

Learning Social Skills Through Fictional Characters

Monica Callahan

Introduction

If you will practice being fictional for a while, you will understand that fictional characters are sometimes more real than people with bodies and heartbeats. – Richard Bach

I teach special education at McVey Elementary School in the Christina School District. McVey Elementary School is made up of approximately 440 students, 50% of which are low income. Approximately 43% of our students are African American, while 40% are Caucasian. In the 2014-15 school year Delaware's largest school district, Christina, enrolled 16,255 students which amounts to 82% of the students who reside in the district. The other 18% who reside in the district attended non-public (private or charter) schools. The district is comprised of a section of Wilmington, Delaware's largest city, and the city of Newark, Delaware some 14 miles to the south. There are three high schools, four middle schools and 18 elementary schools. The elementary schools are configured K-5. I am a teacher at McVey Elementary School in Newark. It is situated among a quiet community of small detached homes just off the I-95 corridor and within a mile of the University of Delaware main campus.

I am currently in my second year as the Specialized Support: Behavior teacher. What does that long title mean, you ask? The students in my classroom have severe behaviors. I currently have 6 students on my roster and 2 other adults in the room with me at all times. A student is placed into my Specialized Support: Behavior classroom because he/she cannot function properly in a whole group setting (traditional classroom). The students in my class vary in grade level and academic ability. I can collectively have up to 12 kindergarteners, first graders, and second graders in my classroom cohort. The students in my classroom are classified as: Emotionally Disturbed, Developmentally Delayed, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, ADHD, and Autism. If you were to step into my classroom on a typical day (although no day is really typical), you will see that "Jed" is under the table and screaming profanities at me, my classroom paraprofessional and peers within the room. The room looks like a school supply tornado hit and it was an F5 on the Richter scale. Chairs are out of place and the other students are in the hallway learning on the ground with another paraprofessional. The only thing out for the distressed child to touch is his/her token card for behavior management. I am holding a walkie-talkie, while

I wear casual clothes, sneakers, and only stud earrings. I have no other accessories on, my clothes do not have strings or zippers, and I rarely wear a watch.

Please recall that I stated this was a typical day. I am prepared for this scene daily. My classroom has 3 tables, 6 chairs, my desk, and a cubby bookshelf that is bolted to the wall. My room has been called dismal or institutional looking by other staff, district personnel, and other students. The classroom is free of colorful bulletin boards, posters, hanging student work, book baskets, and supply caddies. As I describe my classroom all I can do is think that – it works. My classroom makeup is exactly what my students need to achieve their behavior and academic goals, and I plan to keep it that way.

Rationale

As a teacher of students with unique behavioral needs I have found that all of my students are lacking in one specific area; social skills. My students are exposed to fictional stories daily, and like listening to stories. My children enjoy the characters in each story we read and actively listen as the characters within a story try to solve problems. I often read a story more than one time to my students to help them better understand the story's characters. Have you ever read a story to your class and later that day/ week referenced a character's actions in the fictional story?

I can assume you are nodding your head, yes. As an educator I often do a read aloud in the hope that my students (or perhaps just one in particular), will learn a lesson or an appropriate way to respond given situation similar to the character in the story. The students in my classroom need intense behavioral supports for them to be successful throughout the day. When I read, have them listen to, or they read a story I am often presenting a social skill that my group (or one student) needs to improve upon. In seminar we discussed the question "What was the story meant to do?" When I read I think about what my end goal is based on the structure of the story. Aside from basic author's purpose, I think about my purpose of reading the story as an educator of children with social deficiencies.

Building on this strategy, in this unit I hope to offer research on how fiction impacts how a child learns social skills. I want my students to not only find joy in literature but also be able to learn social skills simultaneously. I want "Sarah" to hear a few stories about being mad and then relate, empathize, and identify with the characters in each story. I want her to realize after having been exposed to multiple stories – multiple times, reviewing the social skill, and practicing how to carry out the skill that she too can react similarly to the character in the story when she is angry or mad. I want my students to listen to a story and truly resonate with the character. I want them to remember later on in the day that their favorite character made a good choice; and that it's possible for them to do so also. My research utilizes creative texts to explore characters in fiction, as well as psychological research about how malleable a young child's brain is to learning new behaviors.

