

# Bringing Books to Life: Teaching Character Education through Children's Literature

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**Abstract:** Many teachers use children's literature to build background knowledge and to intrigue students in the upcoming lesson. Children's literature can also be used to teach character education because it is an effective method for teaching young children. Character education is a vital aspect of children's learning because it teaches them different social and moral lessons. Thus, it is possible that children's literature can be used to effectively teach character education to young children. This project uses a pre-post assessment to evaluate if children's literature is an effective method of teaching character education, in particular the trait of fairness. The project was conducted in a Title 1 elementary school in a rural part of Maryland. The participants consisted of 21 kindergarten students ranging from the ages of five-to-seven years old. After analyzing the quantitative results using a t-test, the results were not significant (a p-value of .05). However, limitations such as: sample size, lack of qualitative data, and the use of a multiple choice assessment may have impacted the results. Thus, future research may determine that using children's literature is an effective method of teaching character education.

Accommodations are given to students with learning disabilities or other disabilities in order to ensure that they are able to access the curriculum. These students may also receive special educational services. Unfortunately, this may result in students being at risk for problems socially and with peer relationships. Some students may feel that the accommodations are unfair because those students are given extra time, or other different options. Because the student receiving accommodations should not be isolated by the teacher, the teacher should not tell the other students why he or she is receiving accommodations. It is difficult to explain, to students who are not receiving an accommodation, what an accommodation is and the reasons why an accommodation is given. These explanations can be difficult because the teacher is unable to share this information about students receiving accommodations with the other students in the class due to confidentiality and respect for the students.

Therefore, there should be another method to inform students about fairness, and the fact that fair is not always equal other than a teacher breaking teacher-student confidentiality. This can be difficult to do, especially with young children because they do not often understand abstract concepts. Character education is taught in many schools to encourage students' adoption of values such as fairness. Unfortunately, many students may not find character education to be influential because it is often rarely incorporated in the daily classroom. In comparison to the lack of character education, children's literature is used in the classroom daily. Children's literature is used to teach a variety of lessons, morals, and ideas. Thus, it seems that children's literature may be an influential method to teach character education. The purpose of this study is to help young students understand the need for accommodations without isolating

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the students receiving accommodations. To do this, I will use children's literature to teach character education.

### Literature Review

#### **Accommodations and Differentiated Instruction**

**What are accommodations?** Accommodations are services or changes to an activity or lesson that are given to students who often have a learning disability or other disability that causes them to receive special education services (Wagner et al., 2006). An example of a commonly given accommodation is for a student to receive extra time on work if he or she has Attention Deficit Disorder. After the passing of two federal legislations, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement Act (IDEA), many of the students receiving accommodations will be placed in the general education classroom (Lerner & Johns, 2009; Levy, 2008; Wagner et al., 2006). NCLB and IDEA were created and implemented to increase the use of the inclusion model in schools across America. Furthermore, IDEA and NCLB require that schools document progress of, and data about, the various instructional decisions being made (Lingo, Barton-Arwood, & Jolivet, 2011). However, it still seems to depend upon the individual school as to whether or not students receiving accommodations may or may not be included in general education classrooms.

**What is inclusion?** Inclusion is the term used to describe the placing of students who receive special education services in general education classroom for the majority, if not the entire school day. Inclusion programs have received mixed reviews (Wagner et al., 2006). Some thoroughly support inclusion and see the benefit it has for all students, not only the students receiving special education services (Wagner et al., 2006). Scholars such as Friend and Pope (2005) have argued that inclusion is for "all students-those who are academically gifted, those who are average learners, and those who struggle to learn for any reason-should be fully welcomed members of their school communities and that all professionals in a school share responsibility for their learning" (p. 57). However, others have expressed concern that inclusion programs may be harmful or take away from the general education students (Wagner et al., 2006).

**Why are accommodations given?** Successful inclusion programs benefit all of the students in the classroom (Friend & Pope, 2005). Inclusion and collaboration between the general education and special education teachers enable all students to have an opportunity to understand the curriculum in a way that meets their needs (Carter, Prater, Jackson, & Marchant, 2009). The collaboration between the two teachers is designed to help each student succeed by meeting the needs of the student because there are differences in the rate at which students of the same age learn, and the amount of support and scaffolding they need from their teachers (Landrum & McDuffie, 2010). The collaboration allows the general education teacher to be informed about what accommodations need to be made to help the student receiving special education services succeed (Carter, Prater, Jackson, & Marchant, 2009). The collaboration among teacher is crucial because accommodations vary depending upon the students' needs.

