in their daily lives. One way to do this is through using children’s literature. Children’s literature can be a powerful tool as it introduces students the world in which they live through characters and stories they can relate and make connections. Read alouds with high quality children’s literature create an authentic experience through social discussions and interactions with the text, transactional theory. Transactional theory allows students to incorporate their own personal experiences and knowledge in order to make meaning of a text. Sharing their own connections and understandings of a text creates learning opportunities for all, as students learn about their world.

**Methods**

The purpose of this action research study was to determine how children’s literature can be used to teach character education and comprehension strategies. Character education is important for students to learn as they continue to learn and grow towards adulthood.
Transactional theory supports using children’s literature as a way to provide authentic and meaningful interactions with a text as students connect the stories and characters to their own experiences and learning.

**Setting and Participants**

Between February and April of 2019, I collected data from a third-grade classroom. In a small rural town about fifty miles south of a large Midwestern metropolitan city, Crater Elementary (pseudonym) enrolls 505 students in K-5 classes. Of these students, 94.3% are White/Non-Hispanic, 2.2% Hispanic or Latino, 2.0% are two or more races, 1.0% Asian, 0.4% Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 0.2% Black or African American. Of these students there are 14% in special education programs and 27% receive free or reduced lunch prices.

The third-grade classroom was composed of 21 students, ranging in ages from eight to ten years old. There were twelve male students and nine female students. Two students received special education services for a learning disability in reading. These two students left the classroom for 25-minute small group instruction with the Special Education teacher and received occasional in-class support from an education assistant throughout the school-day. Three other students received a 25-minute daily reading intervention from the RTI, response to intervention, team and instructors. The RTI team is composed of four teachers and multiple education assistances. The small group reading intervention can vary and depends upon student needs. The needs are based upon a benchmark reading assessment that is given three times a year. Depending on needs, students who are not receiving special education services will receive a phonics, fluency, or combination interventions.

In addition, three students worked with the school’s behavior interventionist. The role of the behavior interventionist was to support the classroom teacher as well as work with individual
students for twenty-minute sessions three times a week. The students she served are students who do not already receive special education support but are working on social skills, stress management, hyperactive and disruptive behaviors, and more.

For the purpose of the study, each student in the class was randomly assigned a number. The study will refer to the students based upon their number (Table 1).

Table 1

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<tr>
<th>Student Number</th>
<th>Gender, age</th>
<th>Additional Information</th>
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Materials and Procedures

I designed the action research study to replace one unit of the third-grade's reading curriculum. The reading curriculum resource, Journeys (2014), was provided to the teachers by the school and purchased from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in 2015. Using the provided curriculum, our third-grade team of teachers and myself outlined a scope and sequence in order
to ensure we all teach the same skills at the same time. It is up to the discretion of the classroom teacher what resources they use; however, they need to ensure they are meeting the standards outlined in the scope and sequence. For this study I choose to replace the Journeys curriculum unit four stories with children’s literature that would teach both comprehension strategies and character education.

Each week of the unit, a new carefully chosen piece of children’s literature was read aloud. Through Google and Pinterest searches, using key words like character education, children’s literature, and specific traits, I was able to find numerous books that pertained to each character trait in the unit. After identifying possible titles, I visited the local library or searched my own classroom library to read and evaluate the texts. From there, I selected one text that also could be used to teach a comprehension strategy as outlined by the scope and sequence.

After I selected the texts, each week’s lesson plans were similar in structure. The week began with the read aloud, which focused on teaching one of the character traits as chosen based upon the text and comprehension strategy. Then over the course of the week, the children’s book was the center of all lessons, conversations, and writing activities. Conversations and writing provided opportunities for students to share connections they made to the text, and examples of the character trait as read in the story. In addition, students discussed how the story and character trait pertained to their own lives and how they can use the trait to be successful in the classroom, at home, and the community in which they live.

As students learned about a new comprehension skill, they also completed a graphic organizer to outline their thoughts and understanding of each story. Comprehension strategies, vocabulary, and grammar lessons were also included throughout the week. This study’s focus was on teaching comprehension along with the character education, therefore the grammar and
vocabulary aspects will not be evaluated or discussed in this study. Some weeks, a second book would be read aloud later in the week and students would compare the two texts through discussion or a Venn diagram. See Appendix A for an overview of the unit including character trait, selected children’s literature, and aligned Common Core State Standards.

**Data Collection**

Students first completed a survey about character education (Appendix B). This survey was designed to measure growth and learning in ethical citizenship and to address the character education portion of my research question. This survey has not been tested for reliability, however I created it based upon other similar reliable measures. In the survey, students defined or gave an example of the different character education traits on the first part of the survey. This section was designed to address the meanings and student understanding of specific traits. In the second part of the survey, students rated themselves on how often they exhibited qualities or behaviors specific to the five focus character traits of the study. At the conclusion of the character education unit, students completed the survey for a second time.

In addition to the survey, students responded verbally to discussion questions and through writing with given prompts (Appendix C). I collected the writing responses and made audio recordings of class discussions as students shared their ideas and connections they made to the texts. Throughout each week’s lessons, students responded to various writing prompts that connected to the character trait of the week, and/or the children’s literature text. Some writing prompts asked students to specifically reflect upon their own lives and give instances in which they exhibited the character trait, or instances in which someone they know exhibited the trait. Another type of response was creative writing in which students would write a poem or create a fictional story in which it contained examples and ‘what-if’ scenarios. Often, the writing prompt
was chosen to encourage students to dig deep and evaluate how they act and examples of good character that they see in their own lives. Some prompts even included opportunities to connect to the week’s chosen piece of literature, and how they can apply what they’ve learned from the story to their own lives.

The last source of data is from the school’s reading curriculum, Journeys (2014). One goal of this study is to align the character traits unit with the skills of the scope and sequence created for the grade level. At the end of each unit in Journeys, students take a unit test which assesses their comprehension by applying strategies, taught throughout the unit, to understand a grade-level passage (Appendix E). The purpose of this assessment is to measure student success applying comprehension strategies to any grade-level text.

This test is set up in various sections, with each section containing a reading passage followed by a set of questions. It is a distal measure of their understanding and application of the comprehension strategies. For the purpose of this study, only one section of the unit test was analyzed to address student understanding and learning of comprehension strategies. The comprehension assessment includes a total of 18 questions but only 5 questions are analyzed for this study. These five questions were aligned specifically to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts – Literature.

