Does Reading Moral Stories Build Character?

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The assumption of traditional character educators that children build moral literacy from reading or hearing moral stories is challenged based on research findings. First, research in text comprehension indicates that readers do not understand texts the same way due to differences in reading skill and background knowledge. Second, moral comprehension research indicates that moral arguments are understood differently based on differences in moral schema development. Third, moral texts (e.g., that contain embedded moral reasoning) are understood and distorted differently by readers with different moral schemas. Fourth, children do not extract moral story themes as intended by the writer.

KEY WORDS: moral development; moral discourse; moral text processing; character.

> *. . . there is also a need for what we might call moral literacy. The stories, poems, essays, and other writing presented here are intended to help children achieve this moral literacy. The purpose of this book is to show parents, teachers, students, and children what the virtues look like, what they are in practice, how to recognize them, and how they work.*
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> Bennett, *The Book of Virtues*, 1993 (p. 11)

William Bennett's call for moral literacy captured the attention of the American public. His *Book of Virtues* (1993) was on the *New York Times* bestsellers list for more than a year—only to be replaced by its sequels (Bennett, 1995a,b). The popularity of Bennett's books can be credited at least in part to a specific claim of Bennett and others (e.g., Kilpatrick, 1992;

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Lickona, 1991; Wynne and Ryan, 1993): children need to hear moral stories in order to develop moral literacy and moral character. Unfortunately, as Leming (1997) has pointed out, little research has addressed these claims.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the claims. The assumption that children build moral literacy by reading moral stories is questionable in light of what is known about each of the relevant fields, text comprehension, and moral comprehension. However, before discussing the relevant research, we must determine what the traditional character educators are claiming.

WHAT IS THE CLAIM?

For morality ministers such as William Bennett, interest in character education is motivated by a general perception that youth disorders are on the rise and cultural values are in decline. [Hence, Robert Nash's labeling of traditional character education advocates as "declinists" (Nash, 1997.)] According to this view, the United States is headed for disaster if something is not done to change the erosion of its fundamental values, the persuasiveness or conclusiveness of empirical evidence in this regard notwithstanding.

According to advocates of traditional character education, reading virtue stories is one of the pillars of moral education. Bennett and others contend that exposure to virtue stories has a formative impact on moral character. Nash (1997) describes how declinists highlight the importance of inspiring books and stories of virtue because these texts contain the motivations and aspirations of moral heroes who face a variety of moral conflicts. By reading these texts, children learn traditional moral values and find heroes to emulate. According to declinist William Honig (1987), great literature creates empathy and shared values, and is capable of demonstrating the nature of moral and immoral characters.

Hidden beneath their overt claims, Bennett and his supporters assume an outdated passive reader theory, in which readers digest what they read as a whole—as if what is on the page is transported (beamed) directly into the mind of the reader. Any degradation of the text in recall is due to memory failure or initial decoding difficulties. With this questionable understanding of reading and comprehension, they then assume that when different readers are presented with the same story, all readers will comprehend the theme (adjusting for differences in memory and decoding skills). Thus, a story "speaks to" each person in a similar fashion. By reading a moral story, a child learns how important it is to "live" a virtue and gains a deeper understanding of the moral life.

In fact, some traditional character educators go so far as to advise teachers to step back and not interfere with the power of the stories themselves.

According to Kilpatrick (1992), it is not wise or necessary for adults to explain the point of a moral story because great stories work their own magic. In other words, the stories have a power of their own that can be impeded by adult discussion. Indeed, this view assumes that merely reading the treasury of moral stories is self-instructing in the virtues.

Whereas it would be very difficult to measure whether or not adults impede the comprehension of virtue stories, there are several assumptions made by traditional character educators that can be examined by reviewing relevant research findings. Declinist assumptions challenged by current research findings are

- That reading is passive
- That every reader "gets" the same information from a text
- That readers "get" the information the author intends
- That themes are readily accessible to the reader
- That moral messages are just another type of information conveyed in a text

WHAT HAPPENS IN READING?

Recent research has disconfirmed the "passive reader" theory undergirding the claims made by Bennett, Kilpatrick, and others. Instead, researchers find that readers are active comprehenders. Readers use their prior knowledge and strategically construct meaning from a text (Pressley and Afflerbach, 1995). In general, as a child reads and remembers text, he or she attempts to create a coherent understanding of the text by integrating text information with prior knowledge about the world (van den Broek, 1994).