**Differentiated instruction.** Different accommodations are given to different students depending upon their needs. Some students may receive extra time on assignments, specialized seating, extra set of textbooks, use of a tape recorder, extra help, or a variety of other things (Levy, 2008). It is important to note that in addition to accommodations, teachers can differentiate instruction to help their students succeed. Differentiated instruction refers to

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tailoring instruction to fit readiness levels, languages, responsiveness of students, interests, and learning profile of all students in the class (Lawrence-Brown, 2004). There are three main areas in which a teacher can differentiate instruction to help students succeed: content, process, and product (Levy, 2008; Tomlinson, 2001). Teachers can differentiate the amount of content, how the content is delivered to students, and the types of assessments given to students (Levy, 2008). Thus, teachers may differentiate instruction and provide accommodations for students to help them reach their full academic potential.

**Who receives accommodations?** It is important for teachers to know not only how to differentiate instruction and provide accommodations but also why students need differentiated instruction and accommodations. Some students may be receiving accommodations because they have a 504 plan. A 504 plan is an official document that receives its name from section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act that is used to document disabilities ranging from physical to mental impairments, also including chronic illnesses (Lerner & Johns, 2009). In addition, students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) may receive various accommodations. An IEP is designed for each student who receives special education services. It is a collaborative document with input from administrators, teachers, and parents to determine how to best assist students reach their academic potential (Lerner & Johns, 2009). In addition to an IEP, instruction needs to be appropriately matched to an individual's needs in order for it to be effective (Landrum & McDuffie, 2010). IDEA and NCLB require that the instructional decisions made for students receiving special education services are monitored consistently (Lingo, Barton-Arwood, & Jolivet, 2011). This helps to ensure that the most useful accommodations are being provided for the students. Teachers should be well informed about their students' needs in order to appropriate differentiation and accommodations to ensure their students can access the curriculum in an appropriate manner.

### **Character Education**

**What is Character Education?** Character education is the term used to describe teaching children about the traits that are essential to building good character (Sanchez & Stewart, 2006). Character education has also been described as "the deliberate effort to cultivate virtue"; thus, character education requires deliberate planning (Prestwich, 2004, p. 140). Teachers and administrators who wish to employ character education often emphasize traits that can help an individual become successful in society, such as trust, integrity, loyalty, honesty, fairness, respect, ethics, and citizenship (Katilmis, Eksi, & Öztürk, 2011; Sanchez & Stewart, 2006). However, the exact traits that are taught vary from state to state. In fact, only 15 states in the United States require character education to be taught, but 27 states receive funding from the United States Department of Education to teach character education (Prestwich, 2004). The small number of character education requirements is due to a growing trend for this type of program in American schools after a decline in teaching character education since 1980 (Prestwich, 2004). Although, this is a relatively small number of states, most educators agree that some form of character education should be taught (Prestwich, 2004).

**The importance of character education.** Character education was widely taught between the 1960's and the 1980's (Prestwich, 2004). Character education used to be a main focus in American schools, and it was based upon religious teachings; however, schools began to be concerned with imposing their views on their students (Prestwich, 2004). As teen crime rates began to rise, and Kohlberg's theory of moral development began to influence people's ideas about morality, schools were blamed for not influencing young students with positive examples

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of how to behave in society (Prestwich, 2004). The blame on the school systems is one reason there has been an increase again in the number of states providing character education can be seen.

There are also many other reasons schools should continue to teach character education. From a legal perspective, schools teach character education because some states require schools to teach it, and also because "schools are obligated to impact civic values and a unifying moral code" (O'Sullivan, 2004, pp. 640-641). Therefore, schools should teach character education because it helps students become good people and citizens; it is important to be a good citizen because "democracy is not possible with an uneducated and morally corrupt set of people" (O'Sullivan, 2004, p. 640). Richardson, Tolson, Huang, and Lee (2009) also found character education to be important in a democratic society because it allowed individuals to develop the necessary skills, such as justice, fairness and trust, to think democratically. Lastly, schools should be concerned about the moral values of their students, and thus should want to teach character education to instill good values in their students (O'Sullivan, 2004). These reasons for teaching character education may seem extreme, but they relate to developing moral students who will be prepared to live in a democratic society.

Some people think character education programs can only help students' development of character traits. However, character education programs have also been found to have "positive effects on both character development and academic achievement" (Katilmis, Eksi, & Öztürk, 2011). Richardson and colleagues (2009) concluded that character education has shown a relationship between negative behaviors and academic performance: when negative behaviors decrease, academic performance increases. Hart and colleagues (2009) found that character education improves "test scores, emotional skills, attitudes about oneself and about others, and positive social behaviors" (p.105). Because social groups exist within the classroom, it is important to teach students how to equalize these groups; this can be done through character education (Smith-D'Arezzo, & Moore-Thomas, 2010). Thus, character education can help students academically and socially.