**Findings and Results**

To address the research questions about how to teacher character education and comprehension strategies using children’s literature, various methods to collect data were used in this study. Students completed pre and post surveys to demonstrate their learning about character education (Appendix B). In addition, they responded verbally to discussion questions, and wrote responses to writing prompts throughout the research period (Appendix D). Finally, students
completed the Journeys (2014) benchmark assessment (Appendix E) and results are analyzed for student learning of comprehension strategies. I will discuss results and findings of each data source below.

**Surveys**

Results from the survey are analyzed in two different formats. Students first responded to open-ended questions by providing definitions or examples of specific character education traits. In the second part of the survey, students rated themselves on a three-point scale for how often they engage in different behaviors and actions. The students have had previous exposure to similar response styles throughout the school year and had previously been modeled for clarity. The rating scale prompts are aligned to the specific traits studied in the character education unit (Appendix C).

**Open-ended response questions.** Students provided a character education definition on four of the open-ended survey questions. The first question asked students, “What is good character?” Responses varied on the pre-survey with 31% of students stating it means to be “nice” and 12% responding that they didn’t know what it meant (Figure 1). On the post-survey, these responses dropped to 12% and 0%, respectively. On both the pre-survey and post-survey, approximately 15% of responses contained references to fictional characters in books or good acting in movies or TV shows. The biggest change from the pre-survey to the post-survey was with responses containing one of the five character education traits studied in this action research. On the pre-survey, 19% of the responses contained one of the traits, and all listed “kindness” as meaning “good character.” On the post-survey, 59% of responses contained one of the five character traits; kindness, honesty, perseverance, gratitude, and/or responsibility. This
was the highest percentage on the post-survey and the category with the biggest change from before to after.

*Figure 1. What is Good Character? Survey Responses. Student responses on the pre and post-survey.*

Half of the class was able to define honesty with 55% of responses on the pre-survey containing “tells the truth” and/or “doesn’t lie” (Figure 2). This response jumped to 72% on the post-survey. Other responses included stating an honest person is “nice,” “caring,” and/or “kind.” This response decreased from 18% on the pre-survey to 12% on the post-survey. 9% of students did not know the meaning of honesty on the pre-survey. This response decreased to 0% on the post-survey, while “trustworthiness” increased from 0% on the pre-survey to 8% on the post-survey.
Figure 2. What is your Definition of an Honest Person? Student responses on the pre and post-survey.

On the third question, students defined gratitude. Initially 40% of the students did not know what gratitude meant (Figure 3). This decreased to 14% of responses on the post-survey. There was a substantial increase in responses that included “grateful” or “thankful” from 20% on the pre-survey to 38% on the post-survey. About 20% of students on the pre and post-survey stated that gratitude meant being “respectful,” “kind,” and/or “nice.” Interesting responses on both surveys were those that stated gratitude meant having a “good attitude,” and both surveys had about 10% of these responses. The “other” response category contained definitions of “being helpful” or having “perseverance.”
Figure 3. What does Gratitude Mean? Student responses on the pre and post-survey.

Of all open-ended responses on the survey, defining perseverance had the biggest change for “I don’t know” responses. Initially, 90% of students did not know what perseverance meant (Figure 4). However, on the post-survey, all students were able to provide some variation of a definition. On the post survey, the most popular response was “don’t give up,” (65% of responses). Additional responses included “working hard” and/or “keep trying”, 17%, and “believing in yourself” and/or “doing your best,” 9%.
Figure 4. What is Perseverance? Student responses on the pre and post-survey.

For the remaining open-response questions, students were asked to give an example of someone showing kindness and being responsible. When giving examples of kindness, “helping someone” was the response 36% on the pre-survey and 57% on the post-survey (Figure 5). On both surveys, about 20% of responses gave examples including “being nice,” “being respectful,” and/or “caring about others” (Figure 5 and Figure 6). Responses for kindness “I don’t know” examples, decreased to 0% on the post-survey from 14% on the pre-survey.

Figure 5. How can Someone Show Kindness? Student responses on the pre and post-survey.
Figure 6. Give an Example of Being Responsible. Student responses on the pre and post-survey.

Rating scale. The second portion of the survey students rated themselves using a three-point scale. The scale corresponds to how often they believe they engage in a behavior or thought. A score of 3 indicates “always,” 2 “sometimes,” and a 1 denotes “never.” The twenty behaviors and thoughts chosen for the survey are features of one of the character traits of focus: perseverance, gratitude, honesty, kindness, and/or responsibility (Appendix B).

From the pre-survey to the post-survey, the class average increased by 0.15 points, changing from 2.39 to 2.54. Much of the class increased their scores from the pre-survey to the post-survey with increases ranging from 0.02 points to 1.15 points (Figure 7). Six student averages decreased from the initial survey. The decreases were not drastic, with the largest by only 0.2 points. There were three students who showed no change from the pre to post-survey.
When looking at the rating scores by character trait (Figure 8), all traits saw an increase in average score. The largest increase was honesty, which increased by 0.26 points. The smallest increase was perseverance, which saw an increase of only 0.04 points from the pre-survey to the post-survey. The specific actions students rated can be seen in Figure 8, which is sorted by character education trait.

Figure 7. Rating Scale Averages. Pre and post-survey rating scale averages by student.

Figure 8. Average Rating by Character Trait. Pre and post-survey rating scale results by trait.
Writing Prompts and Discussions

The structure of each week of lessons were similar in design. The first lesson of the week included a read aloud and discussion. In the following lessons, students completed graphic organizers, either independently or as a whole-class, to practice and apply the comprehension strategy taught using the selected children’s literature text. They also engaged in more discussions and responded in writing to provided prompts which allowed opportunities for students to make connections to the text and to their own experiences.

Kindness. On the first writing prompt, students shared how they think acts of kindness make others feel. In addition, the prompt asked how they feel when they do show kindness to others. One interesting response found in their writing was the thought that being kind would earn a reward such as “pizza, Subway, or prizes.” Despite this, most responses had a common theme being that kindness made people feel happy, both the receiver and the giver of kind acts. Student 9’s writing response included this personal experience, “I think they feel good because it’s a compliment, it makes me feel good that they’re feeling good. I know that because at a basketball tournament I said hi to a girl from another team. On my way walking to the gym her and her parents were behind me. She said, “Hey I saw that girl in the bathroom. She said hi to me and was very nice!”