Reading theorists contend that schemas (generalized knowledge structures) relevant to the discourse guide the construction of the mental representation of the text during reading (e.g., Kintsch, 1988; Singer, 1994; van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). For example, say a person reads: "Max looked both ways before crossing the street." In order to understand this passage, the reader must infer several things from general knowledge about the world. These inferences include: cars are driven on streets, Max is crossing a street that has car traffic from both directions, Max is probably walking, cars can be dangerous to pedestrians, Max is crossing the street to get to the other side, among other inferences. If one did not have such world knowledge, it would be difficult to understand the passage and hard to imagine what is happening. The set of inferences from world knowledge may be linked in the mind of the reader by an overall knowledge structure or schema representing "crossing the street." The schema is brought to mind (or "activated") by a stimulus configuration that resembles previous stimuli or personal experience

(e.g., crossing the street). As the reader continues reading, the "crossing the street" schema would facilitate the understanding of subsequent sentences such as, "Because there was no one around, he went ahead." Out of context, the latter sentence would be difficult to interpret. But with the "crossing the street" schema activated, it is easy. Thus, the reader creates a mental model of the text using schemas and draws inferences based on this model.

In accordance with a constructivist perspective of human development, humans are active meaning makers in their interactions with the world around them. Through active engagement, the individual assimilates information, accommodates to new ideas, and builds conceptual networks and schemas. Schema theorists (e.g., Derry, 1996; Rumelhart, 1980; Taylor and Crocker, 198l) describe schemas as general knowledge structures residing in long-term memory. Schemas are formed as people notice similarities and recurrences among experiences. As organized sets of prior knowledge that are applied to new stimuli, schemas provide a top-down tool for interpreting events. In fact, they are essential to human understanding. Schemas direct perceptual scanning and provide guidance for obtaining further information. They give structure or meaning to experience by logically interrelating different aspects. They enable the perceiver to "chunk" an appropriate unit and to fill in information where information is scarce or ambiguous. They provide guidance for evaluation and problem-solving. In these ways schemas facilitate general information processing, and therefore are indispensable for reading comprehension.

In Pressley and Afflerbach's "constructively responsive reading," readers actively search for meaning and construct interpretations based on prior knowledge (Pressley and Afflerbach, 1995). Consistent with similar theories of reading, Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) postulate that each reader constructs a unique representation of a text. When the text is about a familiar topic, the reader has an easier time comprehending it. On the other hand, when the text does not fit with the reader's background knowledge or schemas, readers poorly understand (Bransford and Johnson, 1972), misrecall (Steffensen *et al.*, 1979), and even distort memory of the text to fit with their schemas (Reynolds *et al.*, 1982).

Bartlett (1932) provided seminal work on how schemas or prior knowledge can distort one's recall of a text. Bartlett asked readers to recall a Native American folktale called "The War of the Ghosts." As the interval between reading and recall increased, readers increasingly distorted the story, conforming their recall to familiar story schemas rather than to the unfamiliar schema of the story. Not only was Bartlett (1932) the classic example of how prior knowledge influences what is recalled from a text, it provided specific evidence of how cultural expectations, a type of schema-driven orientation, can influence narrative recall. In subsequent research, Harris *et al.* (1988)

found that routines from another culture were increasingly misrecalled over time by those from a different culture, suggesting a conceptual or schematic influence on text retrieval processes. Anderson *et al.* (1977) postulated that a reader's chronic schemas provide an interpretive framework for an ambiguous text. They instructed students to read and then describe a paragraph that could be interpreted in two ways. Whereas most students interpreted the text as a description of a prison escape, majors in physical education interpreted the depiction as a wrestling match. Alexander and Judy (1988) described research comparing good and poor readers as they studied a science lesson. Both groups of readers frequently distorted text content to conform with preexisting knowledge, i.e., with their expectations.

In summary, readers are not passive assimilators of textual content. On the contrary, they actively construct meaning by applying their prior knowledge to the content of the text. As a result of such active and constructive reading, readers do not take away the same mental representation from reading a text. There is no good reason to suppose that children will draw the intended meaning from a story. Instead, it is likely that the children will actively construct story meaning based on prior knowledge.

