

Stimulating Moral Reasoning in Children through Situational Learning and Children's Literature

Nancy P. Gallavan and Jennifer L. Fabbi

MS. VANDERVELDT OVERHEARS one of her fifth-graders boasting how he ensured his election to student council president by giving peers money to vote for him. Mr. Jackson realizes two of his first-graders hid a boy's completed homework, which caused him to forfeit attending a special event; many of his classmates considered this boy to be the "classroom bully." Ms. Szabo discovers that several of her third-grade students spread rumors about a new classmate, which prompted the child to secretly skip school and hide in an unsafe place.

In any elementary school classroom, a teacher will occasionally observe students involved in activities that seem neither honest nor ethical. Children will sometimes appear to make unreasoned decisions, with little concern for other children or for likely consequences to themselves. Children's actions may reflect behavior that is shown to be acceptable, or even glamorous, on television entertainment and news programs.

Social studies education emphasizes academic knowledge, skills, and attitudes to "help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world."¹ Young learners can benefit greatly from opportunities in the classroom to engage in discussions, debates, and writing assignments. How can we stimulate moral reasoning skills and principled attitudes in the elementary grades?

Situational Learning and Moral Dilemmas

Much like role-play and simulation, situational learning allows students to

construct social encounters (real or hypothetical) in the past, present, and the future. Young learners can portray a character like or unlike themselves, investigate the context in which people live, and develop an appreciation for various viewpoints while participating in an expressive activity for an audience of their peers.²

Situational learning differs from role-play and simulation in that the students choose their own situations and structure personalized outcomes that may or may not be predicted by the teacher. There are no overarching right and wrong answers or anticipated outcomes; the process entails risk-taking and uncertainty, for teacher and students alike. Situational learning permits individuals to explore and express their own understanding as they apply new knowledge to their own socio-cultural context. Thus, situational learning is ideal for developing moral reasoning authentically in today's young learners--the citizens who will shape the future.

In 1969, developmental psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg outlined six stages for the development of moral reasoning in children.³ (Table 1) Studying children over many years then led him to describe seven important points that guide the maturation process (Table 2). Kohlberg measured the level of children's moral development by evaluating their responses to descriptions of moral dilemmas. These dilemmas are fictitious but believable scenarios where individuals face situations that involve concepts such as honesty, trust, equity, respect, responsibility, integrity, compassion, and democracy; communication such as revealing information to others, seeking the opinions of others, mediation, and consensus; and social constructs such as power, authority, choice, and ownership. Young learners acquire a conscientious understanding of themselves, one another, and society through gradual experience with moral dilemmas featuring progressively higher stages of moral reasoning. In the classroom, a teacher

Table 1: Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development⁶

PRECONVENTIONAL LEVEL: EXTERNAL REWARD AND PUNISHMENT; EGOCENTRISM

Stage 1: Displaying unquestioned obedience to authority with immediate consequences

Stage 2: Promoting self-interest in exchange for both immediate & future favors

CONVENTIONAL LEVEL: SOCIAL NORMS AND CONFORMITY; INTERPERSONALISM

Stage 3: Living up to expectations of others and beginning to see viewpoints of others

Stage 4: Following rules to maintain and show respect for social order

POSTCONVENTIONAL LEVEL: MORAL PRINCIPLES AND OPTIONS; INTERNALIZATION

Stage 5: Adhering to a social contract while recognizing the possibility of change

Stage 6: Advancing universal ethical principles & human rights; risking legal consequences

Children's Literature

Begaye, Lisa Shook (illus. Libba Tracy). *Building a Bridge*. Flagstaff, AZ: Rising Moon, 1993.

Baillie, Allan (illus. Di Wu). *Rebel*. New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1994.

Bunting, Eve (illus. David Diaz) *Smoky Night*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1999.

Dr. Seuss (aka Theodore S. Geisel). *The Butter Battle Book*. New York: Random House, 1984.