The next writing prompt connected to the read aloud, Enemy Pie. The story is about a boy that wants to get rid of his enemy so he can have the best summer ever. In the writing, students described how they would try to change a school bully’s actions by convincing them to be kind. Responses on this writing varied, but many discussed how showing kindness towards others will help the bully make more friends. This response was similar to the events in the story, as the main character showed kindness and ended up gaining a friend. Student 19’s writing included
belief in the bully’s ability to change by writing, “If you change you will have more friends. Please change. I know you can.” Another student’s writing was an attempt to bribe the bully to be more kind. Student 11 wrote, “I have a challenge for you. If you are nice for a week, I will give you a candy bar.” There were additional writing responses that included thoughts about earning rewards for being kind. Such as, Student 11’s writing which stated, “If you be good you earn things like pizza parties.”

On the final kindness writing prompt students completed the thought, “Kindness matters because…” A few students mentioned how without kindness, everyone would be mean and being mean isn’t fun. In addition, some talked about how the world and life can be so much better with kindness. Two students discussed the consequences, or sometimes rewards, depending on how kind you are to others. Student 13 wrote, “You might even get to dig in the prize box!” While Student 18 wrote, “If you’re not nice you can get in serious trouble … and your parents will be really mad.”

There were a few students who also wrote about how showing kindness can spread from person to person, and eventually through the whole city and/or world. This response connected directly with the second read aloud, Be Kind. Pat Zietlow Miller wrote a beautiful piece of children’s literature about a girl who tries to discover what being kind truly means. As the character explores the meaning of kindness, and what kindness looks like, she realizes that perhaps just one person being kind can help start the spread of kindness all over the world.

While connections to personal experiences, and the texts were seen in their writing, they were not evident in their discussions about kindness. The discussions focused on analyzing the text, with minimal connections to self, world, or other texts. Students found the theme of good character within the children’s literature. The discussion of Enemy Pie resulted in students
realizing that kindness can help build friendship and make new friends. This is one connection that was found in their writing as well. Additional discussions of the story included determining the steps that the main character took to try and solve his problem and get rid of his enemy.

**Perseverance.** Using *The Most Magnificent Thing* by Ashley Spires as the first read aloud helped students see perseverance in action. In this story, a young girl and her sidekick, her dog, try to make the most magnificent thing. After many failed attempts, the young girl wants to give up, but with the help of her dog, she realizes what is going to finally make her invention successful. The conversations and writing activities that followed the read aloud gave additional opportunities to think, write, and speak about perseverance and how it pertains to their lives. These opportunities helped students make an important realization when *Rosie Revere, Engineer* by Andrea Beaty was read aloud.

Students discussed how Rosie, the main character, persevered in the story and was finally successful after many attempts. When discussing the story, they didn’t come right out and say she persevered, but they gave examples like “she didn’t give up,” and “she kept trying.” In addition, students were able to compare the two texts and noticed many similarities between the two girls and their experiences. First, they noticed that both main characters were inventors. In addition, Student 13 made the connection that, “both girls were laughed at.” They also noticed that both girls had someone help them through their challenges.

The first perseverance writing prompt asked students to think about a challenge in which they failed. Reasons students gave up on challenges included, “my idea didn’t work (Student 5),” “the game made me mad (Student 20),” and “because my friend was not playing the right way. She cheated (Student 21).” On the second part of the writing, students shared things that helped them succeed on a different challenge and not give up. Student 11 wrote, “I had to get it done so
I kept trying.” Other responses included, “My teacher found out and said I believe in you (Student 8)” and “Everyone was cheering me on and I just kept on going as far as I could (Student 5).”

As a part of learning about perseverance, students need to find strategies to help them appropriately handle their frustrations. One of the lessons during the week of perseverance included having students make a spinner that listed various ways to take a break and pause before continuing with a challenge. For the writing piece of the activity, students were asked to make a list of different strategies or things they can do when they become frustrated with a challenge. The three students that work with the behavior specialist have been working on these strategies all year. All three of these students listed taking deep breaths as their first strategy. In addition, two of them mentioned taking a break in the behavior specialist's classroom, which is often something they do when she is available. As a whole class, many students also included taking breaths or going for a walk. Student 13 and Student 16 were the only two students that mentioned asking someone for help. While Student 19’s method of handling frustrations is to read a book. A couple of students, Student 11 and 2, added playing a game to their list of ways to take a break.

The last writing prompt students completed for perseverance was, “What does perseverance mean to you? Why is it important to persevere when things get tough?” A common theme to define perseverance included “not giving up” on something. Many students also included “working hard to achieve goals,” or some variation, in their responses. Student 9 and 10 described that failure only occurs when you give up on something. Other students related perseverance to success at school. Student 13 stated, “If you give up on a math worksheet you
won’t get a good grade.” While Student 15 took this prompt as an opportunity to write that perseverance is “a good motto.”

**Responsibility.** Responsibility was introduced after reading *What If Everybody Did That?* by Ellen Javernick. This book made responsibility relatable and it was an enjoyable read aloud. The story begins by having one boy do something he shouldn’t, like throw a snowball at school. The next illustration shows what might happen if everybody did that. The book goes through a whole list of different situations including, feeding animals at the zoo, throwing garbage on the ground, not taking a care of items like coat, snow pants, and boots, as well as standing up on the school bus. The story was silly at times, but it really did a nice job of showing students what might happen if everyone did that. As part of the first lesson after reading the story, students completed their own illustrations depicting what something might look like if everybody did it. In addition, after reading the story, the definition of responsibility was discussed. The word “dependable” became a topic of conversation with what the word means and how it relates to responsibility. Students initially had a difficult time with understanding how to define responsibility. After our conversation, the word dependable came up a few times in their writing about responsibility. This story demonstrated real-world consequences of not being responsible.