But we are discussing the use and comprehension of *moral* texts. Does moral development research have anything to contribute to this discussion?

THE RELEVANCE OF RESEARCH INTO MORAL THINKING

Piaget (1932/1965) and Kohlberg (1969, 1984) studied moral thinking by presenting participants with a moral dilemma, asking what action should be taken to resolve the dilemma and why. Kohlberg classified the moral justifications that people produced into one of three levels—preconventional, conventional, and postconventional—and mapped a developmental sequence across these levels. In a similar fashion, a recent neo-Kohlbergian reformulation of moral judgment development proposes three moral judgment schemas whose development can be measured with the Defining Issues Test. These schemas are Personal Interests (making judgments based on the welfare of you and yours), Maintaining Norms (making judgments based on law and order), and Postconventional (making judgments based on higher order principles and ideals; see Rest *et al.*, 1999a,b, for discussion). The Defining Issues Test ("DIT") is an objective test derived from Kohlberg's theory (Rest, 1979). The DIT measures the presence of each of the three schemas in the respondent's thinking by presenting moral dilemmas for which the participant rates and ranks possible considerations in making a decision for each dilemma. The considerations represent different moral schemas. They are brief fragments of a justification that make sense to a participant who

has the schema that undergirds the justification. For instance, one item that represents Personal Interests is "Isn't it only natural for a loving husband to care so much for his wife that he'd steal?" According to neo-Kohlbergian theory, a respondent will rank this item as important if a "Personal Interests" schema underlies the respondent's thinking about the moral dilemma. If the schema is activated and considered important to the participant, then the item representing it will receive a high rating. If the person has not been thinking in terms of the schema, or if it is not considered important, the participant will not give that item a high rating. Recent research (Narvaez *et al.*, 2000) indicates that there is a faster response time to schema items that are more salient to the respondent.

Developmentally based moral schemas may be considered "prior moral knowledge" about how to get along with or cooperate with others. The relationship between prior moral knowledge and moral judgment schemas has been illustrated by moral comprehension studies which measure the capacity of participants to *understand* moral schemas (e.g., Rest, 1973; Rest *et al.*, 1969; Walker *et al.*, 1984), regardless of whether or not the participant actually *prefers* to use a schema to solve a moral dilemma. Comprehension studies examine whether the participant can correctly paraphrase a reasoning statement or whether the participant distorts the statement during the response task. Correct paraphrasing of a statement indicates that the participant is capable of thinking at that level of moral reasoning. Findings support the view that comprehension of moral schemas is cumulative [i.e., a participant who comprehends a higher or more complex level also comprehends the lower or less complex (logically prior) levels]. Moreover, moral comprehension is significantly correlated with scores in moral judgment (*r* ranges from .32 to .67; see Rest, 1979).

In summary, moral judgment development is a type of generalized knowledge in the form of schemas. Moral schemas provide guidance in interpreting social experience. It is reasonable to expect that these schemas affect information processing in other contexts, such as when reading moral texts.

MORAL DEVELOPMENT MATTERS IN READING MORAL TEXTS

The effect of moral judgment development on reading has been examined in several studies. For example, I have studied the effects of moral judgment development on the recall of narratives (Narvaez, 1998). I used narratives about real-life moral dilemmas such as whether a poor mother should keep an accidental overpayment. The narratives were written with embedded moral reasoning representing different levels of moral judgment. Within

each narrative, moral arguments were presented in a stream of contextual detail. As in real life, the narratives intertwined events with people's rationalizations and interpretations of those events. Participants were asked not only to recall what actions generally occurred in the narrative but also what the protagonist was thinking about in making a decision. As in real life, the participant had to think over a decision situation while trying to sort out the reasoning and reconstruct what happened.

After reading the moral narratives, middle school and college students were asked to recall the narratives. It was expected that readers with higher scores in moral judgment (higher preference for postconventional moral thinking) would reconstruct more of the postconventional arguments from the narratives during the recall task and that this effect would be significant beyond general content recall (a measure of reading ability) and age level. Indeed, in a regression analysis all three independent variables—general content recall, age level, and moral judgment score—contributed significantly to explaining the variance for reconstructing postconventional moral reasoning. Differences in recall corresponded to differences in moral judgment development as measured by the DIT. Persons with higher scores in moral judgment on the DIT not only better recalled the texts and the high-level moral arguments within them, but their recall showed evidence of differential distortion. Although all readers tended to distort the text in their recall, high-level moral reasoners were significantly more likely to add new *high-level* reasons to their recall of the narratives in comparison to reasoners with lower levels of reasoning.

