Positive Character Traits in Stories

Project Description:

This is a paper that explores some of the positive character traits found in children’s literature and films that would reinforce an elementary school teacher’s resources to equip students to live a life that is filled with positive character traits.

Purpose of Project:

The General Superintendent of the Dallas Independent School District has chosen Character Counts as the plan to use for teaching character qualities to the district’s students. The emphases of this program, which he calls “Principles of Public Service,” are trustworthiness, responsibility, respect, caring, citizenship, and fairness. This paper will gather additional resources from trade books and videos that a classroom teacher might use to reinforce these traits.

How I found These Items:

I used the OPAC and the shelves of my local branch of the Dallas Public Library to find these materials. One of the books was one that I have been reading for pleasure during this course.

Bibliographic Citation:


Story Synopsis:

William Hays, a barber in Pennsylvania closes his shop and heads to Valley Forge, PA to join the Continental Army and General Washington in its fight for independence from England. Mary, his wife who was nicknames Molly, goes with him. It is a cold, fierce winter, but enough of the army stays together to attack the British the next spring and summer. As the camp breaks, Molly, with a pewter pitcher as one of her few possessions, stays with her husband as he heads with the army to New Jersey. In late June, a scout brings a report that there are a large number of British
gathered at Monmouth Courthouse. On a day as hot as Valley Forge had been cold, a horrible battle rages. Molly uses her dented pitcher to bring water from a gushing spring to the thirsty American militiamen on the battlefield. General Washington sees her loading her husband’s cannon after he is wounded. A cannon ball had flown between her legs, cutting her skirt and petticoats, making them much shorter. Despite danger, she stays near “her” cannon, firing it until darkness settles in. The next day, there is no battle because the British had left in the night. For the rest of her life, she introduced herself as “Sergeant Molly,” the honorary rank General Washington had given her for her courage, responsibility, and caring she displayed that hot day in New Jersey.


A very short book that takes a person from the start of a forest fire by a lightning strike to the time the smoke jumpers exit, having extinguishing the blaze. This book demonstrates the teamwork between the firefighters, their dedication to the job and each other, and the courage it takes to jump into a very dangerous situation. These people demonstrate caring for one another. They also show great trustworthiness in each member of the team as he or she does his/her part to quench the fire.


Clover, an African American girl, sees Annie, an Anglo girl, sitting on a fence that divides their town like the Berlin Wall, only between black and white. During one rainy day, Clover sees that Annie, who often sits on the fence, is sitting on it in the rain, wearing a rain coat. When the rain stops, Clover goes out and feels free after being inside during the rain. The girls meet for the first time, introduce themselves, and Clover joins Annie on the fence. Latter, Annie is invited to join Clover’s
friends as they jump rope. When they are too tired to jump anymore, all the girls sit on the fence. Someone says that someday the fence will be knocked down. Someday, they all agree. These girls demonstrated caring and fairness towards each other, at a time these traits were saved for one’s own race.


The story of the Boston Tea Party are told using the medium of grandma’s magical traveling hat. The twins in the story join a distant relative in Boston, just in time to dress up like Mohawk Indians, board three ships in Boston harbor, and help dump all the tea overboard. All too soon, these brave children must leave to get back to their own time, which happens to be July 3. The next day, they are once again “Mohawks,” but this time on the float of their grandmother’s garden club. The children model trustworthiness, responsibility, caring, and citizenship as they join in this historic event.


During the Nazi occupation of Denmark, the king continues to ride through the streets of Copenhagen each morning to encourage his
people. He orders a Danish soldier to remove the Swastika from the palace. When the Nazi commander asks him about it, he said that he ordered it removed and would personally remove any others. No more are flown. When a leaflet orders the Jews to wear a yellow star, the king has his tailor sew one to his best clothing. It is that star and that clothing that his people see the next morning. Soon everyone is a “Jew.” In this legend, the king shows great caring for a different ethnic group and respect for his subjects, who in turn show great loyalty and respect to him. (Author’s note: While in Denmark this summer, our guide of Copenhagen told us this legend. It is a Texas Bluebonnet book for 2003.)


This is a remake of the Bible story from the book by the same name. There are differences, significant differences, however. In this tale, Esther’s family is to be banished to the island of perpetual tickling, rather than being killed. The antagonist is banished to that island instead of being hanged on the gallows he has prepared for Mordecai. It is a great remake, even with the differences, however. Esther shows great courage when she takes her life into her own hands and enters the throne room without being asked for by the king. She also believes that she has been put into a position where she can make a difference for her people and herself. Believing this, she also trusts that she will have the right words to say when she has a request for the king. She does. In addition to her courage, she also showed great respect for her cousin Mordecai, caring for her people, and responsibility for others using the position into which she was thrust, not asked.
There are actually two stories told on this one video. The first is about Prince Omlete from Denmark who will not share his eggs with the starving people from his country. Though several different circumstances, he begins to share. He realizes that this actually makes him feel great. When he summons the people together to tell them what he has learned, the people realize that what they thought were ping pong balls were actually eggs and began to eat them, thus staving off starvation. Lyle goes with the raiding Vikings to the monastery, but always takes his share back to the monks. He learns that sharing stuff does not get him more material goods, but it does give him a good feeling. However, the raiders leave unexpectedly one day, see Lyle at the monastery, learn what he is doing, and tear his sail off, leaving him at the mercy of the sea. However, the monks save him. He encourages them to save the rest of the raiders when their boat throws them into the water as well. Everyone learns that to share with and care for others can provide friends in time of need.