Hoffman, Mary (illus. Caroline Binch). *Amazing Grace*. New York: Dial, 1991.

Hoose, Phillip and Hannah Hoose (illus. Debbie Tilley). *Hey, Little Ant*. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press, 1998.

Lorbiecki, Marybeth (illus. K. Wendy Popp). *Sister Anne's Hands*. New York: Dial, 1998.

Munson, Derek (illus. Tara Calahan King). *Enemy Pie*. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle, 2000.

Muth, Jon J. *The Three Questions*. New York: Scholastic, 2002.

Peet, Bill. *The Ant and the Elephant*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1972.

Polacco, Patricia. *Mr. Lincoln's Way*. New York: Philomel Books, 2001.

Popov, Nikolai. *Why?* New York: North-South Books, 1996.

Steig, William. *Brave Irene*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986.

Stevens, Janet. *Tops and Bottoms*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1995.

Woodson, Jacqueline (illus. E. B. Lewis). *The Other Side*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2001.

Table 2: Rules of Progression for the Stages of Moral Development⁷

1. All individuals move through these stages.
2. The stages always occur in the same order.
3. All movement through the stages is forward in sequence.
4. A stage cannot be skipped
5. The sequence is the same despite cultural differences (social, economic, religious, etc.).
6. Some individuals move farther or faster than others.
7. The movement from stage to stage is not an automatic process, but requires interaction and learning in a social environment.

can pose age-appropriate problems, raise questions, and encourage students to make observations and exchange ideas with their peers in a safe and accepting environment.⁴

Three Situational Learning Strategies

We describe three effective teaching strategies for empowering students in situational learning experiences using moral dilemmas applicable throughout the social studies. Each strategy is described (briefly touching upon curriculum, instruction, and assessment), while incorporating selected children's literature. We encourage teachers to try these strategies, modify them to meet their own students' needs and interests, and add their own selections of children's literature. Each of the following three sections includes an overview of the purpose, procedures, materials, and assessment of

a situational learning activity. Situational learning can be used to examine civic decisions, economic dynamics, social geographic relationships, and historical events found throughout the social studies curriculum.

The First Strategy: Y

Our first strategy is named for the shape of the letter Y, which serves as both the thinking prompt as well as the writing structure. The purpose of the Y strategy is to identify a perceived moral problem and to offer at least three potential causes, choices, or outcomes. This format is appropriate for first and second grade, but can be used in any grade to start children thinking about the moral implications of a situation.