On the first writing prompt, students composed a list of things they are responsible for at school, at home, and in the community. The top three categories of things to be responsible for at school included the classroom morning routine, completing assignments, and following directions and rules. Other popular responses included writing names on paper and keeping track of their personal items for example; bringing their school iPad each day and making sure papers get put into folders. At home the most mentioned that their responsibility is cleaning, which
includes doing dishes, taking out the garbage, and cleaning their bedroom. Another popular answer was caring for pets by cleaning up after them or letting them outside and feeding them. Four students listed homework as a responsibility at home. Within the community students mostly discussed picking up trash and recycling, as well as walking on the sidewalk. This response needed some support when they were writing. It was discussed as a whole class with examples and sharing ideas to help stimulate the writing process. Additional responses included listening to the police and staying safe.

On the next section of the same writing prompt, students were asked about the importance and the benefits of being responsible. Many students commented that it’s important to have responsibilities now, so that they are prepared for when they are an adult and their parents aren’t there to help. Other responses included keeping their homes and spaces clean as well maintaining safety in the community and at school. Some students wrote about earning rewards for being responsible. Some rewards they mentioned included money from completing chores, prizes, and good grades at school. While the latter can also be considered a positive benefit, it is also something earned, therefore a reward for hard work and responsibility.

The final writing prompt for responsibility gave a what-if scenario. Students had to choose between completing the assigned math homework or going to their friend's house to play a new game they just received. Students also explained their choice and any consequences that might occur. Out of the seventeen students that completed this writing activity, fifteen chose to do their homework in some way. Of those fifteen, seven planned to either complete their homework first and then go to their friend's house, or complete their homework at their friend’s house before they play. Five of the twelve students decided to just go home and complete the homework, because as Student 7 wrote, “homework is more important.” While three decided to
go to their friend's house first and then leave early to do their homework. They “wouldn’t want
to disappoint (Student 18)” their friend by not going to their house. That leaves two students who
chose not to do their homework and to just go play with their friend instead. Student 2 wrote that
he would “get in trouble and go to my friend’s house to play video games and stay up all night.”
He also went on to explain consequences of his actions commenting, that he would be “expelled
and [can then] play video games.”

Through conversations students were able to make cause and effect connections between
the irresponsible choices the boy made and the consequences if everybody did the same thing.
Over the succession of lessons, students retained and remembered the purpose and gist of the
story. When asked to describe the story, about two days after the initial read aloud, Student 14
stated that the story was about “a boy who makes trouble and then they show what if everybody
did that.” Not only was this story used to teach responsibility, but also using a cause and effect
strategy to comprehend a text. Students completed a graphic organizer selecting four cause and
effect relationships from the text. Prior to students completing independently, we discussed some
possibilities and did an example together as a class.

The second book read aloud was *The Paperboy* by Dav Pilkey. In this story a young boy
wakes up early, before the sun rises, to deliver papers to his neighborhood. Originally the lesson
was planned to discuss sequence of events however a nice conversation about making inferences
occurred. In the beginning of the story, the boy and his dog wake up and have breakfast. The
words in the story state that only the boy has breakfast but when looking at the illustrations, the
students noticed that the dog was also eating. While discussing the sequence of events, students
stated that the first things that happened in the story were that the boy woke up and then had
breakfast.
As the conversation moved to what happened after breakfast, Student 13 stated, “he folds the newspapers and puts them in his bag.” In the middle of her statement, Student 6 can be heard in the background stating, “No, no. He fed the dog next!” I heard him state this and after we added Student 13’s statement to the sequence of events graphic organizer, we had a conversation about who fed the dog. I asked, “How do we know he fed the dog? I don’t remember reading about that in the story.” Student 8 chimed in and said, “But he’s eating at the same time as the boy!” Students were unable to explain how they knew the boy fed him, so I helped explain the strategies they were using to understand the story. We discussed that they used what they knew from the story (the boy ate breakfast), what we saw in the illustrations (the dog was also eating), and we know about pets (humans provide food to dogs) to make an inference that the boy fed the dog.

**Gratitude.** On the first day studying gratitude, *Last Stop on Market Street* was the read aloud. In this story a boy and his grandmother take a city bus to a soup kitchen, where they volunteer their time. On the way, the boy wishes for material things, but his grandmother helps him see the beauty of the world and appreciate the things he is so lucky to have. As this book was read aloud, we paused to make predictions about what might happen next. For many students this was their first time learning about soup kitchens. Crater Elementary is in a small rural community, that has a food shelf but not a soup kitchen. Throughout the story students get a glimpse of the boy and his grandma and learn that they don’t have everything they want in life, like a car or a music listening device, but they have all the things they need. We paused reading when the boy and his grandma go to the soup kitchen and discussed what a soup kitchen is and predicted why the boy and his grandma might be going there.
Some students were discussing and mentioning that they thought a soup kitchen was, “a restaurant that sells soup (Student 16),” “where people go when they’re sick (Student 20),” and “a kitchen that cooks a lot of different soups (Student 9).” The moment I explained exactly what a soup kitchen is, Student 9’s face lit up as she was predicting and making inferences about the story. Her face immediately dropped, and was sad, as she softly mentioned, “They don’t have that much money.” At the same moment, Student 15 announces loudly to the class, “They’re homeless!” Collectively in the classroom, students predicted that the boy and his grandma attended the soup kitchen to eat because they couldn’t afford a meal at a restaurant. I continued reading. The story goes on to show that the boy and his grandma actually volunteer at the soup kitchen to help those in need; they are not there to eat. When this was revealed to the class, there was a collective sigh of relief and happiness when they realized the boy and his family were not struggling to find food, but instead were doing their part to help others.

After reading and discussing *Last Stop on Market Street*, students wrote about what they are most thankful for and why. Most students (63%) wrote about being thankful for their family and/or their homes. Student 9 writes, “I am thankful for my family...because they help me be a better person every day.” Two students mention being thankful for the ability to go to school and for their teachers. Other things students are thankful for include their friends, pets, and toys. Student 8 is thankful for “my semi [toy truck] because it reminds me of the best person I know, my neighbor Bob. He died of cancer.” On many occasions this year, Student 8 has mentioned how close he was to his neighbor and the items he now owns that help retain memories of him, and one of those items is the toy semi-truck.

