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Unlocking the potential of picture books to consider character strengths

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A powerful picture book can be a springboard for helping young students understand human behaviour as they begin to make sense of the world around them. As students listen to their inner voice, think aloud, wonder and make connections to the text, they are able to deepen their understanding of the characters and the choices these characters make in the narrative. With our schools and libraries full of inspiring literature, we are provided with an instant hook to explore not only story, plot, setting and language features, but also an opportunity to look more closely, to pay attention to and notice the strengths the characters demonstrate.

In this article, we look at how teachers can use character strengths to enhance not only reading, language and comprehension skills, but social-emotional skills as well. Research shows that character strengths are related to achievement, life-satisfaction, and well-being in children and youth (Park & Peterson, 2012), which has important implications for the classroom teacher and positive benefits for the students in their care.

Why character strengths

Positive education programmes that include the explicit teaching of character strengths and interventions have led to improved student school skills and greater student enjoyment (Seligman et al., 2009) and higher academic achievement (Peterson & Park, 2009). Everyone has things they are good at, yet so often our strengths, and the strengths of those around us go largely unrecognised and remain hidden. On the one hand it's easy to spot strengths that are visible. It might be easy to see our students being strong in various pursuits such as sports, reading, maths, public speaking, and socialising. How about other strengths – strengths that are just under the radar, out of sight ... strengths such as perseverance, social intelligence, prudence, hope and self-regulation which are all associated with positive

classroom behaviour (Wagner & Ruch, 2015).

Inquiry into our own character, self-reflection and the celebration of strengths in ourselves and others connects with our well-being – understanding ourselves helps us understand others.

Understanding, identifying and cultivating character strengths in children is more than just about feeling good. It has positive long-lasting effects on mental and emotional well-being. Looking through a strength lens keeps us optimistic and mitigates the risk of anxiety and depression in later years. Over time, children develop resilience skills, a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) and a sense of ownership and identity around the strengths. They listen to their inner voice, 'This is what makes me unique or special', 'This is who I am' and focus on the positive self-talk. Using our own strengths and teaching our students to use their strengths in this way creates positive emotions.

In the classroom

Much of the work we have done in teaching character strengths with K-Year 6 students centres around the 24 identified character strengths from the VIA Institute on Character (2018). These are: creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, perspective, bravery, perseverance, honesty, zest, love, kindness, social intelligence, teamwork, fairness, leadership, forgiveness, humility, prudence, self-regulation, appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humour and spirituality.

So many picture books have characters that have one or more of these character strengths represented. As teachers, we need to highlight them with our students in mind, promoting connections to themselves, to other texts and to the world around them. As educators we want the students to have high degrees of energy, high levels of self-esteem, an emotionally stable personality, and strong social relationships. We also want them to be optimistic, worry-free and listen to their inner voice. For



Figure 1. Students put their 'inner voice' on display.



Figure 2. Self-talk card print-outs for students.

example, after examining character strengths in Year 5, students made connections with how they used their strengths to cope with the challenges faced in putting on an assembly for their parents.

When reflecting, students found that explicit analysis of their self-talk was useful in terms of how they worked through that challenge. These words were recorded and put on display in the classroom so that they could be shared with others with the intention that sharing these phrases with other students would help them with their personal challenges (Figures 1 & 2). The students are now in a stronger position to cope with any future challenges.

We encourage teachers to share picture book stories with characters that embody specific strengths and work together to spot strengths with their class. We can take notice of the strengths the characters exhibit and identify when, if and how the strengths grow and change throughout the story. Students can strengthen comprehension through the text-to-self strategy, making connections between the book and their own life experience. The activities

below are some ways you can begin to use picture books with your students.

***Pumpkin soup* by Helen Cooper (teamwork, kindness, forgiveness)**

Sharing the story *Pumpkin soup* was a great way for students to first experience strength-spotting. Having first introduced the character strengths to a Year 3 class, it soon became obvious that children were intrigued and engaged with this way of thinking and looking at characters' thoughts and actions in stories. Initially it was thought that the students would identify one or two strengths in the book, such as kindness and teamwork. However, we found students spotted strengths on almost every page!

Students were able to make a connection with what they understood the character was thinking, and how the character dealt with a challenge or a problem. Character's self-talk was imagined and then recorded in a speech bubble. It was this aspect that became a focus for discussions around students' own inner voice. Students shared examples of similar problems that were represented in the book and what they would say to themselves in order to get through them.



Figure 3. Students go strength spotting in the book *Pumpkin soup* by Helen Cooper.

***When worry takes hold* by Liz Haske (perseverance)**

Students were asked to think about connections between the character in the book and a character that had faced a similar problem in another book. This was a perfect text-to-text comprehension connection and was developed further by discussing

Table 1. Suggested picture books by character cluster.