Instruction begins by selecting a situation to be presented to students. The

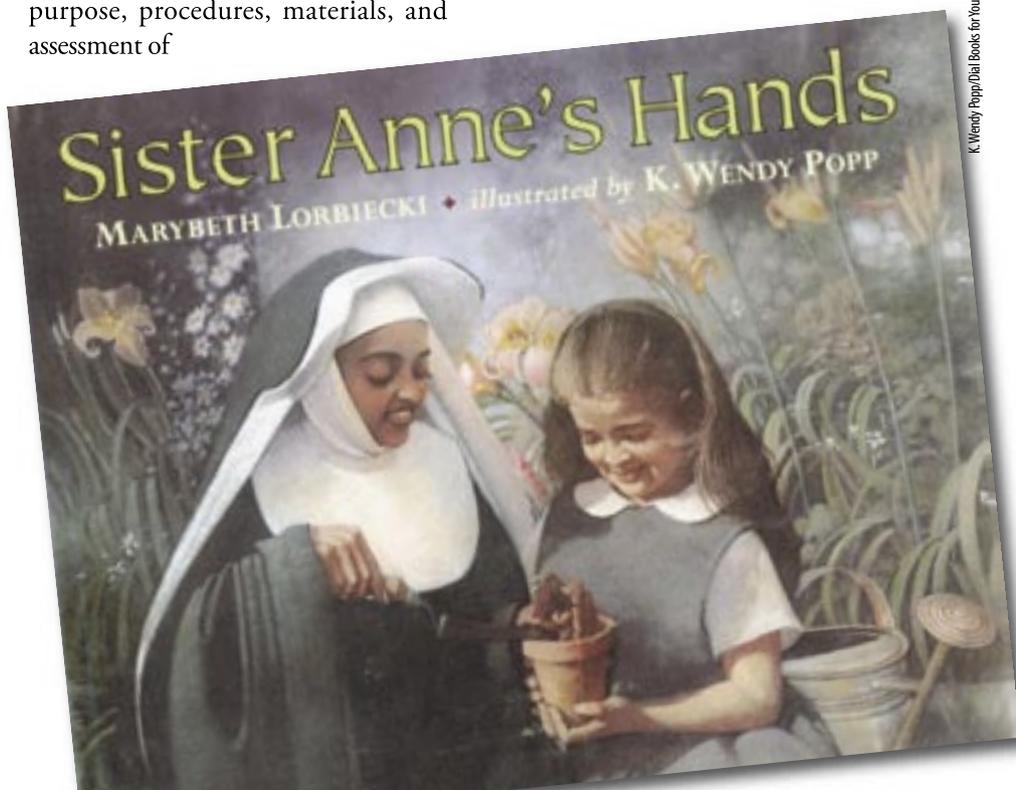
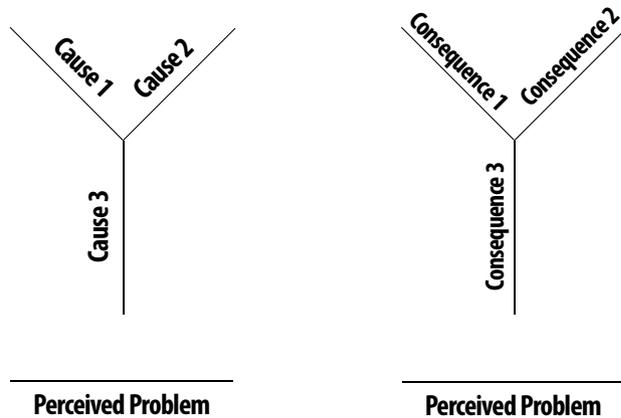


Figure 1: The Y Strategy



wordless picture book *Why?* provides an exemplary situation. In this story we see two characters and their environment changing over time as they react to a particular sequence of events. The teacher can introduce the book by asking them to look at the illustrations carefully and then think about the problems encountered in the story. Following the story, they should be able to identify one perceived problem, three causes, and three consequences.

After reading the story aloud, provide each student with a diagram of two large Ys and a base line drawn below each Y (Figure 1). Students can briefly describe problems on the base lines and then write out three causes or three consequences on the stem of each Y. These

written responses can help students to compose their thoughts mindfully, without the influence of classmates' opinions. Meanwhile, the teacher can be preparing similar diagrams on the board, overhead transparency, or large sheet of paper.

After completing their Y diagrams, students can discuss them with partners, small groups, or the entire class. Ideally, all responses would be shared for everyone to hear and understand. What is the perceived dilemma? Is there a consensus among students as to what the three primary causes and three primary consequences are? Can a consensus be reached? Students will gain insights from listening carefully to others describe the situation and weigh the various possible outcomes.

Assessment can include asking students to write their own summaries of the situation comparing and contrasting two of the possible causes or two of the potential consequences. As an extension, this strategy can be used to address an immediate concern in the classroom helping students to identify and understand a perceived problem and to consider different possible outcomes. For example, Tim finds an expensive toy car in the grass beside the school playground, empty of children, early on a Saturday morning. Should he keep it for his own, or turn it in to the school's Lost and Found on Monday?