**Methods to teach character education.** Although not all schools teach character education, there is a multitude of different ways in which it is taught. Some schools may have the character education traits included in the school rules and guidelines, or have a trait of focus for each month (Prestwich, 2004). Having a character trait of focus for each month is a common way to teach character education; however, it has also been criticized. One of the main criticisms is that the students may become bored if the character trait is the same for a given month from year to year (Prestwich, 2004). This type of character education program is also criticized for the teacher's lack of knowledge regarding ways to change the student's behavior (Prestwich, 2004). Teachers may not have skills to help students understand how to change their behavior to demonstrate the incorporation of a given trait. Furthermore, there may be a lack of character education at home and the inconsistency could deter the work of character education at school (Prestwich, 2004).

Other schools use prepackaged programs such as CHARACTERplus, Character Counts! and An Ethics Curriculum for Children. These programs identify key traits and have pre-developed lessons or books to teach students about the various traits (Prestwich, 2004). CHARACTERplus is used primarily in the Midwest and has ten key principles that focus on the importance of parental involvement (Prestwich, 2004). Character Counts! is a program that provides lessons focused on specific character traits: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. An Ethics Curriculum for Children is based upon 14

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multicultural books that discuss seven character traits (Prestwich, 2004). Character education is taught daily by teachers (Auciello, 2006). Auciello (2006) found that students cannot fake good character, but rather they respond to interactions they have and they see teachers having with other students. Furthermore, Auciello (2006) explains that “teaching for good character requires good character in teachers” (p. 69) and no character education program will be successful without teachers who have good character. Overall, the types of character education programs use different methods to teach children about different character traits to help them strive morally, socially, and academically, but one of the most important models of character education is the teacher.

### **Children's Literature**

**Why use children's literature?** Children's literature is a great resource because it can be used to teach a variety of topics (Prestwich, 2004). Children's literature helps students begin to discuss and think about character education, but has been found that having discussions after reading the selected books can improve the books' effectiveness on the students' attitudes about character traits (Auciello, 2006; Clare & Gallimore, 1996; O'Sullivan, 2004; Smith-D'Arezzo & Moore-Thomas, 2010). The use children's literature has been beneficial in changing attitudes children have about their peers with disabilities because inclusion alone will not lead to a change in attitudes (Smith-D'Arezzo & Moore-Thomas, 2010). Despite seeming to be a method, children's literature should be used to teach character education because “internalizing behaviors (e.g. displays of sadness or depression) were more common as well at the elementary and high school levels” (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 21). Thus, teaching children to empathize and problem solve through literature selections that have specific morals may help to decrease the number of students who internalize such behaviors.

**Benefits of using children's literature to teach values.** Literature can be a good way to teach character education because “literature lends itself to the teaching of specific moral dilemmas and the examining of specific character traits” (Prestwich, 2004, p.143). Students are able to empathize with the characters and understand character traits better than just being told information about each trait, also known as catharsis, or the connection between the reader and the characters (Lowe, 2009; Prestwich, 2004). Literature can assist in discussing difficult topics such as incarceration, bullying, death, and abuse. Literature can provide students with emotional and social support for things they might also be going through; thus, the use of literature may be a useful method to discuss difficult topics (Jalongo, 2004; Lowe, 2009). Moreover, Bibliotherapy, or therapeutic reading, can help students cope with emotions and problems they are facing because “expression through text offers readers of all ages the opportunity to find solutions through the character and conflicts within a story, and thus within themselves” (Lowe, 2009, p.1). In addition, and perhaps most importantly, children's literature should be used to teach character education because picture books attract children, communicate ideas, and the visual images leave “the most indelible impression” (Jalongo, 2004, p.38). The students often relate to the characters and pictures in these books rather than non-picture books, which adds to their effectiveness. The pictures aide the students in understanding the abstract concepts taught in character education stories, which is another reason why picture books are beneficial for teaching character education to young children. Furthermore, children are more likely to respond to storytelling because it is seen as a gift from the teacher (Sanchez & Stewart, 2006). Thus, students are more likely to internalize and remember the lessons that they learn from these stories.