**Honesty.** To align with the scope and sequence and Common Core State Standards, the unit needed to include a fable. For honesty, the first read aloud was *The Boy Who Cried Wolf.*
This was read aloud and discussed the first day. Then, students practiced throughout the week a collection of different reader theater’s scripts. As a way to help students learn about the different structures of stories, specifically plays, readers theaters was a great addition to the honesty unit. One group practice and preformed *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*. Another group worked on *The Empty Pot*, which is a Chinese folktale about an emperor who is need of a replacement. A few boys receive a seed and are expected to grow and care for the plant. However, all but one boy, falsify the results and cheat. The one boy who returns with a plant that did not grow, became the new emperor. The last group read *George Washington and the Cherry Tree*. In this myth, George Washington makes a mistake and despite his father being very upset and angry, George is honest and tells the truth.

For the first writing prompt, students wrote about what trust means and listed someone they trusted and why. Most students mentioned that trust means someone doesn’t lie, or it’s someone you believe in or can depend on. Student 5 wrote, “Trust can build friendships.” As for who the students trusted, most students listed friends or family as people they trusted the most. Two students said, “nobody” and Student 6 explained, “because I just don’t.” Reasons students listed for why they trust this person are very similar in responses to what trust means, they’re truthful and dependable. Student 18 commented, “A good friend tells the truth.”

The second day of honesty, *The Honest to Goodness Truth* was the read aloud book. In this story, a young girl learns a lesson about honesty after she makes a vow to never lie again. She realizes that sometimes telling the truth can be hurtful, so it’s important to be mindful of the way in which you tell the truth. Many students agreed with each other in that if the girl was never caught in her lie, she would have continued to lie. In the discussion, Student 14 mentioned, “She wouldn’t know what she did wrong, so she would keep on doing it.” Students also discussed if
lying or telling the truth was easier. Student 18 thought that the telling the truth was easier, “because you might get in trouble if you lie, so you should just tell the truth.” Many students agree with Student 18, however Student 10 had a differing opinion. He shared that both are easy because “If you tell the truth and it’s mean, they might not like you. But if you tell a lie they might feel better about themselves.” Student 10 went on to explain that sometimes telling the truth can be hurtful, even when you don’t intend to, so that keeping things a secret, or lying might be the better way to interact with friends.

As a writing activity following the discussion, students responded to the following quote from the book, “Sometimes the truth can be told at the wrong time, or in the wrong way, or for the wrong reasons. And that can be hurtful.” Student 8 wrote, “When you tell, it is hurtful when you say it rude.” Student 13 relates the quote to an important example of telling the truth but in front of the wrong crowd of people, “[When] you blurt it out in front of the whole class, it might not be okay for the other person. They might be embarrassed.”

Through writing and discussions students had multiple opportunities to share their ideas, make connections, and respond to the stories. Some responded by connecting the read alouds to personal experiences. Students were even discussed differing opinions in response to posed questions. During this study students were engaged in transactional theory through the various opportunities to connect their personal and learned experiences to the texts.

**Comprehension Assessment**

The comprehension assessment scores are outlined in Table 6. Seven questions were selected from the eighteen-question unit assessment to analyze. These seven questions are also aligned to Common Core State Standards for Third Grade English Language Arts in Literature. Only two standards were assessed on the unit test, and they were RL 3.2 with two questions, and
RL 3.5 with five questions. RL 3.2 states that all third-grade students should be able to “recount stories, including fables, folktales, and myths from diverse cultures; determine the central message, lesson, or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text (Common Core State Standards Initiative). Common Core State Standards Initiative RL 3.5 expects third grade students to “refer to parts of stories, dramas, and poems when writing or speaking about a text, using terms such as chapter, scene, and stanza; describe how each successive part builds on earlier sections.”

The class average on the seven comprehension questions was 54.5%. The highest student score on the assessment was 86% while the lowest score was 14%. The class averages for each question can be seen in Table 6, as well as individual student scores. Three questions had an average of 55%, two questions with an average of 60%, and the last two questions had an average of 45% and 35%. The last two questions of the assessment earned the two lowest averages. Questions aligned to RL 3.5 had a class average of 50% while RL 3.2 questions had an average of 55%. Note that Student 12 is not included in the table. Per this student’s Individual Education Plan (IEP), they are not to take the benchmark unit assessments as the passages are above their reading level.

Table 6

Student Results Comprehension Assessment

<table>
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<th>Assessment Question</th>
<th>A1</th>
<th>A2</th>
<th>A8</th>
<th>A10</th>
<th>A11</th>
<th>A17</th>
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<td>1</td>
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Discussion and Implications

Through this action research, I studied how to teach character education and comprehension strategies using diverse children’s literature. The transactional theory became an important aspect of this study. Learning about character education is much more meaningful when students can make personal connections and share those connections with others. Using children’s literature as an invitation to students to share their ideas, learning, and understandings makes the character education learning more meaningful and engaging.

Student engagement was one of the biggest differences I noticed from my students through this study. Students listened and contributed more to the discussions when we discussed children’s literature than when we read from stories from a large textbook. Even though Journeys uses great pieces of children’s literature and offers multiple modes to read the texts, the format in which students engaged in the texts was not enjoyable. The large textbook was just too heavy to hold and show the entire class during a read aloud. The prerecorded digital read alouds of the stories were often dull and monotone, offering little variations in voice and expression. Students dreaded listening to the digital stories and didn’t even enjoy when I read the story aloud from the computer screen. Therefore, I believe that the accessibility of using children’s literature
increased engagement. After the read aloud, I would leave the book displayed in the classroom and throughout the week students would ask if they could read it independently when they had spare time.

The post-survey results were rather exciting to analyze. Seeing that the average score of students' ratings increased demonstrated that children’s literature may be an effective way to teach students character education. In addition, students have been able to apply what they’ve learned to their own lives and make changes in their behavior and the things they’ve said. For example, Student 15’s work ethic has improved drastically. Before the character education unit, it was a struggle each day to get him to complete quality work, but now he asks for updates on what assignments he is missing and no longer puts up a fight or is irresponsible about his work. Student 6’s engagement in reading lessons has improved greatly as well and his parents were impressed by his improvement in reading scores.