These findings suggest that reading moral texts successfully requires more than reading comprehension skills. Reader moral development, or prior moral knowledge, also influences the recall of complex moral texts. However, many texts used in character education are simple stories that have a moral message or theme. What elements are critical in moral theme comprehension? Before tackling this question, one must know something about general theme comprehension.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THEME COMPREHENSION GENERALLY?

Theme comprehension has been studied in a variety of ways. First, how do researchers define "theme"? Williams (1993) wrote: "A theme expresses a pattern among story components in a form that is abstracted from the specific story context, and it also comments on that pattern in some way. The comment need not be evaluative. Thus, we define a theme as involving a commentary attached to a core concept." Lukens (1982) defined a theme

as "the idea that holds the story together, such as a comment about society, human nature, or the human condition." Lukens suggested that a theme answers the question: "What does it all mean?"

Viewing theme as the "point" of a story, several researchers have looked at children's ability to extract a theme. Taylor (1986) examined the ability of 9 to 11-year-old children to write summaries of a narrative, including its point. Although Taylor found that summarizing the narrative was easy for the children, summarizing its point was not; it was as difficult as summarizing an expository text. Examining the development and processes of summarization, Johnson (1984) noted that summarization was more difficult than recall for primary school children. When testing rules for summarizing texts, Brown *et al.* (1981) found that the most difficult task for novices was adding information, as is required in constructing a theme, rather than just repeating or modifying existing sentences. Goldman *et al.* (1984) studied the comprehension of fables among children from ages 5 to 12. Children were generally unable to extract a theme until about age 10 (grade four). In sum, theme extraction is a difficult task for children, especially for expository texts and unrealistic fiction; children are generally unsuccessful until the fourth grade (ages 9–10).

Theme extraction is not a typical activity for any age (Mandler and Johnson, 1977; Stein and Glenn, 1979). It is rarely included in responses to questions about a story or in recall. It requires generalizing from the literal level of the text (Kintsch and van Dijk, 1978) and extracting a main point—not an automatic activity for most readers (Afflerbach, 1990; Reder and Anderson, 1980; Williams, 1993). However, Afflerbach (1990) found that experts in a particular domain automatically construct the main idea of domain texts significantly more than for texts outside the domain. Afflerbach suggests that main idea construction is not automatic or fundamental unless the topic is familiar.

In summary, extracting a theme does not automatically accompany reading, even for adults. It is more likely to occur with familiar topics. Yet even when purposefully intended, young children have a difficult time extracting a theme. Nevertheless, in traditional character education, the purpose for reading a moral story is to get the message intended by the author. What evidence do we have that children can or cannot understand a story's moral message?

DO CHILDREN DISCERN THE MORAL THEME?

Although moralists like Allan Bloom (1987) propose that people read moral stories the way the authors intended, is it possible for children to do so? Several studies have examined whether children can extract the theme from a moral story. Narvaez *et al.* (1998) used "found" stories to measure

moral theme comprehension in 3rd grade (8–9 year olds), 5th grade (10–11 year olds), and college students. After the participants read and heard a story, we presented them with several tasks. First they were asked to generate a theme by writing the message of the story. Second, we asked them to select the theme for the story from a list of possible themes. Third, we asked them to select from a group of several vignettes (paragraph-long stories) the vignette with the same theme. Even after controlling for reading comprehension scores (based on a nonmoral story), significant developmental differences were evident.