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**How to choose appropriate children's literature.** Although there is a strong rationale for using children's literature to teach character education (Prestwich, 2004; Jalongo, 2004; Lowe, 2009), not all children's literature lends itself for this use. It is important to ensure that the literature is selected carefully because "the type of literature to which children are exposed is likely to influence their general perceptions of social life" (Beckett, Ellison, Barrett, & Shah, 2010, p. 373). Furthermore, it is important when incorporating disabilities to ensure that the character with a disability is portrayed in a positive manner; these stories can benefit all students even those without disabilities (Beckett, et al., 2010; Smith-D'Arezzo & Moore-Thomas, 2010). Selecting texts with moral or character developments as a main part of the plot will allow students to gain the most benefit from the character education lesson because they may be able to empathize with the characters.

It is also beneficial to have the texts be multicultural because they will allow the students to learn different lessons about self-concept that they may not be able to learn through other texts (Lowe, 2009). Incorporating multicultural books will also help students of different ethnic and racial backgrounds because they will be able to identify with characters, which they may not always have the opportunity to do (Lowe, 2009; Prestwich, 2004; Smith-D'Arezzo & Moore-Thomas, 2010). Multicultural texts can also help students to understand differences between cultures, and thus decrease the prevalence of prejudice (Smith-D'Arezzo & Moore-Thomas, 2010).

### **Research Questions**

This study aims to answer two research questions in regards to the use of children's literature to teach character education in order to help young student understand the need for accommodations:

1. What conceptions do students have about fairness?
2. To what extent, if any, can children's literature influence a student's idea of fairness?

### **Methods**

#### **Sample and Context**

The sample in this study was composed of one of four kindergarten classes at a Title 1 Elementary School. The Elementary School is located in the southern part of a rural county, close to the local military base. There were 21 students in the kindergarten class, all of whom served as participants in this study. The students in this classroom had varying needs: one participant had a severe hearing impairment, four participants in the class received English Language Learner services, three of the participants in the class received services for Speech and Language, and three participants had Individualized Education Plans for different needs. These subgroups were not mutually exclusive. The participants ranged in age from five to six years old. There were twelve female participants, and nine male participants. Six of the participants are Caucasian, eleven participants are African American, and four are Latino. I also served as the student-teacher for the kindergarten class. In addition to me, the classroom teacher, the para-professional, and an interpreter were in the room during the time the study was conducted.

## **Action Strategy**

My action strategy took place over the span of three school weeks to implement, and materials included four appropriate children's books and a survey. All of the books shared a common theme of fairness. A list of the books used, including a brief description of the books, can be found in Appendix A. All of the book sessions were conducted in the same manner with a picture walk, reading, and discussion during the whole group setting. Each session began with a picture walk of the book in which I showed the students the pictures of the book. Picture walks are often useful to help engage students' prior knowledge and peek interest in the story. Students were asked to make predictions about what they thought would happen during the story. Students were also asked how they thought the characters were feeling during various parts of the story. I read the book aloud to the students during whole group read-aloud time in the morning. After reading the book, the students and I had a whole group discussion about the story in which we focused on plot, characters, feelings, and lessons. I prompted students for answers using probing questions such as: "How do you think the character felt when that happened?" All probing questions can be found in Appendix B.

The pre-test was administered on the Tuesday of week one. On Thursday of week one, book 1 was read in the previously described manner. During week two, book 2 was read on Tuesday and book 3 was read on Thursday. In the final week, week 3, book 4 was read on Tuesday and the post-test was given on Thursday. Thus, the entire project was spread over a time period of three school weeks, but was only conducted on six different school days. All of the sessions were completed within 20 minutes.

## **Data Collection**

On the first day of implementation, I administered a survey to assess student opinions about the concept of fairness and feelings about situations that may be considered as unfair. In order to decrease the likelihood of response bias, the survey was administered to the entire class at one time. I gave each student a paper on which 5 questions were displayed on the front that related to how a situation made the student feel, and 5 questions displayed on the back asked if the student thought the situation was fair. I also had a copy of the paper to display on the SMARTBoard through the camera. I read each question aloud to the participants, twice, because many of the participants could not read or were not proficient in reading. The participants responded by circling a happy, sad, or in-between face with a crayon; the complete questionnaire appears in Appendix C. The questionnaire itself was developed from a variety of texts about fairness, which were used as the read-alouds for the lessons between the pre and the post-test administration. The same method was used to administer the exact same survey at the end of the project. The survey served as a pre-post method of data collection. The results of the survey were collected and recorded in Excel. In addition to the survey, informal field notes were taken by myself. These notes were used to record behaviors, attitudes, and ideas expressed by the participants.