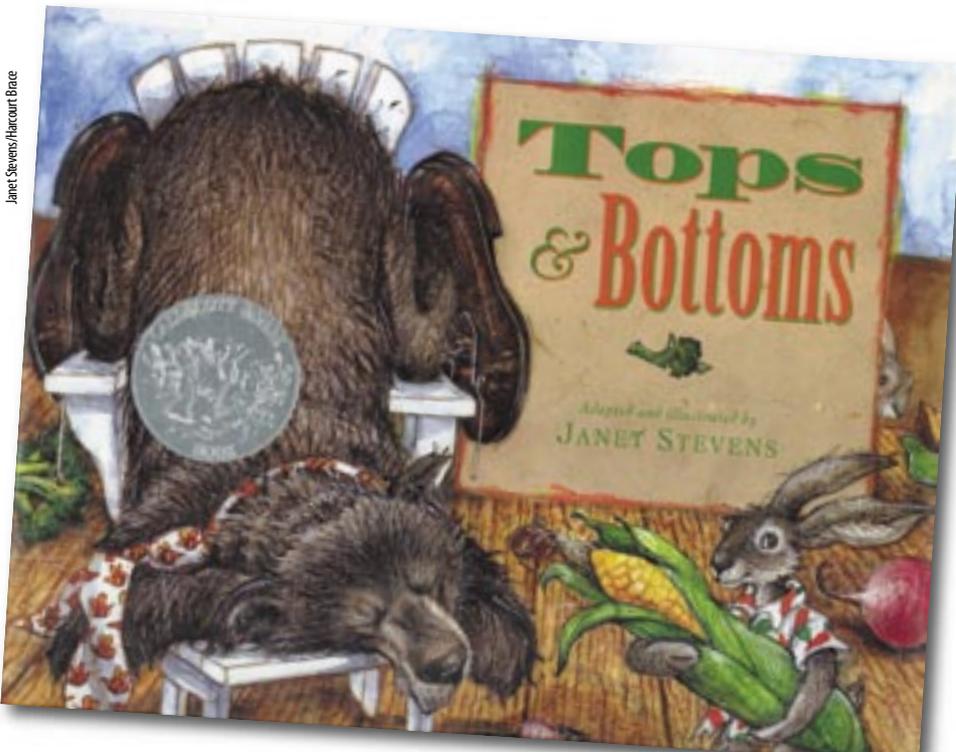
Ultimately, the Y strategy helps students to clarify what constitutes a problem and expands their views of the world. Throughout the process, learners are engaged in student-selected and student-directed examination of causes of moral dilemmas and the moral consequences of different responses.

Children's Literature for the Y Strategy

Five selections of children's literature that can be used with the Y strategy include:

1. *Brave Irene*: When Irene volunteers to deliver a dress that her mother has made for the duchess, she does not realize the challenge she will face. As the snowstorm around her intensifies, Irene must overcome several obstacles in order to complete her task. Forces of nature symbolize the powers of good and evil that confront Irene along her journey. What other events or choices might have changed this story for Brave Irene?

2. *Enemy Pie*: A young boy's perfect summer is disrupted when Jeremy Ross moves to town and becomes his worst enemy. The boy's dad knows a surefire way to get rid of enemies—the recipe for Enemy Pie. What kinds of disgusting ingredients should go into a pie for an enemy? While Dad bakes, the boy's job is to spend the day with Jeremy, hoping to lure him home for a piece of pie. But when dinnertime comes around, the boy is no longer sure that he wants to follow through with the plan to get rid of his enemy.



3. *Mr. Lincoln's Way*: "Mean Gene" hates everyone who is different from himself. Mr. Lincoln, the "coolest principal ever," helps Mean Gene to see that differences are what make people special and also helps him to discover his own unique talent. However, it will take more than just the principal's attention to break a pattern of intolerance that has been perpetuated through Gene's family life. Why does Mean Gene tease and bully other kids at his school?