In a second study, Narvaez *et al.* (1999) wrote stories about getting along with others. Using a definition of theme similar to Williams (1993), each story concerned a commentary about getting along with others (e.g., being honest with strangers). Each story addressed the components of moral behavior as conceptualized by neo-Kohlbergian theory: moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character (Narvaez and Rest, 1995; Rest *et al.*, 1999b). Third grade, fifth grade and college students read several moral stories. After each story they were tested with four tasks. First they read four vignettes and rated each according to how close its theme was to the original story. Second, they selected one vignette out of the four with the theme that most closely matched the original story theme. Third, participants rated a list of possible themes according to how close each was to the original story theme. Fourth, they selected from among the list of themes the theme that most closely matched the original story theme. Students also answered true–false questions for each of the four stories as a measure of reading comprehension, used as a covariate. The results showed remarkable developmental differences in all tasks. For example, the younger children were much less likely to select the correct theme (11% of the time across stories); the older children selected the theme about half the time (45%); and the adults selected the theme nearly all of the time (91%). When selections and ratings were combined into an overall "theme comprehension score" and reading comprehension was covaried out, developmental differences were large (effect size = 1.00).

In summary, children do not necessarily understand the theme of a story as intended by the author. Although many children generate or select a theme when asked, the selection is often "wrong" according to an adult or author perspective. What kinds of themes do children generate?

READERS CONSTRUCT THEIR OWN THEMES

What happens when a person encounters an unfamiliar stimulus? Reading research indicates that if the reader lacks the knowledge (the appropriate schemas) requisite for interpreting the stimuli, the reader will misunderstand,

misinterpret, or distort the stimulus according to the (incorrect) schemas that were activated when reading. For example, Narvaez (1998) found that some readers incorrectly recalled reasoning about law and order (Maintaining Norms schema) as reasoning about avoiding punishment (Personal Interests schema). The latter concern reflects a more simplistic level of moral judgment. It is presumed that these readers did not yet have the schema for law and order and interpreted the reasoning according to schemas they had developed at the time.

Lehr (1991) noted that children often extract themes that are different from those of adults. For example, she noted that the issue of safety was of high importance for many kindergarteners. In *The Three Little Pigs*, many kindergarteners cited the theme as not to trust strangers you don't know. Lehr noted: "Although many of the children's responses [theme construction] were not congruent with the adult choices, most of them were congruent with the text, which suggests once again that young children process meaning in literature from perspectives that differ from those of adults" (p. 48). Like adults, the child reader creates his or her own interpretation, building a mental representation of the text based on prior knowledge (Perfetti, 1994).

In Narvaez *et al.* (1998), we examined the generation of themes. Although many children generated the correct theme for a story, some generated themes different from the author's intent. For example, instead of generating the correct message for the story *The Monkey and the Rabbit*— to accept others as they are and don't try to change them—some children generated messages like: "Don't be alone in the jungle" and "Don't scratch or look around while eating." Thus, it is sometimes possible for younger children to generate a theme for a story, but it accords with their own perspectives, not necessarily with the perspective of the author or of adults.

But is this what traditional character educators want—for children to come up with their own ideas about the theme of a moral story? For example, the story about Jacob and Esau in Genesis can be interpreted as: "God loves cheaters better" or "Do anything to get what you want" or "Cleverness is more important than hard work." Or the theme of the story about Washington and the cherry tree could be: "Do whatever you want then tell the truth and say you are sorry—adults are suckers for this." Clearly, traditional character educators would not like these messages.

Some traditional character educators might respond by saying that "of course, children may get the wrong message, but the adult is there to straighten them out." Does this work? Think about seeing a movie like "Pulp Fiction." Say that you believe the theme to be one of glorifying violence and disregard for human life. But your companion finds it to be an avant-garde work that cleverly depicts realistic, smart people gone wrong—as we all could. Do you change your mind about the message? Do you let

go of the certain feeling you had about the message in the film? Of course, your view of the film is expanded by talking with your companion because you are a good abstract thinker and can absorb your companion's perspective. When you watched the film, you assimilated a theme based on your prior knowledge and experience, but in discussing the theme with your companion you are able to accommodate your thinking about the film to include your friend's viewpoint.

What happens in the case of a child? A child has a certain intuition about the message of a story but then an adult suggests that he or she is wrong and that this other message is the "right one." What does the child do? (This is an empirical question—but it is theoretically answerable.) The child might nod, and maybe even mouth the message, if old enough. But the child is very likely unable to take the perspective of the adult and blend it with his or her own as you did. The child lacks the flexibility to accommodate to new viewpoints. The child listens to the adult but remembers, perhaps with some self-doubt, the feeling and the message received when viewing the film. Much like conservation of mass or liquid, it is hard to change the mind of a child before he or she has the cognitive tools to change in the desired direction.