## **Data Analysis**

After all of these quantitative data had been entered into the spreadsheet, I conducted paired two-tailed t-test to determine if there were any significant changes in students' attitudes toward and conceptions of fairness. I conducted a t-test to examine changes in overall scores on the pre and post survey scores. T-tests were used also to determine if

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responses to individual questions changed significantly from the pre to the post surveys. In addition, I conducted evaluations of individual students and individual questions. To evaluate individual questions and students, I used Excel to run a discrimination index. For each statistical test conducted, significance levels were determined using an alpha level of .05. The field notes that were described earlier were not analyzed; the reason for this is described in the interpretations and findings section of this paper.

### **Findings and Interpretations**

The goal I had when developing and implementing this project was to answer two research questions that were developed after I explored the past research on: character education and children's literature. I aimed to determine if children's literature could be used to change students' conceptions and ideas of fairness. After analyzing the results of the pre-post assessment, it is most beneficial to explain the findings and interpretations of this data based upon each research question.

#### **Research Question One**

The first research question I wanted to answer through this project was: What conceptions do students have about fairness? To answer this question, I had planned to take field notes over the course of the project. I planned to take field notes to determine how the students' conceptions of fairness changed throughout the project during the four reading sessions in which I conducted a whole class discussion after each book was read. However, due to the constraints of time and significant circumstances in the classroom, after the first session, it was no longer possible to continue taking these field notes. During the sessions themselves it was not possible to teach and take field notes at the same time. Furthermore, there was not a consistent staff member in the classroom to take the field notes while having the whole group discussions simultaneously. I attempted to take the field notes at the end of the day; however, it became evident after the first session that this method would not lead to accurate field notes. It was not possible to remember exactly what the students had said or even which student had shared an idea. Thus, I decided it was beneficial to continue with the project, but discontinue collecting field notes. Unfortunately, this decision causes me to be unable to answer my first research question with the data that I have collected.

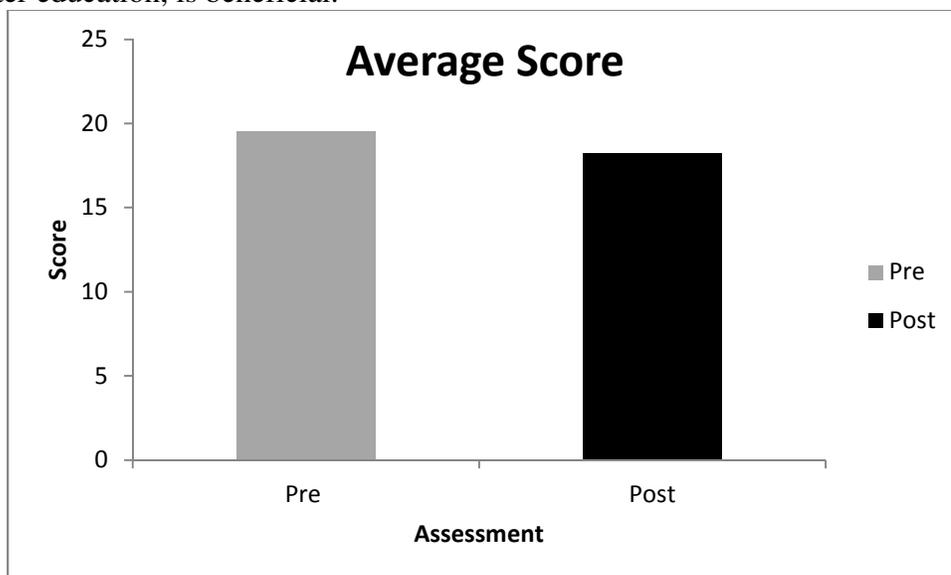
#### **Research Question Two**

The second research question I wanted to answer through this project was: To what extent, if any, can children's literature influence a student's idea of fairness? To answer this question, I had administered a ten question pre-post assessment (see Appendix C). Each question could be answered on a three point likert scale, where each answer option is a choice in a range of choices that aims to determine how strongly someone agrees with or feels about a topic. For example, many likert scales are used to determine how strongly someone agrees or disagrees with a statement. The first five questions were designed to determine students' emotions about situations that could be considered unfair. The answer options were: happy, okay, or sad with corresponding emoticons. Questions six-through-ten were designed to determine if students felt that a particular situation was fair or unfair. The answer options were yes, maybe, or no with corresponding emoticons; the emoticons were consistent for all ten questions, but the answer options changed.