When a person is read a fictional story they are given the opportunity to enter into other people's thoughts and feelings. They can essentially treat the interactions among fictional characters as something like real-life social encounters. Scientists have coined the term "theory of mind" to refer to the ability to attribute mental states — beliefs, intents, desires, pretending, knowledge, etc. — to oneself and others and to understand that others have beliefs, desires, intentions, and perspectives that are different from one's own. When there is overlap in the brain networks used to understand stories and the networks use to simply interact with others — specifically interactions in which we are trying to figure out the thoughts and feelings of others it is called the theory of mind. A 2010 study by Dr. Mar found that in pre-school age children, the more stories they had read to them; the keener their theory of mind. This effect was the same when children watched movies with others; but not when children watched television. The result of the study found that when children watch television it is often by their lonesome. Children typically go to the movies with their parents, caregivers, or family members and therefore there is a conversation about the film after viewing it — as there would be conversation throughout the reading of a book (or after). When we read narratives — we identify with a character's wants, needs, frustrations, and then are left to guess at the hidden motives and track their interactions with others. It is important to note that others encompass a variety of individuals — family, friends, enemies, lovers etc. When people are frequently exposed to fiction they seem to better understand other people and can empathize with them and see the world from their perspective. Studies have proven that brain scans reveal what goes through our minds when we read a detailed description, an evocative metaphor, or an emotional exchange between characters. In short — stories stimulate the brain and alter how we act in life.

Why Are Social Skills So Important?

Social skills are how we deal with others that create healthy and positive interactions. When a child possesses social skills they are able to communicate calmly, clearly, and respectfully. In turn, children can show consideration for the feelings and interests of their peers. Social skills allows children to do three things

- 1.) Take responsibility for their actions
- 2.) Control themselves
- 3.) Assert themselves as needed

The following lesson plans will give your students the chance to learn from peers and learn how to considerate of other children. Social skills are the foundational blocks of friendship. I want the students in my class and yours to be able to maintain friendships within the classroom and beyond the classroom where they will be responsible for making their own friends without the help of adults. It is crucial that children learn through experience how to interact with others. They must be given ample opportunity to practice the skills they learn repeatedly. The most important strategy in teaching social

skills is giving the child a hands-on experience on how to practice and develop the skill; rather than just watching from the sidelines.

Take Responsibility

When a child is frustrated or feels they have been wronged by someone else without proper teaching of social skills; retaliation is the most natural response. If a person threw a chair at you while in a meeting; as an adult you would not throw one back as you know that would escalate the behavior, put others in harm's way, not solve the problem etc. As an adult – you would probably use your words to express frustration and disgust. You would try to figure out why the person threw the chair. Your main goal would be solving the problem; not making it worse. A child does not know how to do all of the above unless he/she is explicitly taught.

The children in my classroom immediately react to situations physically rather than verbally. They are lacking in the ability to “Stop, think and make a good choice”. Almost all of their responses are dire in nature and done in a needs to be taken care of now sort of way. If a chair is thrown in my classroom, 2 other students will reactively pick up their chairs and charge at the original chair thrower. The concept that my students lack is that eventually they will be held responsible for their reaction also. They could be held responsible in a positive way though. If one of my students ignores the chair being thrown or instead uses his words to say “I am scared” or “Do not throw things at me” he will get positive praise from me and be held responsible for his reaction. Alternatively if one of my students does pick up a chair to retaliate – they will be held responsible for that reaction – even if they were just impulsively reacting.

Self Control

As adults we can control ourselves to an extent to be socially appropriate in most situations. We define self-control as willpower, self-discipline or conscientiousness. Self – control is the concept of being able to regulate oneself. Self-control is the ability to remain calm under stress and control impulsive behavior. “When you have self-control, you decide the best way to act instead of acting without thinking. It might only take a second or two, but a person with self-control stops, thinks, and remains calm—even if she is very upset or angry. Before she acts, she thinks about the situation and what might happen if she reacts impulsively.

Self-control develops over the years and the biggest changes occur between the ages of 3 and 7. Research shows that poor self-control and planning abilities leads to aggressive heavier problems – which leads to anxiety and depression- which leads to impulsive adults who become dependent on alcohol and drugs and are more likely to commit crimes. While attention disorders are hereditary is it important to note the “Parents and teachers can have a profound effect on the development of self-discipline.¹”

Children will thrive in an environment where self-control is rewarded. Many public schools have adopted a positive behavior support to promote good decision making and reward students for doing the right thing. Children who are rewarded for self-control start to intrinsically realize that their good behavior choices can have a positive effect on them. I notice that in my classroom the students start to falter throughout the day in terms of their self-control abilities. I always assumed it is because they are tired, and just want to go home. Through my research I have learned that self-control gets used throughout the day and students then literally lack the energy to keep going. If you ask children to go straight from one unpleasant activity to the next their self-control is likely to suffer. Children learn faster when lessons are shorter and separated by downtime. I think as teachers, we often forget that the students need a break as much as we do. Most teachers are allotted approximately 45 minutes on their day to “plan” – and teachers covet that treasured “planning period”. This year due to the climate of my classroom I often am not able to take a “planning” due to crisis and safety within my classroom – yet I expect my children to keep going and self-controlling. If teachers need a break during the day – so do the students.