4. *Sister Anne's Hands*: Anna recalls how Sister Anne, an African American nun, came to be her second grade teacher during the early 1960s. Although the nun's skin color is unlike any she has ever seen, Anna knows that Sister Anne is the best teacher she has ever had. However, it is not easy being different in a small town, and after the school year has finished, Sister Anne moves away. What causes the story to end this way for Sister Anne?

5. *Why?*: Through full-page watercolor illustrations, a wordless story emerges in which a small altercation escalates to a full-fledged war between a group of frogs and a group of mice. As each group persists in surpassing the other's last move, hope for a resolution diminishes. In moving from the opening sequence of a beautiful spring day to the final page depicting a landscape of destruction, the question that remains to be asked is "Why?"

The Second Strategy: Points on a Continuum

This strategy focuses on a situation in which there are a multitude of possible outcomes, each of which is supported strongly by an individual or group. The Points on a Continuum strategy is appropriate for the upper elementary grades. The procedures for this type of situational learning begin with the teacher selecting a scenario in which individuals or groups vastly differ in their positions regarding the problem, causes, consequences, and solutions. The book *Hey Little Ant* not only presents such a conflict, the text also offers two opposing viewpoints and leaves the reader to

form a conclusion. As they are listening to the story, students record the different positions or points on single Post-it notes. After the reading, students share their work with partners or within small groups, and place their statements along a line that represents a continuum from one opposite pole to another (Figure 2). Then students discuss their Post-it notes with the whole class and combine their notes onto one continuum.

This situational learning strategy stimulates rich and powerful discussions. Students debate their positions or advocate one outcome over another. During the two-step consensus building process, students find themselves generating additional points, modifying or deleting previously held points, and frequently realizing they need to research their points (gaining new perspectives with the information gathered through observations, documents, interviews, Internet searches, etc.). Points on the Continuum provides a useful mechanism for examining and understanding authentic social issues and serves as an insightful metaphor for comprehending individual and group concerns.

As with the Y strategy, the issues involved in this situational learning strategy can be student-selected and student-directed, addressing immediate classroom concerns. For example, in one classroom there were an insufficient number of seat cushions in the read-aloud corner; some students had to just sit on the rug. Tussles ensued. So the teacher assigned small groups to discuss the problem and propose possible solutions or ameliorations. Students

generated a flurry of ideas on Post-its, such as "Take turns using the pillows," "Hold a fundraiser to buy more," and "Ask families to donate a pillow." These were placed on a continuum from "short-term" to "long-term" solutions.

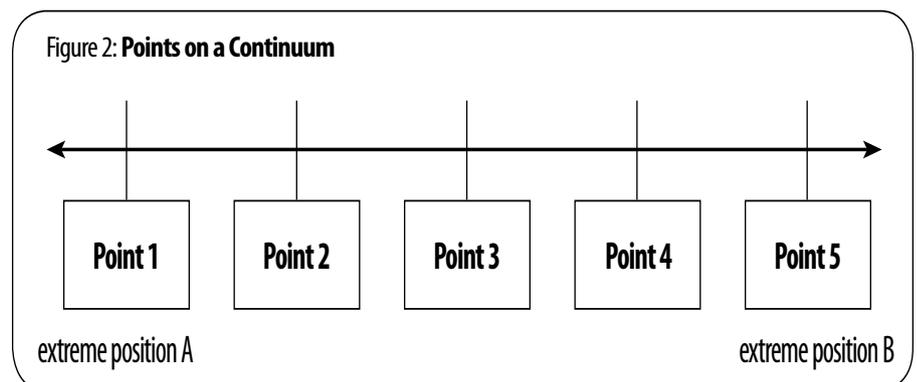
Assessment can be conducted by asking students to write and present their points individually or within small groups through a structured debate format. Student defense of a specific position or a point on the continuum can be voluntary or assigned by the teacher to encourage students to openly consider different points of view, perhaps one conflicting with their own opinion.