When analyzing the survey data, it’s evident that growth and learning occurred. As a whole class, rating scale averages increased, percentage of understanding definitions and ability to give examples increased and were more accurate. On the individual level, some students did see a decrease in their average rating scale scores. Perhaps they realized over the course of the unit they were not as kind, responsible, and honest, and/or don’t have as much gratitude and perseverance as they initially thought they did. Or perhaps they became more reflective and honest about their own actions, thoughts, and behaviors which decreased their average scores from the pre-survey to the post.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading their writing as well. While initially I was disappointed in what I thought were thoughtless responses, I came to realize that their reflective writing abilities were not as advanced as I had hoped. In the future, if I continue to teach character education in
this manner, I will need to teach some writing skills that pertain to this style of reflective writing. I did model a response once or twice, but I believe more explicit modeling and directions will help increase the quality of their work. Some of the prompts had multiple things to consider and respond to, and not all students responded to all parts. This could be due to student effort, or time could have been a factor. Perhaps, I won’t have quite as many writing prompts in the future. Some weeks we had a new one every day and I think students felt overwhelmed by the amount of writing they had to do. Future writing prompts might take an entire week of writing lessons and time to complete, which could benefit the quality of their writing as well.

While some writing responses were lackluster, I do believe they helped contribute to their understanding of the different character traits and their own ethical citizenship. Each writing prompt provided opportunities to dig deep into the trait and look reflect upon different aspects of what it means. The writing gave real-life examples of situations they may experience, connected their writing to their reading, and provided an opportunity to be reflective upon the choices they make and the ways in which they behave.

There were some very important conversations that occurred throughout this study. One, occurred while discussing *The Paperboy*. They became very focused on the dog, and they wanted to include him on the graphic organizer we were completing as a class. The conversation that evolved around the boy and the dog eating breakfast created a great learning opportunity. Making inferences was not the planned comprehension skill, but the conversation presented an opportunity for the class to use inferencing and figure out how the dog was fed breakfast. What made this conversation so meaningful was that the students were changing the lesson conversation, their needs, their interests created a different engagement and conversation about
the story. Transactional theory was at play here as the direction of the lesson, and my responses as the teacher, changed based upon student reactions.

The second conversation I really enjoyed was during the *Last Stop on Market Street* read aloud. The connections made throughout the story were visible on the students’ faces. The discussion about the soup kitchen really demonstrated how the students came to care about the boy and his well-being. They were sincerely concerned that he was homeless and needed the soup kitchen as a food source for him and his grandmother. The relief when they realized they were volunteering, was also very visible. I believe there was even an audible sigh of relief. I was impressed by the amount of sincere empathy they had for a fictional character. This was true evidence of student engagement and a transactional experience with children’s literature.

Analyzing the Journeys comprehension assessment was probably the most disheartening aspect of this study. I was disappointed to see the low scores on the final assessment. Over the course of five weeks we worked on many different comprehension skills, all which were outlined and determined by the Journeys curriculum scope and sequence. I relied heavily on that resource to guide the selection of skills for the unit as I knew I needed to stay aligned with my grade-level team, and ensure I was teaching the standards. My hope was that by teaching comprehension strategies, students would be able to demonstrate comprehension of any text, which I believed could be measured through the Journeys benchmark assessment. The assessment text is a grade level passage that students cold read; meaning that students have not seen or read the story before. However, I realized that these are skills that develop over time and students may need more exposure and opportunities to apply and practice the skills. In addition, upon further evaluation of the assessment, I was surprised to see that of the 18 questions on the assessment,
only 5 were aligned to Common Core State Standards Reading Literature. The remaining twelve questions were aligned to language or fluency standards.

A couple thoughts to consider regarding the results of the benchmark assessment. First, this is one of the longer assessments they have taken thus far in third grade. The passage for this section of the test is two pages long and is followed by eighteen questions. Most assessments previously given have about ten questions and the passages are much shorter in length. The two test questions that had the lowest scores, are also the last two questions of the assessment. Perhaps, their testing stamina is just not quite ready for this length of an exam yet.

In addition, due to this being a digital assessment, I was able to analyze the amount of time students spent taking the assessment. Not including reading time, students spent an average of 5 minutes or less completing the 18-question assessment. Some students even completed it in under 2 minutes. Something I have been working on with this group of students is their effort they put forth on assessments and other assignments. Many students rush and don’t seem to care about the outcomes of their work.

While I can analyze and explore the potential options of how my students performed on this assessment, analyzing these results also had me thinking about the assessment itself. As previously discussed, the assessment was a total of eighteen questions. While there are additional skills taught throughout the unit, are seven questions enough to thoroughly assess student comprehension? When reviewing the specific questions as well, not all comprehension skills taught in the unit were tested on the assessment. This prompts me to want to evaluate and analyze all benchmark assessment for the Journeys curriculum to see how close they align to the standards taught in each unit.

**Limitations**
Some limitations of this study included numerous cancelled school days and late starts due to weather. Between late-January and early-March, our district had nine cancelled snow days and an additional two late starts. Lessons that were planned to extend a full five-days, often were edited to fit into a 4-day, or sometimes a 3-day school week. In addition, this extended the amount of time between when the action research first began and when the final assessments and surveys were given. This study was initially designed to teach six character traits over six weeks. However, the content was cut to five weeks of lessons but the time frame from pre-survey to post-survey extended seven weeks long.

The comprehension assessment was not thorough enough to determine the extent of their comprehension learning and abilities. Seven questions are not nearly enough to paint a quality picture of an individual student’s learning. With each question aligned to a different standard, there are then even fewer questions per standard. For instance, RL 3.2 is assessed with only two questions. Also, not all the standards taught in the unit are addressed in the unit four assessment. The Journeys assessment needs some modifications in order to align appropriately with the scope and sequence, and more accurately assess all standards.

Conclusion

While there is the premise that children are full of inherent goodness, they still need exposure to various character education traits in order to instill the morals and traits revered by society. Through discussion, reflection with writing, and reading literature with relatable characters and situations, students can see how being responsible, honest, kind, thankful, and having perseverance can have an impact on their lives. They can accept responsibility for their actions, take on challenges with grit and grace, show appreciation and thankfulness for the
opportunities they receive, as well as learn about how honesty and kindness affect personal relationships.

As addressed in this action research, character education can be taught using children’s literature. With a carefully selected text, discussion questions, and writing prompts, students can be engaged in meaningful and relevant conversation, writing, and reading that helps them learn and grow not only their reading comprehension but also their ethical citizenship.