On the other hand, you have the ability to accommodate to new information and change your thinking. When you disagreed with your companion about the movie theme, did you change your mind? Perhaps you were so certain about your opinion that you held firm. If so, it is likely due to the power of schemas—those generalized knowledge structures that you have built from experience. Schemas (e.g., culture schemas) are activated when the stimulus cues have enough corresponding elements to patterns in your memory. Schemas are resistant to change. They can be so strong that altering them takes emotional or mental conflict, or conscious self-teaching. This is hard enough for adults to do, let alone children.

Advocates of character education are silent on how to help readers understand moral themes. They fail to address the pedagogical hurdles involved in moral theme comprehension—the power of established schemas, the difficulty of generalizing from a text. We know that children are likely to assimilate the theme of a story according to their own level of understanding based on the schemas they have developed. But are they able to grow in understanding, accommodating to new themes?

CAN CHILDREN BE TAUGHT TO EXTRACT THE AUTHOR'S MORAL MESSAGE?

One might anticipate detailed instructions from traditional character educators about how to make sure that children end up with the moral

message of a story, but there is a remarkable silence on this point. Nash (1997) considers the declinists "instructionally deficient." Whereas they are able to advocate for teaching character and emphasize its important characteristics (e.g., modeling virtue, creating a rigorous moral ethos at school), they have nothing to say on how to teach it. Instead, they "list and dump" virtue stories on students and they assume that teachers know how to teach them. Nash calls this "the 'moral contagion' school of character formation: the assumption that if readers are simply exposed to morality in an inspiring book, then they will 'catch' it . . . by (literary) contact alone" (pp. 46–47).

Yet we know that neither the virtues nor the moral themes are communicable by contact alone. The studies reviewed above indicate that children (and sometimes adults) are not "infected with" the messages intended by authors, adults, and teachers. Instead of acting as a virus and spreading easily among those exposed, receiving moral messages turns out to be more like the game of "telephone," in which one person whispers a statement into the ear of the person in the next seat, and the message continues to be whispered to the next person around the circle back to the point of origin. Each player does his or her best to make sense out of what was heard, applying familiar concepts. As the message is whispered from one to the other around the group, distortions accumulate resulting in a message very different from the one initially sent. Similarly, children, like other readers, filter the moral message or theme according to their conceptions of the social world. These filters often distort the intended message "sent" by an author.

Because theme extraction is so difficult for children, some researchers have examined strategies to help children learn to generalize from a story. For example, Williams *et al.* (1994) demonstrated that fifth and sixth grade students can understand the theme of a narrative, but only with extended and skillful instruction. Structured questions before, during, and after reading facilitate the comprehension of themes (Carnine *et al.*, 1982). Yet researchers still do not know what must occur at a fundamental level. What are the elements that are used by the reader in generalizing from a lesson? For example, perhaps the reader must link at least one character-action-outcome that is transferrable to other stories or natural events. However, educational psychologists know that children remember less of a story overall and have difficulty making inferences to connect goal-action-outcome chains of events (e.g., van den Broek *et al.*, 1997).

What do we need to know in order to teach moral themes? In preliminary research using a short intervention (4 lessons in 6 weeks), in which the process of extracting a theme is described, 3rd graders did not improve in theme extraction (P. Mogush, personal communication about dissertation findings, University of Minnesota, 2000). Regardless of the length of the intervention, there may be moral developmental hurdles that prevent a young

child from comprehending an author's theme until sufficient developmental structures are in place.

Elsewhere my colleagues and I have speculated about the elements involved in moral story comprehension (Narvaez *et al.*, 1998, 1999, Narvaez, in press). The elements may not all be required for theme extraction in a particular story, but some combination of them we regard as necessary: (1) Awareness that some demands are in conflict with apparent demands (e.g., inner demands). This may be studied by asking these questions: What was the problem? What was the worst thing(s) the character faced? (2) Sensitivity to the configuration of the situation (moral sensitivity) which may be studied with these questions: What was going on? Who was thinking about what was going on? (3) Reasoning about possible actions (moral sensitivity and reasoning), studied with the following questions: What could be done? What would happen if . . . ? (4) Personal identity (moral motivation) may be examined with a question like: What did the character think about when deciding about or doing the deed? (5) Awareness of sacrifice or sublimation of personal gratification for a greater good (moral motivation) may be studied by considering: How did the action affect the character and the others? (6) Action follow-through should be parsed with a discussion of: How did the character carry out the action? (7) Students should consider the positive social outcome and the implicit or explicit positive judgment of the action with questions such as: How did the story end—good or bad? Why? Of course, whether or not these suggestions help children extract a moral theme must be systematically studied.

