



Mari Nakamura & Marian Hara

The *Younger Learners* column provides language teachers of children and teenagers with advice and guidance for making the most of their classes. Teachers with an interest in this field are also encouraged to submit articles and ideas to the editors at the address below. We also welcome questions about teaching, and will endeavour to answer them in this column.

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that bring much joy and learning into our English program.

The Virtues of Story-based Activities

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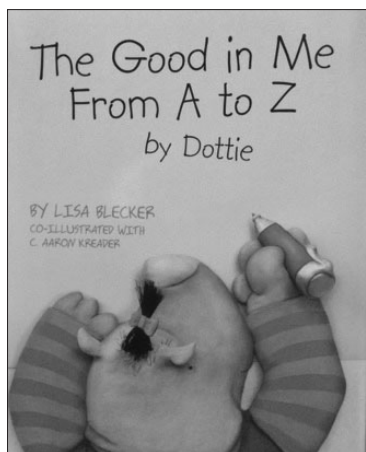
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The Virtues of Picture Books

Children love stories and picture books. I often see them at school, huddled in front of their teacher in rapt attention, on the floor at the bookshelves, or peering gleefully into their bag at a book they checked out for the weekend. So much can happen when a child engages with a book that works to build their character, self awareness, and imagination, and encourages them to feel curious, brave, and joyful.

Figure 1

The *Good in Me from A to Z* by Dottie by Lisa Blecker and C. Aaron Kreader (2009)



In the previous *TLT*, the article on “Today’s Plan” briefly mentioned our class mascot, Dottie chan the Rhino, and her book of virtues, *The Good in Me from A to Z* by Dottie (Blecker & Kreader, 2009). Dottie chan and her book have become essential resources

A Rhino Roaring with Personality

The curtain rises on a kindergarten English class. The teachers and students are about to finish the *How Are You* chant with the final emotion, excited. Everyone knows what, or rather who, is coming. It is Dottie chan, our cute rhino classroom mascot, dressed appropriately for the weather, dancing to the tune of the Can-Can, with all the children clapping and chanting for her to introduce the virtue message of the day. It is funny and magical, and our students are excited to see her and curious about what she will present.

Dottie Chan’s Book

The Good in Me, From A to Z by Dottie is a book that introduces 26 virtues from A-Z. Dottie chan’s book is full of delightful pages, each depicting a virtue in words and actions. It is even possible to sing the book to the ABC Song. Some of the virtues in the book are: Courageous, Determined, Encouraging, Kind, Patient, Questioning, Respectful, Supportive, and Zany. For the sake of simplicity for our 4-to-6-year-old students, some of the virtues above and throughout the book were changed to: Be Brave, I Can Do It, You Can Do It, Be Curious, Be Polite, Be A Good Friend, Be Unique, and so on.

Dottie Chan’s Messages

Dottie chan’s book works as a great resource with rich concepts that we can match with picture books and other activities that we introduce in our classroom. Dottie chan often brings us a “Message of the Day” to help us act out and understand the feelings and situations that can happen in our daily lives. One day, Dottie chan presented the virtue, “Show Self Control” from her book. In the picture, Dottie chan is in front of a television screen that has gone black. She has watched her allotment of cartoons and has turned off the TV. We take this time to talk to our students about their ability to exercise self control at home and in the classroom, and then we give them a chance to experience self control for

themselves. A timer is set for 20 seconds, and the students are told to remain quiet and still until the timer goes off. That goes well for about 10 seconds, when the teacher starts making funny faces and some students start to giggle, but others will retain their self control. Then, it is Dottie chan's turn to try her luck at showing Self Control with a plate of cookies. We ask the class, "How many cookies are ok to eat?" The students call out answers like, "4, 2, 10, 1!" We all decide that Dottie chan can have two cookies. hilariously, it takes Dottie chan a couple of tries to regain her self control as the students yell "Show Self Control!" to encourage her.

Dottie chan also interacts with other components of our lesson plan, like the Mystery Box, where, after passing it around and shaking it, we might open it to find a pair of her lost underwear (so embarrassing, but helpful to show and learn the difference between "pants" and "underwear" before reading a story with that very important vocabulary word).