Self-control is also directly linked to motivation. Read the below scenario and I can guarantee a light bulb will go on in your head as you say – “wow!” Dewar wrote,

A kid who won't cooperate in the classroom might seem like the poster boy for poor self-regulation. But give him his favorite set of Legos or a beloved video game, and he's all focus, persistence, and drive. He doesn't lack self-control. He lacks motivation. He needs to find enjoyment in the things he's asked to do, and that's where he needs our help. Savvy adults know how to get psyched up for an assignment – how to find ways to get personally interested, or to combine work with a bit of pleasure. They also know that approaching a task as if it's a nasty chore always makes things worse, even if it is, in fact, a nasty chore. But children have a hard time figuring all this out, especially if adults are themselves modeling the wrong attitude.¹

Turning a chore into a game takes time and energy. Discovering the right “hooks” to get kids interested may require a lot of patience, observation, and flexibility. But as many successful teachers and therapists know, it's an investment that pays off. And it may be the key to beating “self-control fatigue. It's much easier to plow through a pile of homework when you've learned to find at least some of it enjoyable.

As you have read – my students in particular must learn self-control to be successful. They can do so by reading fictional stories and learning from characters within their favorite books. Elementary schools are very intervention focused when it comes to academics and often social skills are not explicitly taught because getting

high test scores for reading and math trumps being able to share, control anger, use manners etc. In one analysis of multiple studies, involving over 270,000 students from kindergarten to high school, schools programs aimed at improving social and emotional skills increased academic performance by 11 percentile points – as much as interventions targeted specifically to academic subjects. Schools often lack time to teach social skills. Many teachers believe that a student should come to kindergarten with a basic understanding of social skills. The unfortunate reality is that even if a child is taught social skills at home – they need to practice them with peers – not their siblings or their parents. Social skill proficiency comes with experience and the experiences have to be in a non-controlled setting. A parent could explicitly teach a child to use their words when a toy is taken from them rather than throwing a tantrum but until that experience happens to the child with an unfamiliar peer or in unexpected scenario – the child’s reaction will have been controlled.

Be Assertive

A child who takes responsibility for themselves and is able to self- regulate is ultimately going to be able to assert his/herself in any situation. As an educator I want my students to be able to stand up for themselves and learn to interact well with their peers. “Teaching them to be assertive and self- confident, as opposed to being aggressive or submissive, contributes to their social and emotional development.”⁴ The students in my classroom do display aggressive behaviors – they blame, name call, threaten, fight, throw objects etc. They are combative because they lack social skills. They do have an alternative reaction. When a child is able to assert themselves – they learn to trust and value themselves. As I stated before – social skills are learned through experiences. Although in my classroom the students not only learn through experience but also overt modeling and repetition.

The Function of Fiction

When we read any type of fictional story it is crucial that our imaginations are at work. “Imagination is essential for narrative comprehension, allowing us to vividly render the surroundings and situations, being presented to us in literary fiction”² When we read fictional stories we can place ourselves in the shoes of story protagonists, and therefore are able to better understand people in our real worlds. Readers of fiction learn concrete social information and skills from books. They are essentially acquiring the know-how of human psychology. Fictional stories allow us as people to become engrossed in a story that is not about us – but often we do find a common bond with a character in the story. That common bond could be something so small and innocent but it allows us to better connect with the characters in the story. When we read or watch television we deal with the actual world presented to us in those stories; we are transported to new places with new people. As humans, we inherently start to feel for the characters as if we actually know them in real-life. There is a simulation of social experiences that occurs that engages the same social- cognitive process that is employed during real world social experiences. “Specifically engaging with narrative fiction and mentally stimulating the