Children's Literature for the Points on a Continuum Strategy

Five pieces of children's literature to integrate with the "Points on a Continuum" strategy include:

1. *The Butter Battle Book*: In this characteristic Seussian rhyming tale, the Yooks and the Zooks, whose lands are divided by a great wall, vigorously disagree over which side of one's bread should be buttered. As time passes, each side develops more and more sophisticated weaponry in order to protect its belief and stand its ground. On the last page, representatives from both the Yooks and the Zooks are depicted holding a "Big-Boy Boomeroo," and wondering who will drop it first, leaving a broad spectrum for speculation on how this story could end.

2. *Hey Little Ant*: This book presents the alternating perspectives of a boy who is about to squish an ant and the ant that he is about to squish. While humans may



think of ants as pests, this ant argues that he has a purpose on Earth and a family to feed. To squish or not to squish-what would you do?

3. *The Other Side*: A long fence separates the black side of Clover's town from the white side. Clover's mother has always told her not to climb over the fence. However, when Annie, a White girl from the other side, begins to sit on the fence, Clover starts to wonder about her and why the fence is there at all. What are some other options for Clover and Annie, besides sitting on the fence all summer?

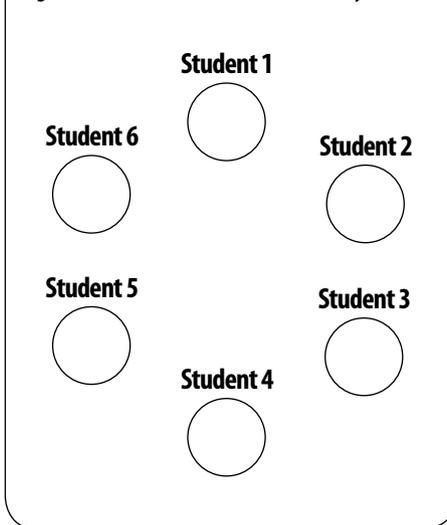
4. *Smoky Night*: Daniel and his cat stare out their apartment window at the streets below, as people riot and loot the stores. He wonders why this is happening, how people can look angry and happy at the same time. As Daniel and his mother sleep, a fire starts in their building. In the rush to get out, the family cat is lost. Mrs. Kim also is missing her cat. How and why are these people brought together? What is the impact of the riot?

5. *The Three Questions*: What is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do? Nikolai, in a quest to be a good person, surveys his friends on the answers to his three questions. Unsatisfied with their conflicting answers, he seeks counsel from Leo, the wise turtle who lives in the mountains. When he hears a stranger's cry for help, Nikolai springs into a series of actions, which help him to answer these questions for himself. Answers to these questions, which will vary from person to person and change over time, help to form the points on a continuum.

The Third Strategy: Quote Without Commentary

The third strategy helps to promote clear communication and to provoke critical thinking. The Quote Without Commentary strategy is best applied to large group discussions in the upper elementary grades. This strategy focuses on identification of the issues or problems, individual concerns, possible

Figure 3: Quote Without Commentary



effects on the group, reasons to support or not support particular actions, etc. Quote Without Commentary examines elements of power and influence, with students exchanging ideas and promoting change.

Begin by having students sit in an open circle (Figure 3). This configuration is essential. It shows that all participants will have voice, vote, and value. Everyone can be seen, heard, and understood. Before hearing the entire story, students should listen to a brief description of a conflict, and then write down a few thoughts and feelings posed by the situation. The situation in the book *Amazing Grace* demonstrates how this strategy might be used: Ask students whether they believe that Grace can play the role of Peter Pan in her class play. After hearing the story, each student is given five to ten minutes to write a brief statement about it, focusing on one of the characters, the plot, or a moral dilemma that is posed in the book.

Beginning at any spot around the circle, one student reads his or her statement. No one is allowed to question, interrupt, or respond to any other student's statement. All members of the group share their quotes without commentaries, continuing around the circle until everyone has spoken, and no member is allowed to "pass." Group members are encouraged to write additional comments after each person has shared.