Bessie Coleman was a young African American girl born into poverty and a large family. She spent much of her time doing things that people thought were not possible. She was an eager learner, walking a total of eight miles to and from school, when school was not closed for picking cotton. Her dream of becoming a pilot was fulfilled when she saved enough money to go to France and learn there. After getting her pilot’s license, she returned to America, performed at air shows, and spoke to many school children. She would always invite them to “Fly High!” This work continued until she fell to her death from a borrowed airplane while doing a mechanical test flight. She showed great responsibility, caring, and citizenship by serving tirelessly as a role model to many other underprivileged children who were also African American.


This story is told about a farmer and a horse trader at the time that machines were removing horses from the position of being the power to make farms work. One farmer, caught up in the craze to get rid of his “hay-burners” and become modern, had invested heavily in machines and generated a great deal of debt. Electric storms had destroyed the crop, his machines had been taken through foreclosure, and he did not have enough horses to get the land ready for his next crop. He asked to be loaned enough money in horses and harness to continue farming. The trader did. The
next August, the trader received a check for the amount of the horses, plus six per cent interest on the “loan.” The trader showed great citizenship and caring. The farmer demonstrated that he was trustworthy and responsible.


A young boy in the early 1923 is excited about becoming an amateur radio operator. After an initial disappointment in not passing the test to get his license, his hard work and study is rewarded when he gets his “ticket.” A friend helps him build a larger set, a superintendent of a neighboring building helps his erect his antenna, and 2AZK was on the air. During a hurricane in southern Florida, he hears a distress signal, and he contacts the Coast Guard with a message on an emergency frequency. When he hears that the people have been rescued, he immediately goes to sleep. He had been on the air for more than twenty hours. A few days later, he makes the newspaper as one of the youngest heroes to use a “ham” radio. The character, based on an event in the life of the author’s father, demonstrated caring for others, responsible citizenship by helping others, and assuming great responsibility.

**Story Analysis:**

The three methods or concepts that I will use to analyze across the stories are as follows: theme, character analysis, and genre. The theme of all these resources was character traits. Some of them were so bold as to list the major character trait on the box of the video, itself. As I looked, I found a number of resources that are available to reinforce the Dallas Independent School Districts “Character Counts” emphasis. From my analysis, I found three incidents of trustworthiness, six of responsibility, two of respect, ten places where characters showed caring, three who demonstrated great citizenship, and one case where the characters seemed to focus on caring for others.

It is amazing that across these ten resources, not only children’s books, but also videos and one adult book, caring was the most cited character quality. It seems that having the ability to demonstrate and communicate the feelings of caring for others is a thread that weaves itself through many stories. An emphasis on that aspect of a story will help make the story more memorable.

The character analysis reveals that there are no stereotypes when it comes to characters with good character. Many of the characters were younger, having been
chosen from children’s literature. However, the Kind of Denmark was not a young man during World War II, nor was the farmer from *New Fangled Farming*. There were both male and female characters demonstrating the positive traits delineated by the General Superintendent. Many of the motives and goals of the primary characters were noble and upright. They encountered others with less noble goals and motives. Some of these negative goals were in the personalities of people, some were in the weather, and some were bound in the culture of the age. The struggle showed that the good and beautiful could attempt to change the bad and ugly situation of the story, sometimes even succeeding. I saw little difference in the characters within the stories that I see on a daily basis. It was just that these ordinary people did extraordinary things when called upon to do it.

The genre for these resources was greatly varied. There were two biographical books, one legend, a true short story, two that were historical fiction, one came from a Bible story, and one was a cartoon with a historical setting and the final two were fiction based upon true events. Although many different ages and races were involved, the thing that tied them altogether was the theme of character. Strong characters with great character, enough to overcome obstacles, make a great story, regardless of genre.

**Summary:**

This was an exciting and worthwhile experience, aggravated somewhat by a fried computer. It was a time consuming activity, however. Telling stories to introduce a thematic unit would be a great way to gain attention from students. As a librarian, I can see the value in developing this as a resource for teachers and for me. It could be invaluable in developing an idea of additional resources that should be included in the collection.

I believe that I would like to have spent more time on the project itself, rather than the computer problems listed above. However, one does not always get to make those choices. I think that additional time, thought, and effort would result in an even better choice of resources and a better product.