social experiences represented may improve or maintain social skills, especially skills of empathy and social understanding.”³ When children read fiction they learn through modeling that empathy is something all humans must possess and carry out to live a socially successful life. As we read fiction we become part of a simulated reality and we feel real emotions in response to the conflicts and relationships of the story characters. The students in my classroom need to listen to a fictional story multiple times before they start to truly embrace characters and their actions. It is important to note that the idea of reading fictional stories is not limited to actually reading a story from a book. Our free time revolves around fictional stories, whether it be the morning comic strip, the novel we read, the television show we watch after dinner or the book that waits for us on our nightstand. The idea of fiction is everywhere and we can learn social skills from all sources of fiction – not just books. Those who frequently read tend to have greater social abilities. This is a direct contradiction of the stereotype of a “bookworm”. Bookworms are often seen as turning to fictional characters and literature in general in order to compensate for the lack of real-world peers. Bookworms immerse themselves into an imaginary social world due to the lack of a physical social network. That being said – bookworms are not introverts who lack the social capability to interact with others – they are actually more proficient in the area of social skills due to their constant reading. “There is growing evidence that reading narratives, - even just fiction is far from a meaningless leisure activity that ends when one closes the cover of a book.”⁴

Fictional narrative experience does have an impact on how people feel and behave in their daily lives.” It has been suggested that people who read a lot of fiction become empathetic, because fiction is a simulation of social experiences, in which people practice and enhance their interpersonal skills.”⁵ When a reader engages in a fictional story they identify with the characters in the story and the emotional involvement in the story causes the reader to sympathize with the characters and start to feel the effect of story events personally. When people read they are essentially practicing being empathetic without even realizing it. Empathy can be defined as “the cognitive and intellectual ability to recognize the emotions of other persons and to emotionally respond to their persons.” Those who are highly empathetic are more prosocial and the long term affects include: higher workplace performance, productivity, and creativity. When people; especially children are routinely exposed to fiction the simulation of real-world experiences in fiction might be associated with processes that people use in daily life to comprehend what happens in the world. When a person reads a story he/she is able to predict the actions and reactions of the characters, by using the process of inference. Through inferencing the person can try to understand what the character is thinking, feeling and intending.

The function of fiction is to elicit emotion, to become engaged in a fictional story, a reader suppressed the notion of fictionality of the story and the characters to experience the emotions of the characters. It has been studied that a person reading fiction tends to react more strongly towards a story than when he/she would read a non-fiction piece.

This is because fiction provides a safe place for the reader to experience emotions without worrying about the reaction of other people. The reader can freely experience the emotion without the immediate transfer of the emotion bleeding into their real lives. “We can allow ourselves to sympathize strongly with a character of a fictional story, because we do not have obligations towards the characters of a fictional story, while sad reports in a newspaper may cause feelings of obligation towards the victims to help them .It has been studied that there is a “sleeper effect of fiction on outcomes. A sleeper effect occurs when the effect of a manipulation do not present themselves immediately, but manifest themselves over time. Absolute sleeper effects in fiction research assume that the effects of fiction reading on empathy will increase over time, rather than present itself directly after the experience. When reading to children it is important to note that they may not pick up the social skill presented in the lesson on the first chance of exposure. It may take multiple reads and lessons to go along with the story to aid the child in understanding the moral of the story. For sleeper effects to occur people must be given time after reading to rethink and relive what has been read. People need time to analyze why the characters acted the way they did – the same as humans needing time in real-life to think through a problem.

Conclusion

Finally, the students in my classroom and I am sure yours could use improvement (or development) of social skills. Fictional characters can help bridge the gap between just modeling and telling students how to act or what to say. When a student reads about their favorite character they are immediately drawn to the story because they already like the character. When a child is engaged in the story they are more likely to pick up on how the character is interacting with others and handling their own problems. The students in your classroom may hone in on one character from a multi character story and it is important to note that the student may not hone in on the same character as the one you did. When a story has multiple characters each character can be analyzed to study what their reactions to situations were.

The students within my classroom lack social skills. The school supplies, toys, and math manipulatives are thrown across the room because one of my students is angry. They do not know to say “Please give me my crayon back I was using that color, and it upsets me”. A child in my room is likely to react by calling the other student in the scenario a f***** b*****, and throw the entire bin of crayons at the child. My students may be experiencing separation anxiety and rather than crying and saying “I miss my mommy”, my students will race out of the classroom, run past multiple classrooms and attempt to exit the building. The child’s ultimate goal is escape. The students within my cohort have not developed their thought processing skills to realize that if they do get to the exit door they then need to find transportation to get home. I want my students to realize that by being exposed to fictional characters they can make the right choices also by controlling their verbal and physical reactions.