I have discovered a more engaging way to teach students comprehension skills by using relevant and meaningful children’s literature. I plan to incorporate more lessons of this nature in my teaching as well as tying character traits into the learning as often as they fit in order to encourage and guide my students on a path towards ethical citizenship.
References


Character Development Education, Minn. 120B.232 (2005).


Appendix A

Outline of Character Education Unit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Trait</th>
<th>Children’s Literature</th>
<th>Comprehension Skill</th>
<th>Common Core Standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindness</td>
<td>Enemy Pie by Derek Munson</td>
<td>Story Elements- Problem and Solution &amp; Writing a Summary</td>
<td>RL.3.1, 3.2, 3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perseverance</td>
<td>The Most Magnificent Thing by Ashley Spires</td>
<td>Character Analysis, Compare and Contrast</td>
<td>RL.3.1, 3.3, 3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rosie Revere, Engineer by Andrea Beaty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>What If Everybody Did That? by Ellen Javernick</td>
<td>Cause &amp; Effect, Illustrations, Sequence of Events</td>
<td>RL.3.1, 3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Paperboy by Dav Pilkey</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>Last Stop on Market Street by Matt de la Pena</td>
<td>Inferences, Theme, Compare and Contrast</td>
<td>RL.3.1, 3.2, 3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Penguin Problems by Jory John</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>The Boy Who Cried Wolf (Aesop’s Fable)</td>
<td>Story Structure - Plays, Main Idea &amp; Detail, Moral</td>
<td>RL.3.1, 3.2, 3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Honest to Goodness Truth by Patricia McKissack</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tell the Truth, B.B. Wolf by Judy Sierra</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Third Grade Common Core State Standards English Language Arts-Literature

| RL 3.1 | Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers |
| RL 3.2 | Recount stories, including fables, folktales, and myths from diverse cultures; determine the central message, lesson, or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text. |
| RL 3.3 | Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events |
| RL 3.5 | Refer to parts of stories, dramas, and poems when writing or speaking about a text, using terms such as chapter, scene, and stanza; describe how each successive part builds on earlier sections. |
| RL 3.9 | Compare and contrast the themes, settings, and plots of stories written by the same author about the same or similar characters (e.g., in books from a series) |

*Taken directly from Common Core State Standards Initiative commoncorestandards.org
Appendix B

Pre and Post Student Survey

Answer each question.

1. What is good character?
2. Give an example of being responsible.
3. What is your definition of an honest person?
4. What’s an example of showing kindness?
5. What is gratitude?
6. What is perseverance?

Read each sentence. Think about how often you complete that action, always (3), sometimes (2), or never (1). Circle the number that best represents how you act.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I come to school with all my needed materials</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iPad, folder, agenda, homework).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I complete assignments with my best effort.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I use my time wisely in order to complete assignments.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I keep track of my materials and can find what I need, when</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I need it.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I tell the truth even if I may get into trouble.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I complete my own work and don’t copy others.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I try to help others if they have a problem.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I use kind words and avoid saying hurtful things.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I do and say things that make people smile.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I say “thank you.”</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I notice and appreciate the good things that happen to me.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I have so much in life to be thankful for.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I can disagree with someone without hurting their feelings.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. I treat others the way I want to be treated.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. I use good manners.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. When something is difficult, I give up.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I work through the struggle even when things are difficult.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. I am a hard worker.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td></td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>I try to finish everything I begin.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>I am a good friend.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix C

Survey Rating Prompts by Character Education Trait

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>Prompts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Responsibility</strong></td>
<td>I come to school with all my needed materials (iPad, folder, agenda, homework).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I complete assignments with my best effort.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I use my time wisely in order to complete assignments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I keep track of my materials and can find what I need, when I need it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Honesty</strong></td>
<td>I tell the truth even if I may get into trouble.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I complete my own work and don’t copy others.</td>
</tr>
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<td>I try to help others if they have a problem.</td>
</tr>
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<td>I use kind words and avoid saying hurtful things.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I use good manners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I am a good friend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gratitude</strong></td>
<td>I say “thank you.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I notice and appreciate the good things that happen to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have so much in life to be thankful for.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perseverance</strong></td>
<td>When something is difficult, I give up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I work through the struggle even when things are difficult.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I am a hard worker.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I try to finish everything I begin.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D

Lesson Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts by Character Trait

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Trait</th>
<th>Discussion Questions</th>
<th>Writing Prompts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Kindness        | • What was the problem in *Enemy Pie*?  
|                 | • What does the boy want his dad to put into the pie? Why?  
|                 | • What does the boy think is going to happen when his enemy eats the pie?  
|                 | • How did the boy spend the day with Jeremy?  
|                 | • What ended up happening to the boy and his enemy? Why do you think this happened?  
|                 | • How would the story be different if told from the perspective of the enemy, Jeremy?  
|                 | • How did the boy change during this story?  
|                 | • How do people feel when you do something kind for them? How does being kind make you feel?  
|                 | • A student in your class has asked you why they should start being nice instead of a bully. What might you say to this classmate to make them change the way they act and how they treat people? Write a paragraph to convince them to be kind.  
|                 | • Kindness matters because... |
| Perseverance    | • How did the girl feel in the beginning of *The Most Magnificent Thing*? How did her feelings change throughout the story?  
|                 | • Do you think it’s a good idea to work when frustrated?  
|                 | • What did the girl do when she got frustrated about her project? How do you think that helped her?  
|                 | • What is magnificent about her final project?  
|                 | • What are some things you can do when you get frustrated by a project, assignment, or challenge?  
|                 | • Why do you think the word magnificent was used so many times in this story?  
|                 | • Can you think of a challenge when you gave up? What was it? Why did you give up? Now, think about a challenge that you persevered. What did you do that helped you work through the challenge?  
<p>|                 | • Sometimes things don’t always go the way we want. It happens, a lot. There might be times you just want... |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Responsibility</strong></th>
<th></th>
<th><strong>What does PERSEVERANCE mean to you? Why is it important to PERSEVERE when things get tough?</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Why do you think the boy in <em>What If Everybody Did That?</em> was choosing not to follow rules?</td>
<td>• Make a list of the things you are responsible for in your home, at school, and in the community. Why are responsibilities important?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Why are rules important?</td>
<td>• Today at school you were given math homework that is due tomorrow. During recess a friend asked you to come over and play a new game they just got and have</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What does it mean to be responsible?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Gratitude | • According to Nana, in *Last Stop on Market Street*, why didn’t they have a car?  
• Why do you think they don’t have a car? Do they need a car?  
• What happened when CJ heard the music?  
• How do CJ’s feeling change from the beginning to the end of the story?  
• What were Nana and CJ going to do when they got off the bus on Market Street? How do you know this?  
• What do you think is the theme of this story?  
• How are CJ and the penguin in *Penguin Problems* similar? Different?  
• How did the penguin’s feelings change throughout the story? Who helped him change and how? | • For whom and what are you most thankful? Why?  
• In *Last Stop on Market Street*, Nana helps encourage CJ to stop complaining and be more appreciative of what they have and get to experience. What helps you be more appreciative and thankful for what you have? Is there someone like Nana that helps you see the beauty of the world? Who? How do they help you show appreciation and gratitude? |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Honesty | • If you were the friend of the boy in *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, what would you say to him when he was bored and wanted to cry out “wolf!”?  
• Why did the boy choose to lie?  
• What happened when a wolf actually arrived and the boy needed help?  
• Why do you think the townspeople chose not to come help him?  
• After reading *The Honest to Goodness Truth*, why were Libby’s friends made at her in the beginning?  
• Isn’t being honest good? Why did Libby’s honesty hurt so many people and make them mad? | • What does TRUST mean to you? Think of someone that you trust. Why do you trust them?  
• “Sometimes the truth can be told at the wrong time or in the wrong way, or for the wrong reasons. And that can be hurtful.” - *The Honest to Goodness Truth*. What do you think this means? How
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do you think is easier, telling the truth or telling a lie?</th>
<th>If Libby had never gotten caught lying, do you think she would have stopped? Why or why not?</th>
<th>can telling the truth be “hurtful”?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