The teacher facilitates a group discussion by starting a second round follow-

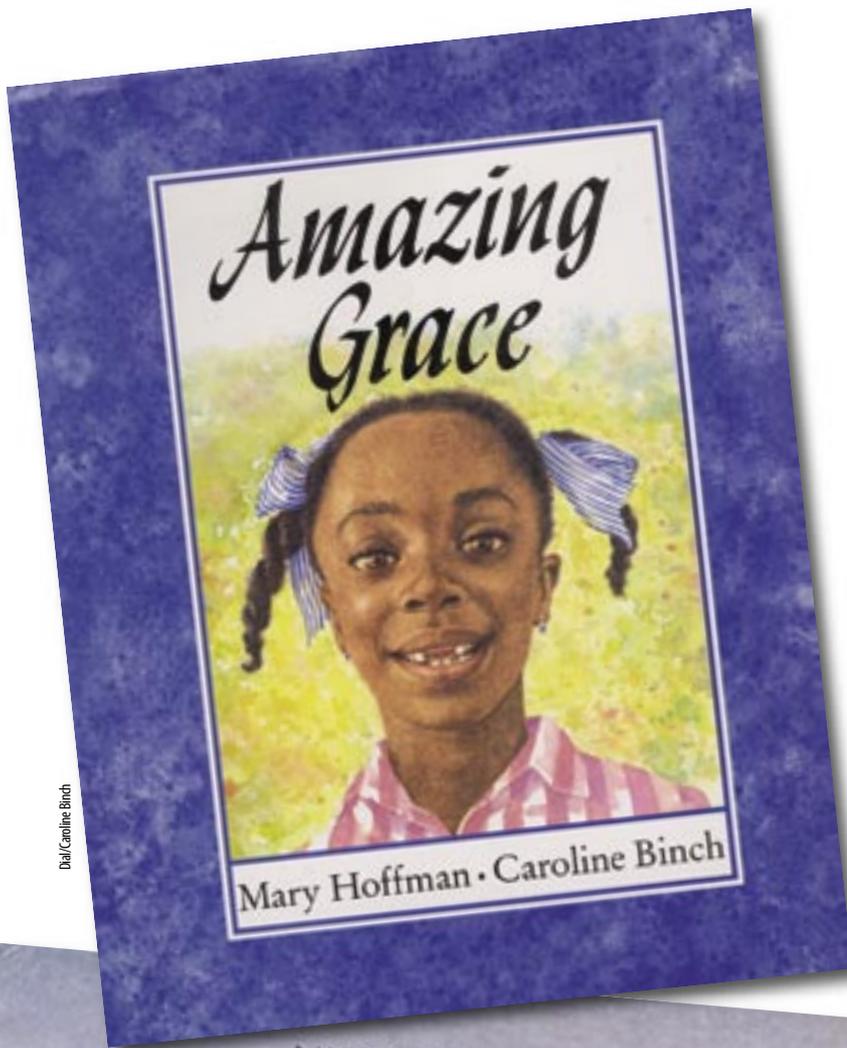
ing the same format. Any student who chooses to speak may do so, again by speaking one at a time in the order students are seated in the circle; however, all students are not required to speak. A student may react to a prior statement, provide continued support of a previous position, or introduce a new comment. The paths around the circle continue until no one has anything new to add. Upon conclusion, several different outcomes may occur. The class may craft a list of comments for group members to consider or actions they need to take. This list can be prioritized, assigned to individuals or groups to investigate, and/or be delegated for further action.

To assess this situational learning, students can write a self-assessment statement summarizing what they have learned about themselves and others from participating in this process. Students can validate their progress by originating one to three goals they will pursue based upon this experience in relationship to a particular (preferably authentic!) situation or question. The Quote Without Commentary strategy offers a respectful approach to situational learning. It removes peer pressure and the need to conform while offering the chance to hear from everyone, to share various perspectives, and the opportunity to modify one's thinking. It is useful for promoting conversations about many different issues related to young people's lives.