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After administering this pre-post assessment at the start and the conclusion of the project, I then analyzed the data. Each individual response was given a corresponding number: 3 for happy or yes, 2 for okay or maybe, and 1 for sad or no. Any question that was unanswered by a student was left blank when entered for analysis. Because all of this data was quantitative, I conducted a t-test to determine if the impact of the reading sessions had an effect on the students' scores. The mean for the pre-assessment was 19.55, and the mean for the post-assessment was 18.22. After conducting a one-tailed, paired samples t-test, I can conclude that the results of the pre-post assessment are not significant;  $t(18) = 0.079$ ,  $p < .05$ . Therefore, the changes in means of the pre and the post assessment are as likely to have been caused by chance as they are an effect of my project.

Although the results of the t-test were not significant, I do feel that the project overall was beneficial. The results of the t-test were close to the significance cut-off of .05, which leads me to believe that the sample size I used for this project was too small. This is most likely because of the fact that only 18 of my 21 kindergarten students completed both the pre and the post assessment, I had a relatively small sample size. A larger sample size would allow me to generalize my results because I would have a sample that is more representative of the general population (Smith-D'Arezzo & Moore-Thomas, 2010). Furthermore, a larger sample size would have allowed me to determine if this intervention, of reading children's literature to teach character education, is beneficial.



*Figure 1: Indicates the average score on the pre and the post assessment*

Despite the small sample size, the results of the t-test allowed me to conclude many things. Although the t-test results are not significant, the project did not negatively impact the students because their scores did not significantly decrease. In fact, five of the students' scores increased when comparing the pre and the post assessments (See Figure 1). The students also began the pre-assessment with a mean of 19.55 out of a possible 30 points. Therefore, this could be a reason why the students did not show more growth between the pre and the post assessments since they had relatively high scores on the pre-assessment.

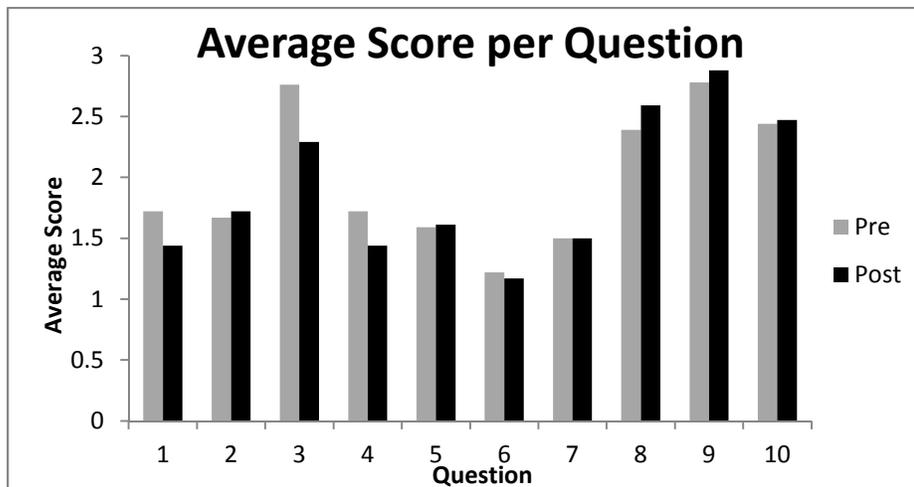


Figure 2: Average Score per Question; this figure provided the students' average score on each question of the Pre-Post Assessment.

**Questions one-through-five.** Although Figure 2 explains the students' average score per question on the pre-post assessment, it can also be used to explore how students scored on the assessment. The first five questions were related to how the students felt about the different situations that may or may not be considered to be fair. Thus, by reviewing Figure 2, most of the students scored relatively low on the first five questions. This indicates that the students more often chose okay or sad to answer these questions, which caused the average score to be lower. Therefore, the students had more negative emotions in response to these situations. Within these five question, question three had a scenario in which the outcome was fair and thus most of the students responded that this made them feel happy; this explains the higher average for this question. However the rest of the questions in this set were of scenarios that were unfair in which explains why the students would have had a lower response, because they would feel sad or okay if they experienced these unfair scenarios.

**Questions six-through-ten.** When examining the students' average scores on questions six-through-ten, which focused on whether or not a situation was fair, the students' average scores were higher than they were for questions one-through-five. This indicates that the students were more likely to select that they felt the situations were fair as opposed to unfair. Within this set of questions, the average of responses for question six for the pre and post assessment are much lower than questions eight through ten. After reviewing the question which described an unfair scenario, it can be understood why this response is lower; the most appropriate answer would be that no this is not fair, which would have pulled down the average because an answer of no would have received a score of 1. Furthermore, it is possible that the students already had a relatively good understanding of the concept of fairness, but a more negative emotional viewpoint of the different situations where fairness is questioned. This is important because it explains why the results of this project may not have been significant.