In conclusion, much is unknown about how students extract general themes and how and why they fail. Researchers must examine the specific elements required for moral theme extraction and how to facilitate student use. Only with such knowledge will they then be able to test whether moral theme extraction can be taught.

WHY DON'T TRADITIONAL CHARACTER EDUCATORS GET THIS MESSAGE?

Traditional character educators have convinced some parents and teachers that merely reading stories to children will develop their characters.[3] How is it all these people believe this with no basis in empirical fact? There are at least two factors: adults being adults and general ignorance.

Adults are more expert at many tasks than children. A common characteristic among experts is the inability to remember what it was like to be a

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[3]There may be a positive influence on moral character when adults read moral stories to children, but the effect may be largely due to adult attention and time with the child.

novice (e.g., Bransford *et al.*, 1999). Because things seem so simple and obvious to the expert, the expert expects the novice to comprehend with little explanation. For example, those who have read a story multiple times find its themes and subtleties obvious. Beach (1993) says: "Having reread and taught a text many times, teachers [read 'adults'] become so familiar with a text that they are more likely to apply rules of coherence to each rereading" (p. 30). So adults, being relative experts, believe that things should be nearly as easy for children as they are for themselves. It is only the gifted teacher who can step back into the shoes of the novice and coach the beginner toward expertise.

Adults often believe they perceive things without bias. Nash (1997) wittingly opines: "Contra Allan Bloom, no book is simply a collection of questions awaiting an 'immaculate reception' on the part of readers, or reflecting an 'immaculate perception' on the part of those educators who choose and assign it" (p. 48). Adults may think they perceive things without bias but research tells us otherwise. Everything perceived is interpreted according to prior knowledge and established schemas. Traditional character educators ignore this fact and believe they see "truth" and that the children will too.

Second, traditional character educators view moral themes (and moral virtues) like biological gene packets that are passed from one generation to the next. Consequently, they seem to be stuck in a 19th century understanding of human development and learning. They appear ignorant of current knowledge about human learning that emphasizes such things as novice-to-expert learning and the construction of meaning. On the other hand, if traditionalists were serious about *learning* and not merely *parroting*, they would pay attention to what works, such as self-efficacy training (e.g., Bandura, 1997).

Traditional character educators ignore not only the findings of educational psychology but current theories in the reading research literature. They cling to an old, largely discredited tradition in which the quest when reading literature is to obtain the correct interpretation. Today, experts in language and literature, like reading psychologists, believe that readers are active interpreters of the text. Here, multiple interpretations are expected, especially when approaching a complex literary work. Among "reading response" theorists (e.g., Beach, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1938/1983), it is assumed (and celebrated) that individual differences among readers (e.g., psycho-emotional, cultural background, and social status) influence text comprehension. Rosenblatt (1938/1983, p. 42) states that an "intense response to a work will have its roots in capacities and experiences already present in the personality and mind of the reader." Most researchers in text comprehension and experts in English education agree on this point.

In conclusion, traditional character educators need to attend to the following points derived from current research:

- Reading is active
- Readers "get" different information from a text based on their background (e.g., skills, knowledge, expertise)
- Readers do not necessarily "get" the information or message the author intends
- Themes can be constructed by the reader but not automatically or easily
- Moral messages are a special kind of theme the reader puts together that are influenced by reading skills and moral development

Taking into account all these points, traditional character education advocates should drop their simplistic understanding about reading moral stories to build character. While they are at it, they might also reconsider their view of character itself—as a set of traits to be developed. Such a perspective does not fit with current conceptualizations of personality (Cervone and Shoda, 1999; Lapsley, 1996) nor with new approaches to character education (e.g., Narvaez *et al.*, 2001).

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