Character Traits	Picture Book
Wisdom – creativity, curiosity, judgement, love of learning, perspective	The book of gold by Bob Staake focuses on many strengths within this cluster as well as perseverance. The character goes on a journey to find knowledge and discovers something more powerful.
Courage – bravery, honesty, perseverance, zest	Flight school by Lita Judge shows how Penguin displays perseverance when faced with the challenge that comes with the desire to fly.
Humanity – kindness, love, social intelligence	We're all wonders by R.J. Palacio focuses on the strength of kindness and encourages students to reflect on how others can see the strengths within themselves.
Justice – fairness, leadership, teamwork	Pumpkin soup by Helen Cooper focuses on the strengths of teamwork and kindness but has many other examples of character strengths within it.
Temperance – forgiveness, humility, prudence, self-regulation	The bad seed by Jory John focuses on the strength of self-regulation so that readers can reflect on how they can be the best self they can be.
Transcendence – appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humour, spirituality	Gratitude soup by Olivia Rosewood focuses on the strength of gratitude and how it can have a positive impact on alertness, enthusiasm, attentiveness and energy.



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the character's self-talk when overcoming a challenge. The Year 3 students identified the character strength of perseverance as being an important theme throughout the story. Time was then given for students to share their own 'inner voice' from a real experience where they had faced a challenge and how they had overcome it (which provided a text-to-self connection).

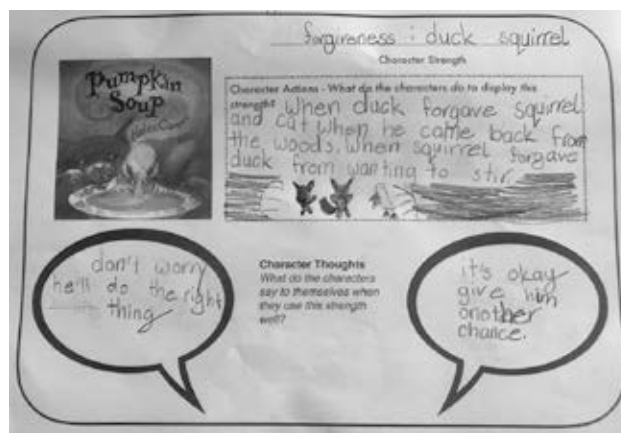


Figure 4. Students used this to identify areas in the text connected to strengths and to imagine the self-talk of the character.

Allowing students to volunteer and share strategies for problem-solving in this way had at least two positive benefits. Firstly, students could articulate their experiences in a constructive way and, secondly, other students facing similar difficulties could listen to how their peers dealt with the problem and develop the skills needed to try some of the suggestions themselves.

This book is based on narrative therapy, where the issue is the problem not the character. This style of writing provides a good model for working through anxiety and worry with students. The children can see the way the character's thinking changes when handling the problem. Through analysing the illustrations as well as the text, the reader gains insight into how problems manifest themselves, and that sometimes problems don't disappear altogether because there is no instant, magic solution. The concept of change can also be explored using a change map (Figure 5) to scaffold thinking. There are specific clues in the illustrations for the students to analyse e.g. the size and colour of the worry cloud, the character becoming sparkly as she handles a new situation and the presence of the cloud on every page including the final page.

Listed in Table 1 are several other examples of picture books that could be used in the classroom for the purpose of exploring the connections across the strengths. Children's social conscience and empathy for others can be fostered through narratives that explore social issues and human relationships.

Many picture books lend themselves to strength discussions and the opportunity to deepen student learning by providing multiple perspectives on strengths. Indeed, we have found that an initial strength that we, as teachers, identified was only one of many others discovered by our students. The teacher's role is to avoid making assumptions

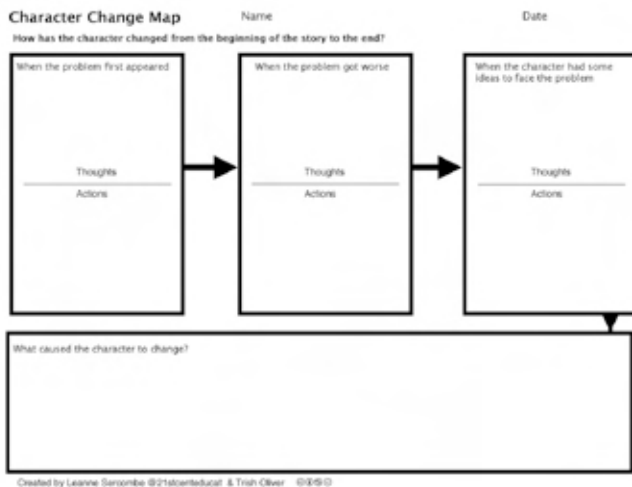


Figure 5. A change map helps students focus on changing behaviours, thoughts and actions.

about specific character strengths, and instead to encourage strong and relevant connections between students and the text.

Conclusion

Collaboration with school librarians and school counsellors can provide classroom teachers with a deeper understanding of character strengths and how children can develop their own sense of agency. Using picture books connected with character strengths leads to an increased awareness and understanding of strengths. We have noticed that using picture books as a shared way of speaking and thinking about the strengths has helped students to develop empathy for and acceptance of others. We know that research connects character strengths with increased school achievement in our students. We know that this will lead to a sense of stronger identity and a more resilient outlook when students are faced with further challenges later in life. We encourage you to explore character strengths in your own classrooms with your own students and we strongly believe that using picture books is the best way to begin.

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