**The entire assessment.** All of the questions on the assessment required the students to think about different scenarios that they may or may not have experienced. This can be difficult for young students. In addition, some of the questions ask students about scenarios involving siblings; for example, question seven was: if you get punished for kicking your little brother, but your little brother doesn't get punished for kicking you, is this fair. These question types are difficult for the students to answer if they do not actually have a sibling, which possible explains question seven's lower average response than what I had anticipated. Unfortunately, I over

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estimated their ability to think abstractly and pretend that they had a young sibling. Thus, the results may not be the same as if this question had been asked differently. This assessment required the students to apply their knowledge of fairness and use it to describe their emotions, which requires abstract thinking to answer questions one-through-five. Unfortunately, this was not appropriate for their age and developmental stage, which may explain the lower scores for the questions that required application.

Furthermore, psychologists such as Piaget and Kohlberg have studied child development and determined that young children, such as my participants, are egocentric in their thinking (Prestwich, 2004). Thus, some of the questions may have been difficult for the students to accurately answer if the question was asking what would happen to someone else. As previously stated, children's literature can help students to empathize with the characters and develop an understanding of the character traits, which is evident by the higher responses for questions six-through-ten that focused on the students' understanding of fairness (Lowe, 2009; Prestwich, 2004). The focus of this project was to determine to what extent, if any, children's literature could influence a student's idea of fairness, but the students seem to have already developed a good understanding of the idea of fairness; thus, the focus of the project should have been to determine to what extent children's literature could change a student's emotions about fairness.

## **Discussion**

### **Limitations and Future Research**

After planning, implementing, and analyzing the different aspects of this project, I have found several factors that are limitations of the project. These factors most likely influenced the overall results of the project and may explain why I found my results to be not significant rather than significant. Moreover, these factors explain why I cannot be certain that any changes in students' scores from the pre to the post assessment were due to my project rather than chance. Some of the limitations are factors that I could change if implementing this project again in the future. However, some of the limitations are factors that I could not control or account for when planning this project.

One limitation of my project was the small sample size. There were only 21 students in my kindergarten class, and only 18 were able to complete both the pre and post assessments; thus, I could only use the results from those 18 students. If I had a larger sample size, it is possible that I could have seen significant results of this project given that my results were close to the significant level. Moreover, a small sample size causes me to be unable to generalize my results to a larger population; thus, I cannot definitively conclude that my project was effective in changing the students' conceptions or ideas of fairness.

Another limitation of my project is that it was conducted simultaneously with the month-long character education program in which the month's character trait was fairness. The class had weekly discussions of that character trait that were not included in my project. In addition, the guidance counselor conducted an hour-long lesson about fairness that consisted of a whole group discussion and a read-aloud of a book with another kindergarten class. Because fairness was the character trait of the month, and the guidance counselor conducted a session with the students, I cannot be certain that the results of my project are due to the actual project. It is possible that these other sessions explaining fairness could have impacted my data.

There was also the limitation of the format of my assessment. The pre-post assessment (see Appendix C) I used to conduct my study had a multiple choice format. This may have been

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a limitation because the participants had never been given a multiple choice assessment before. Thus, the novelty of this type of assessment may have affected their ability to accurately respond to each question. Furthermore, to account for the fact that some of the students were not able to read the response choices, I accompanied each response with an emoticon. Although I feel this helped the students to be able to select the response that was appropriate for them, I also feel that these emoticons may have been distracting for the students. Thus, it is a possibility that the students selected the emoticon that was most appealing to them rather than the one that most accurately reflected their answer choice.

Lastly, all of my data was quantitative. I intended to conduct qualitative data with this project, but that was not possible. It was ambitious to expect that I could teach full-time and take anecdotal notes simultaneously. Thus, it is a limitation that I do not have the qualitative data I intended. Furthermore, if I had been able to gather qualitative data, I would have been able to identify trends or themes that may have arisen when the students were discussing fairness. These trends or themes may have been able to assist me in determining if the children's literature selections were effective in changing the students' conceptions about fairness. Moreover, this type of qualitative data may have helped to explain findings that were not found with the quantitative data I collected. It is possible that qualitative data could have compensated for the limitations that I previously described such as: assessment style and the impact of other character education interventions.

### **Future Research**

Although this project did not have significant findings, and had many limitations, this knowledge can be used to improve upon future research in this field. One possibility for a related research project would be to conduct the same experiment with a larger sample size. If this project was conducted with a larger sample size, it is possible that the researcher would have significant results. The research could be conducted across the entire grade level (in all kindergarten classrooms) or even in all early childhood grade level classrooms (pre-kindergarten through second grade) to obtain a broader perspective of the effectiveness of the method of using children's literature to teach character education.