Objectives

- Students will understand the meaning of empathy
- Students will recognize the feelings and perspectives of others.
- Students will use real life scenarios to relate to one another
- Students will learn how to relate to the characters in the story
- Students will draw/write about the characters in the story and how the story events relate to the them
- Students will understand the concept of compliments others
- Students will become self- aware of their own feelings

Activity 1

I Have Felt Like That Before

Students will be shown a clip from Sesame Street about the meaning of the word empathy. This will occur 3-4 times until the students can watch the video and say “O I think I get it now”. The clip will serve as a scaffolding mechanism before we read a story about empathy. The word empathy is not used often when speaking to elementary level students so the video clip will help drive the definition home. Next students will be exposed to a book titled “Franklin’s Friend” by Paulette Bourgeois and Brenda Clark. The students will be given an opportunity to do a picture walk and look at the story events without hearing the words first. The Franklin series is popular among children and the students in my classroom have been exposed to the series often. Prior to reading the story (small group setting), I will place 4 index cards in the middle of the reading area. Each one will have a question on it. I will go over each question prior to reading the story aloud. I will note that these are our questions to be thinking about as I read. Some of my students are unable to think about the questions as I read a story, but my higher level students can actively listen to the story and think about the pre-reading questions. I will read the story the first time without stopping. After reading the story, I will play the Sesame Street video clip again. I will ask if anything from the story is relatable to the message in the video.

After reading the story – I will ask how the students thought Franklin and Otter felt throughout the story. I will then have the students draw pictures of Franklin and Otter. Then I will hand out speech bubbles for the student to glue by the characters mouth. One bubble will have something written in it such as “I just fell off my bike”. The child’s task will be to write a response to the character using empathetic language and kind words. Examples of appropriate responses could be “I am sorry. Are you okay?” “Or “Ouch! That has happened to me before. I understand how you are feeling”. If the child is unable to write a teacher could scribe for the student. The students will then share out their characters responses to each scenario. Refer to appendix A.

Activity 2

Compliments Make You Feel Good

The students will be read the story “The Bernstein Bears and too much teasing” by Stan and Jan Bernstein. After reading the story I will ask my students how they thought the characters felt in the story when they were being teased. Next, I would go through the story with my students and look at each scenario presented. I will ask how each scenario could have been handled differently. The emphasis of the lesson will be that none of the characters enjoyed being teased. I will discuss with my students how to compliment someone instead of teasing them about their choice. Students will then be given a sheet of lined paper. On the front of the sheet they will write the numbers 1-5, and write 5 nice things about themselves. On the back of the paper, they will write the numbers 1-5 and write 5 nice things about the person sitting nearest to them. I will orchestrate the partnering so that no one is left with a partner. The students will then partner up and share out their compliments to the other person.