Appendix E
Journeys (2014) Unit 4 Benchmark Assessment

Reading and Analyzing Text

Read the story “Cody and Friends Make a Difference” before answering Numbers 1 through 18.

Cody and Friends
Make a Difference

“Mom! Please don’t throw away that bottle!” Cody called to his mother. He was seated at the kitchen table, writing on sheets of paper.

“What should I do with it, then?” Mom asked Cody.

“You should recycle it,” said Cody. “That way it can be used again. If you throw it away, it’ll become more trash.”

“How did you become so wise about these things?” Cody’s mom asked, taking a seat beside him at the table.

“We’re learning about recycling at school,” he answered. “The less we throw away, the less trash ends up in landfills or in the environment. Trash and pollution are global problems, and solving these problems begins with each one of us.”

Cody continued, “We can reuse a lot of what we throw away. Used plastics can be made into all sorts of things such as rope and toys. Glass bottles and jars can be cleaned and used again, or they can be crushed and used in other products. Old newspapers can be made into cartons and bags.”

“You’re right,” said Mom. “All of that is true.”

“Then why were you going to throw away the bottle?” Cody asked.

“Our town doesn’t have a recycling program,” said Mom. “The city council doesn’t think enough people would take advantage of it.”

“I’ll bet that a lot of people would recycle if we had a program. Someone ought to convince the city council to start one,” said Cody. “I can’t do it, though, because I’m just a kid,” he said with a note of disappointment in his voice. He returned to his writing.
“What are you working on?” asked Mom.


Cody’s mother smiled. “Charlotte the spider saves Wilbur the pig,” she said. “That is a great book whose story shows that even a small creature can make a huge difference.”

Cody looked up from his writing. “Wait! Who says I can’t make a difference just because I’m a kid? If a spider can save a pig’s life, maybe anything’s possible. There might be a way for me to start a recycling program after all. I could get my friends to help with the project.”

“That’s a great idea, Cody!” said Mom. “The next town meeting is in three weeks. You and your friends could make a presentation there. You could have your friends meet at our house this Saturday to make a plan.”

On Saturday, twelve of Cody’s friends met at his house. They discussed ways to make a presentation. There would be a lot of work, so they divided it into groups. Cody and some friends would write a letter asking the council to start a recycling program. Then, they would ask the town’s residents to sign the letter. Others would prepare pictures, charts, and graphs to use during the presentation. Another group would gather things made from recycled materials to show what recycling could do. Finally, everyone would try to get neighbors and family members to come to the meeting.

When the night of the town meeting arrived, the friends were a little nervous. “Now we will hear a presentation from some of the town’s younger residents,” announced the mayor. Cody presented the letter he and his friends had written along with several pages of signatures. The other children explained their pictures, charts, and graphs and showed examples of objects made from recycled materials.

A month later, there was another town meeting. After the meeting, the mayor announced that the council had voted to start a recycling program. No one was more excited than Cody. The children’s parents had a pizza party to celebrate. Cody gave a speech in which he thanked his friends for their help. At the end of his speech, he said,
“Now I know that even a kid can make a difference, and twelve kids can make a big difference!”

Now answer Numbers 1 through 18. Base your answers on the story “Cody and Friends Make a Difference.”

1. How is Cody’s mom throwing away a bottle important to the story’s plot?
   A. It shows that Cody’s mom doesn’t know what it means to recycle.
   B. It starts a conversation between Cody and his mom about recycling.
   C. It leads to an argument between Cody and his mom about recycling.
   D. It shows how much trash winds up in landfills and the environment.

2. How does Cody FIRST learn that the town doesn’t have a recycling program?
   A. from the mayor, while at a town council meeting
   B. from his teacher, while learning about recycling at school
   C. from his friends, who have started recycling programs in other towns
   D. from his mom, who explains why she was going to throw the bottle away
3. Read this sentence from the story.

"Trash and pollution are global problems, and solving these problems begins with each one of us."

What does the word *pollution* mean in the sentence above?

- New ways to use trash
- Trash that was put in landfills
- People who work to make a better world
- Waste that makes air, land, or water dirty

4. Read this sentence from the story.

"Trash and pollution are global problems, and solving these problems begins with each one of us."

What does the word *global* mean in the sentence above?

- Difficult
- Modern
- Serious
- Worldwide

5. Read this sentence from the story.

"We can reuse a lot of what we throw away."

What does the word *reuse* mean in the sentence above?

- Use up
- Use again
- Use before
- Use one time