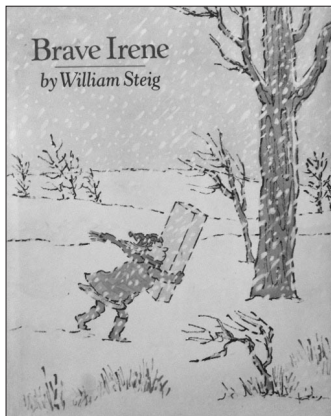
Favorite Books and Activities

Brave Irene

Last winter, we read the book, *Brave Irene* (Steig, 2011). In the book, Irene's mother, a dressmaker, makes a special dress for a customer, but is sick and cannot deliver it. Her daughter, Irene, puts on her winter wear, places the dress in a box, and treks out into a raging snowstorm. Irene is battered by the wind, tripped and struck by branches, loses the dress, twists her ankle, is swallowed up by the snow, and is finally all alone and lost in the woods. Will she give up or go on?

Figure 2

Brave Irene by William Steig (2011)



Before we read the story, we sing the "How Are You?" song from the Greeting Block in Today's Plan. The emotions featured in the song are Happy, Sick,

Sad, Mad, Surprised, and Excited. These emotions were taken from the story to reinforce the language in the book. After singing "How Are You?" Dottie chan pops in to showcase the message, Be Brave, from her book. On that page, little Dottie chan is seen holding a toy rhino and standing in front of a big doctor. The students talk about how Dottie chan might be feeling about being there. The teacher then pulls out a toy injection needle and prepares to give Dottie chan an injection. Dottie chan shivers with fear. The class encourages her with soft chants of "Be Brave, Be Brave, Be Brave!" Dottie chan takes the injection well! Some students then volunteer to come forward to be brave and get a shot, while their friends cheer them on, as they did for Dottie chan.

- Brave Irene Activity: "Against the Wind"
- Dottie chan's Virtues: Be Brave, Kind, Loving, Creative, Trust Myself, I can do it, You can do it
- Props needed: a box bigger than a kindergartner
- Characters: The Wind and Irene.
- The scene: The Wind and Irene push and pull on the dress box to wrestle it away from the other. Classmates cheer Irene on by pointing and chanting, "You can do it!" as Irene says, "I can do it!" The Wind makes whooshing noises and pushes and pulls Irene. One or even two students can fight together against the Wind.

Figure 3

Fighting Against the Wind



All of our students got a chance to engage with the Wind. The more outgoing kids got up first, one by one or in pairs to fight. The Wind gave them all a good battle before getting pushed back against the wall. The smallest boy in the class, Nao, waited until last and walked up with an expression of repudiation on his face. He put his hands on the

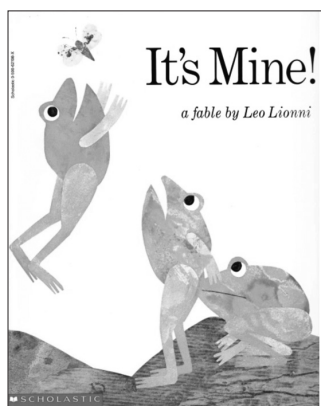
box and pushed. The Wind fell back a bit, regained footing, and pushed him back for a few seconds, but then faltered backwards as the boy pushed and pushed the Wind into the corner easily, as the other children in the room chanted, “You can do it! You can do it!” Nao’s face was alight with happiness, and the other children in the room were amazed that he beat the Wind quicker than they did. At the end, Nao went up to another teacher and said proudly, “I didn’t even use 100% of my power.”

It’s Mine

Another of our special virtue books is *It’s Mine!* (Lionni, 1996). It is a story about three frog siblings who do not like to share and are always fighting with each other. However, by the end of the book, they finally learn kindness and sharing. As we close the book, we ask the students if they think they can be kind and share, and of course they always say “Yes, I can!”, so, we put them to the test.

Figure 4

It’s Mine! by Leo Lionni (1996)



- It’s Mine Activity: “It’s MY Island!”
- Dottie chan’s Virtues: Be Brave, Giving, Kind, Helpful, Patient, Good Friend
- Props needed: Non-slip material for circles (20-25 cm), 1 circle per person, music, a shark puppet or doll
- Characters: Students, teachers, and the shark!
- The scene: Islands (non slip circles) are spread across the floor. Everyone finds their own island, jumps up and down on it, and says “It’s MINE!” When the music starts, all walk around stepping from island to island. When the music stops, everyone finds an island to stand on, jumps up and down on it, and says “It’s MINE!” At this point, everyone has their own island. The music repeats

and stops, and little by little, the islands disappear, and people are left without an island. Teacher says, “It’s ok, just wait, and you might get an island next time.” About the fourth time the music plays, the *Jaws* theme comes on, and a shark puppet slowly starts swimming around the islands.