Activity 3

Kindness Chain

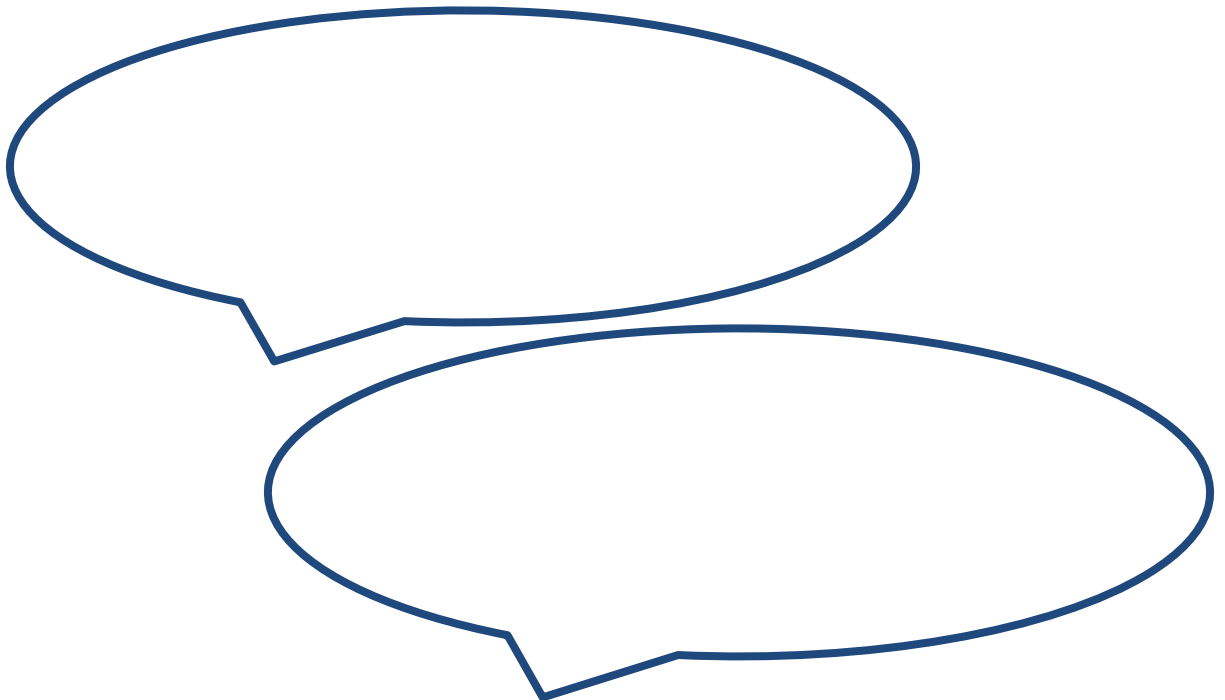
I will reiterate the concept of empathy and how powerful using kind language can be. I will explain to my students that as a class we are going to make a paper chain. When I see someone being kind to another person, I will write it on a chain link. As the chain starts to grow we will hang it around the classroom. Each time we reach five chain links – we will read those five links and talk about the great choices we made as a class. For every five links the children will fill out a paper strip that says “I feel happy when _____” or “I feel proud when _____”. I will put the feelings links in between the good choices links. Ultimately the chain will have 5 colorful links with good choices written on each one, and then 4 (or however many students are participating in the activity) white strips with “I feel _____” statements.

Appendix A- Teaching Empathy

Franklin

Harriet

I feel happy when :



I feel proud when :

I feel excited when :

I feel loved when :

I feel silly when :

Appendix B – Kindness Chain

Appendix C

This curriculum unit is aligned to the CCSS (Common Core State Standards) and target the specific standards listed below.

- Civics Standard Four K-3a: Students will acquire the skills necessary for participating in a group, including defining an objective, dividing responsibilities, and working cooperatively.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.K.1
With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.K.10
Actively engage in group reading activities with purpose and understanding.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.K.1
Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about *kindergarten topics and texts* with peers and adults in small and larger groups.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.K.1.A
Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions (e.g., listening to others and taking turns speaking about the topics and texts under discussion).
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.K.1.B
Continue a conversation through multiple exchanges.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.K.2
Confirm understanding of a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media by asking and answering questions about key details and requesting clarification if something is not understood.

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Reading list for students

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Notes

¹ Koole, S. L., W. Jager, A. E. Van Den Berg, C. A. J. Vlek, and W. K. B. Hofstee.

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² Mar, Raymond A., Keith Oatley, and Jordan B. Peterson. "Exploring the Link between Reading Fiction and Empathy: Ruling out Individual Differences and Examining Outcomes." *Communications* 34, no. 4 (2009): 409.

³ Ramey, Christopher H., and W. Jake Thompson. "Getting Into A Character's Head: The Role of Reading Fiction vs. Non-fiction in Empathy." *PsycEXTRA Dataset*.

⁴ Green, M.C., J.J Strange, and T.C. Brock. "Narrative Impact." 2002.

⁵ Mar, Raymond A., Keith Oatley, and Jordan B. Peterson, Fiction and Empathy, 424

Curriculum Unit Title

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KEY LEARNING, ENDURING UNDERSTANDING, ETC.

Students will be taught specific social skills through the use of fictional stories. Students will relate to the characters in the stories and carry out the morals into real life scenarios.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION(S) for the UNIT

What is empathy? How can you compliment someone else? Why is it important to be honest? How can we be nice to others daily? Why is it important to do the right thing?

CONCEPT A

I have felt like that before

CONCEPT B

Compliments make you feel good

CONCEPT C

Kindness Chain

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS A

What is empathy?

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS B

How can you compliment someone else?
Why is it important to be honest?

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS C

How can we be nice to others daily?
Why is it important to do the right thing?

VOCABULARY A

Empathy, feelings, understanding,

VOCABULARY B

Feelings, compliments, teasing, honesty, understanding, kindness

VOCABULARY C

Kindness, compliment, empathy, feelings, choices, actions

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/MATERIAL/TEXT/FILM/RESOURCES

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