Children's Literature for the Quote Without Commentary Strategy

Five pieces of children's literature to integrate with the Quote Without Commentary strategy include:

1. *Amazing Grace*: Grace loves stories and prides herself on her acting ability. However, when her classmates doubt her ability to play the role of Peter Pan in her class play because she is Black and a girl, Grace begins to doubt herself. With the support of her mother and grandmother, Grace decides that she can do anything that she puts her mind to. Should Grace be chosen for the role of Peter Pan in her class play?



Dial/Caroline Binch

2. *The Ant and the Elephant*: When an ant is in trouble and needs help, the turtle ignores his pleas. Next, the turtle stumbles into trouble, and his cry for help is ignored. And so the story goes, with each subsequent animal ignoring someone in need and then wishing for help. Finally, the mighty jungle elephant arrives and gets everyone out of trouble; however, in a cloud of self-satisfaction with all of his good deeds, he falls into a ravine. Will the ant be able to help the elephant? Why should we help each other?

3. *Building a Bridge*: On the first day of kindergarten, Anna is scared and excited. On another part of the Navajo Reservation, Juanita is feeling the same way. When Anna boards the school bus, she is overwhelmed by how different she looks from everyone else. Anna sits alone in class until her teacher urges her to play with Juanita and the “magic blocks.” Together the girls build a bridge and begin to bridge their cultural differences. How would you feel if you were Anna? Juanita? How are the blocks magical?

4. *Rebel*: When the General, with his tanks and his soldiers, overtook Burma, everyone watched and nobody spoke. Suddenly a small, battered sandal hits the General behind the ear, knocking his hat off of his head. The General threatens to punish the “little rebel” harshly and sets his sights on the school children. As the children line up for inspection before the General, he is in for a surprise. Are there cases where it is acceptable to rebel against authority?

5. *Tops and Bottoms*: Bear is rich, but lazy. Rabbit, seeing an opportunity for a better life, plans a tricky business venture with Bear, who is allowed to sleep while Rabbit works. However, at the end of each harvest, Bear is left with the raw half of the deal! As Rabbit’s wealth increases, Bear learns that laziness is expensive, and he ceases to be business partners with Rabbit. Does Bear deserve to be tricked by Rabbit?

NIKOLAI POPOV
WHY?



North-South/Nikolai Popov

“Informed and Reasoned Decisions for the Public Good”

Situational learning incorporates social studies content and processes employing knowledge, skills, and attitudes to stimulate moral reasoning and development. From the three effective teaching strategies presented here, young learners extend their understanding of and appreciation for the many different ways people live, work, and play, as individuals, as a united citizenry, and as members of the global community. Students are empowered to examine situations closely by asking important questions and by listening attentively to others—people both like and unlike themselves. They can learn to identify what is perceived to be happening by different people, who the various players are, what might happen, and what each person’s investment is in a particular outcome.

Situational learning fosters opportunities for young learners to practice probing the big question of how they know what they know. They practice asking questions of themselves and one another through clear communication and friendly consensus building. A well-developed inquiry process enables young learners to practice keeping their minds open as they examine events and their causes

and consequences. Using situational learning to explore moral dilemmas based on children’s literature allows young learners to see themselves acting within their own sociocultural context. This is an important step toward “making informed and reasoned decisions for the public good.”⁵

Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994), vii.
2. Gail A. McEachon, *Self in the World: Elementary and Middle School Social Studies* (Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 2001), 224.
3. Lawrence Kohlberg, “Stage and Sequence: The Cognitive-Developmental Approach to Socialization,” In David A. Goslin, ed., *Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally, 1969), 347-480.
4. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1-20.
5. NCSS, vii.
6. Kohlberg, 347-480.
7. George W. Maxim, *Social Studies and the Elementary School Child*, 5th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall, 1995), 231-232.

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