Another suggestion for future research is to use an assessment that is more developmentally appropriate for young students or conducting the assessment in a one-on-one style interview rather than in a whole group setting. A one-on-one style interview may be more beneficial because the researcher would be able to ask questions and record the responses rather than relying on the young participants to record their responses accurately. Furthermore, this would give the researcher an opportunity to collect qualitative data that could be beneficial when trying to identify students' conceptions of fairness and how they can be changed.

In addition to revising the limitations I described previously, it would be beneficial to look more closely at the children's literature that was used in this project. Not only should more literature be used over a longer time span, but the researcher should analyze the literature. An analysis of the literature would help to ensure that the literature was presenting the concept of fairness in a manner that most accurately matches what the assessment is assessing. Perhaps children's literature selections that were similar to the book used in session two (see Appendix A), with a clear story line and problem the character overcomes, would be more beneficial for this project because they are easier for students to follow. These types of literature also enable students to connect with the protagonist as opposed to the books used for sessions one and four, which explored multiple scenarios of fairness. Although, the literature used in this project was

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selected based upon the common theme of fairness, it is possible that the literature was not as carefully selected as it should have been. Thus, future research should analyze how the different literary works present and express the concept of fairness in greater detail. In addition, the project only consisted of four reading sessions; if there had been more sessions, it is possible that there would have been a greater increase in overall scores, especially if the research is more selective when choosing books. If the students had been read a larger selection of this type of literature, it is possible that the literature would have been more effective in changing their feelings and conceptions about fairness.

Overall, this project is still considered helpful despite several limitations and lack of significant findings. This is true because picture books attract children, communicate ideas, and the visual images leave “the most indelible impression” (Jalongo, 2004, p.38). Thus, even though my project was not significant, the lessons and ideas expressed through the literature are likely to have made an impression upon the children and their behavior. Moreover, it is important to remember that there is a reason why most parents always read books to their children; books are important and influential. They are influential because children often remember the stories from the books they are read. In addition, children learn to love books and to relate to them. Furthermore, when children relate to books they can make meaning from the stories. Thus, it seems only natural to use books to teach important lessons not only academic, but also social lessons such as character education.

### **Appendix A**

Book 1: Small, Mary. (2006). *Being fair: A book about fairness*. Picture Window Books.

This book explains different situations and the reason it is important to be fair.

Book 2: Lester, Helen. (1995). *Me first*. Sandpiper.

This book follows Pinkerton Pig as he finds out it may not always be best to be first while he is on a trip with some of his friends.

Book 3: Bang, M. (2004). *When Sophie gets really angry- Really, really, angry*. Scholastic Paperbacks.

This book describes a situation when a little girl named Sophie gets angry and runs out of the house. It details how she handles her anger and what happens when she returns home.

Book 4: Rosenthal, A.K. & Lichtenheld, T. (2008). *It's not fair!*. HarperCollins.

This book describes different situations that on the surface appear to be unfair. This book was useful to help students understand that sometimes things may not seem fair, but actually are fair.

### **Appendix B**

**Discussion Questions from reading session:**

1. How do you think the character felt when that happened?
2. Why do you think the character did that?
3. How would you feel if that happened to you?
4. What could the character have done differently?

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- 5. Do you agree with how the characters treated each other? Why or why not?
- 6. Would you like it if you were treated that way? Why or why not?

# Appendix C

Pre – Post MRP Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. If you get punished for kicking your little brother, but your little brother does not get punished for kicking you, this makes you feel:

		
Happy	Okay	Sad

2. If the same person gets to be first in line every day, this makes you feel:

		
Happy	Okay	Sad

3. If the person behind you waits her turn for the water fountain, this makes you feel:

		
Happy	Okay	Sad

4. If your sister breaks the cookie jar, but doesn't tell your mom that she broke it and you get in trouble for breaking it, this makes you feel:

		
Happy	Okay	Sad

5. If you are playing and your friend does not play by the rules, this makes you feel:

		
Happy	Okay	Sad

6. If someone gets angry and kicks and screams, is this fair:

		
Yes	Maybe	No

7. If you get punished for kicking your little brother, but your little brother does not get punished for kicking you, is this fair?

		
Yes	Maybe	No

8. If everyone gets a turn to be first in line, is this fair?

		
Yes	Maybe	No

9. If someone shares her toys with you, is this fair?

		
Yes	Maybe	No

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10. If your sister breaks the cookie jar and tells your mom what she did, is this fair?



Yes



Maybe



No

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