As the islands disappear, the mood starts to change, and the activity and squeals intensify. The Shark disappears suddenly, the previous music resumes, and students continue their walk around the islands. Teacher removes more circles, the *Jaws* theme begins again, and the Shark returns to swim around the room.

Things are more hectic now. There is laughter and squealing as the Shark circles the islands and comes close to those without a place to land. It is at this point I see a young girl on an island reach out to a classmate running by and pull her onto the island with her. The look of happiness and satisfaction on her face at what she did is heartwarming. Other island dwellers see this and start pulling people onto their island as well, leaving the Shark alone to say, “I’m disappointed!” More islands disappear until finally, only one island remains! The Shark circles and circles and finally starts sobbing. You see, the Shark is actually lonely and just wants some friends to play with. When the students realize this, they invite the Shark to join them, and everyone is happy.

A few years ago, I did this activity in a presentation for teachers, and when we finished, someone asked me why I did not just directly teach the children how to be kind. It was a marvelous question, one that I actually was not prepared for at the time, but when I saw the above young girl’s expression in that moment when she was kind to her classmate, it hit me. I want our students to have a spontaneous, personal, firsthand experience of kindness and the other virtues when possible. Young children carry with them a bag of emotions that they run through every day. Some of those emotions they know well, but others are new and strange and have no name yet. As teachers, we have opportunities to help our students discover and understand their feelings as they learn to communicate in English in our classrooms.

Transcendent Virtues

This final virtue story is not from a book, but from an English class of our 5–6-year-olds. Dottie chan has a younger sibling named Ricky, who goes to live with a student for a week, when it is their turn to take Dottie chan’s book home. One of the most moving episodes occurred in this “take home activity,” when Mashu, whose name was always last on the roll call, finally got his turn to take home a

rhino. For weeks before his turn, he watched his classmates go home with Ricky, and every week he would say, that since his name was always last on the name list, that he should get to take Ricky home for two weeks instead of one.

Finally, Mashu's turn came, and he took Ricky the Rhino home. We wondered if he would keep Ricky for two weeks, but at the end of the first week, Mashu brought Ricky back to the Kindy. He told us about the fun he had with Ricky, Dottie chan's book, and the games that came with it. Then he paused and said, he thought it would not be fair to keep Ricky for another week because it would make someone else wait longer for their turn. There was silence. Here was a real-life episode, not in a game, not in a story, not in a Mystery Box, but in the heart and mind of a little boy, where the whole class could experience working with real virtues in real time. We opened Dottie chan's book and asked the children to say the good things they saw in Mashu. They said he was "nice," he was a "good friend," and that he showed "patience" and "self control." Mashu beamed at being recognized for his thoughtfulness and kindness. The children showed their awareness of the virtues they had learned, and, together with our exploration of them through discussion, picture books, songs, chants, and drama, they could use these powerful English words and concepts for themselves and each other.

These stories are a necessary part of the classroom, where our goal is to give our students the language to express themselves in English. Using Dottie chan's book and other picture books helps us to keep this language fresh and pertinent to guide

the students through their learning. Making activities from these books to complement and support the book material multiplies student engagement and growth. Picture books are rich fountains of slices of life for our students to splash around in where they meet interesting characters, face curious problems and situations to solve, and create dreams to aspire to, as they put themselves into the story and experience the feelings, awareness, and growth offered.

References

- Blecker, L., & Kreader, C. A. (2009). *The good in me from A to Z by Dottie*. Discover Writing Press.
 Lionni, L. (1996). *It's mine*. Dragonfly Books.
 Steig, W. (2011). *Brave Irene*. Square Fish.

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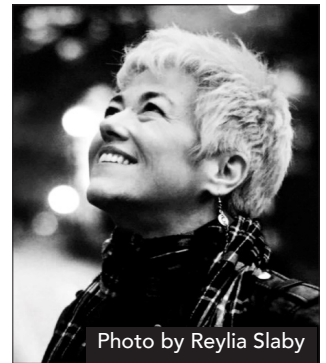


Photo by Reylia Slaby

[JALT PRAXIS] BOOK REVIEWS



Robert Taferner & Stephen Case

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This month's column features Thomas Amundrud's review of *Think Smart: Critical Thinking in Critical Times*.

Think Smart: Critical Thinking in Critical Times

[Michael Hood. Tokyo: Kinseido, 2018. (Teacher's Book and listening materials

available online) pp. 91. ¥1,900. ISBN: 978-4-7647-4043-3.]

Thomas Amundrud, Nara University of Education

Think Smart is an oral communication textbook for classes of CEFR B1-B2 students or higher. It has 15 thematic units that explore a variety of issues of social concern relevant to university