

# Heroes and Heroines: Finding Role Models in Books

Do you often find yourself looking for role models to ignite and inspire your students—people they can admire and emulate, who solve problems by using initiative, perseverance, integrity, and cooperation? I mean *real* heroes and heroines, not popular super-action characters or sports celebrities.

Although we don't always realize it, they're right under our noses—in books full of rich characters, problems, and plots that reflect real life. As Jonathan Swift wrote in *A Tale of a Tub*, books are “the children of the brain.”

While children often have difficulty identifying and communicating their feelings, they can relate to literary characters and view their own needs and experiences with a deeper understanding. Stories provide an opportunity for readers to become emotionally involved with characters, enabling them to verbalize, act out, or draw pictures to describe their feelings. We must help our students understand that they cannot live without the nourishment of books that allow them to vicariously experience the outside world.

At Fairview Elementary, a K–3 school in Mora, Minnesota, we use Susan Kovalik's 12 Lifeskills (*see box*) to teach and model the characteristics of the heroes and heroines in our literature, and to illustrate our behavioral expectations. They are taught and reinforced daily by all members of our learning community. High expectations, combined with parents' participation and reinforcement, have resulted in early success in maintaining our emphasis on positive behavior. We have succeeded in creating an educational climate that has reduced



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behavioral referrals by 68 percent over the past four years.

An important element in our success has been the use of literature to promote and inspire students' behavior. One of my favorite duties as principal of 550 students is to teach Lifeskills with thought-provoking books. We have many books at Fairview that children want to hear again and again, including *Those Can-Do Pigs* by David McPhail, *Enemy Pie* by Derek Munson, *The Quiltmakers' Gift* by Jeff Brumbeau, and *James and the Giant Peach* by Roald Dahl. Students are asked to identify which Lifeskills the characters possess in these books, and which ones are lacking.

Virtually all children's books feature characters that exhibit a variety of important skills for a successful life, and their stories can teach and transfer positive character traits. I give my Fairview students two important messages about reading: “Reading is like eating. You must read every day to build a strong and healthy brain”; and “Reading for pleasure is the greatest gift you can give yourself.”

I believe we must actively teach and model the characteristics of the heroes and heroines in our literature. We must also identify, label, reinforce and celebrate the demonstration of the Lifeskills they represent. The beauty of this approach is that all of our students benefit—the gifted, the average, and the struggling ones. With the combination of Lifeskills and literature, children are able to validate their feelings, realize that other children have similar issues, discuss and use problem-solving to decide on a solution, and model themselves after a literary character that they admire.

After hearing the story of Helen Keller, a first grader told me, “I sure don't want to be blind, but I sure would like to have all her courage!” ■

**Cheryl Bjerk** is principal of Fairview Elementary School in Mora, Minnesota. Her e-mail address is [Cheryl\\_Bjerk@mora.k12.mn.us](mailto:Cheryl_Bjerk@mora.k12.mn.us).

## LIFESKILLS IN LITERATURE

These are the 12 Lifeskills represented by the characteristics of heroes and heroines in children's literature at Fairview:

- Respect
- Responsibility
- Cooperation
- Integrity
- Effort
- Perseverance
- Patience
- Good judgment
- Organization
- Problem-solving
- Initiative
- Caring

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