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## Using children's literature to develop decision making skills

Marsha Koenig  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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## Using children's literature to develop decision making skills

### Abstract

There has been much discussion concerning the importance of including thinking skills in the curriculum. Although emphasis has been placed in this area, data indicates that only a small percentage of students graduate from school competent in thinking skills (Smith, 1987). The lack of success in teaching them is explained by Beyer (1984). He names five factors that contribute to the failure of teaching thinking skills. His list includes: (a) confusion over which skills to teach, (b) failure to identify the components of skills, (c) use of inappropriate teaching techniques, (d) coverage of too many skills in too little time, and (e) incongruity between what is taught and what is tested.

Using Children's Literature to Develop  
Decision Making Skills

A Graduate Project  
Submitted to the  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by  
Marsha Koenig  
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Director of Research Paper

Mary Nan Aldridge

7/10/91

Date approved

Graduate Faculty Advisor

Cathy L. Thompson

7/10/91

Date approved

Graduate Faculty Reader

Peggy Ishler

7/29/91

Date approved

Head, Department of  
Curriculum & Instruction

There has been much discussion concerning the importance of including thinking skills in the curriculum. Although emphasis has been placed in this area, data indicates that only a small percentage of students graduate from school competent in thinking skills (Smith, 1987). The lack of success in teaching them is explained by Beyer (1984). He names five factors that contribute to the failure of teaching thinking skills. His list includes: (a) confusion over which skills to teach, (b) failure to identify the components of skills, (c) use of inappropriate teaching techniques, (d) coverage of too many skills in too little time, and (e) incongruity between what is taught and what is tested.

One of the thinking skills, decision making, is particularly important considering Kenneth Craycraft's (1988) words, "I may be able to experience a day when I don't read, add, write, or spell, but I won't be able to experience a day without decisions" (p. 3). Every day, decisions shape the directions of our lives, as well as the lives of those around us. Therefore, special importance is attached to decision making, especially in a democratic nation in which people have

freedom to make choices. Several authors including Ochoa (1981), Fulcher (1965), Glatthorn and Baron (1985), and Wales and Nardi (1985) feel that decision making is THE most essential thinking skill to teach. Decision making skills are important not only because the decisions people make determine all their voluntary actions and crucially affect their success after graduation, but also because decision making skills build a foundation for strategies used by other mental tasks.

Decision making is an important, functional and basic skill. Decisions can be made thoughtlessly and selfishly. However, with proper guidance and experience, people can learn to make decisions reflectively and responsively. It is this goal that social studies teachers and other educators are working toward. In order to teach decision making, it is first necessary to resolve the issues and obstacles blocking implementation in schools. This paper will attempt to investigate the factors that Beyer (1984) claims are preventing the teaching of thinking skills, by focusing on one of the skills, decision making. The following questions will be answered. What constitutes decision

making? How is it different from critical thinking or problem solving? What skills are necessary for good decision making? How and when can it best be taught? What models have been devised to teach decision making? Is using children's literature an effective method of teaching decision making? The findings will be synthesized with recommendations for teaching decision making skills in the elementary school.

#### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

##### What constitutes decision making?

Educators agree that one of the goals of education is to produce citizens who are good thinkers. There is disagreement about which skills to teach and what they encompass. Presseisen (1985) names four complex thinking processes including problem solving, decision making, critical thinking and creative thinking. All four kinds of thinking skills need to be included in any effective thinking skills program; however, many educators encounter difficulty differentiating among the different types. It is important to define these four thinking skills not only because the definition influences how they are taught, but for the purpose of this paper, it will help the reader distinguish

decision making from other thinking processes. Creative thinking is "using basic thinking processes to develop or invent novel, aesthetic, constructive ideas or products" (Presseisen, 1985, p. 45). Critical thinking is "rationally deciding what to do or believe" (Norris, 1985, p. 40). Students are demonstrating critical thinking when they analyze arguments, understand assumptions and biases, distinguish between facts and value claims, determine the reliability of a statement, or recognize illogical thinking. Problem solving and decision making are more difficult to differentiate. Generally, problem solving is defined by the steps that are used in this approach. Problem solvers identify a problem, hypothesize solutions, test the various proposals, choose the best solution, and apply the solution. Decision making uses a similar set of steps, but includes opportunities to justify the conclusion (Beyer, 1984). These are the general differences in the four main complex processes. A closer look at decision making follows.

Presseisen (1985) defines decision making as:  
using basic thinking processes to choose a best  
response among several options; assemble



information needed in a topic area; compare advantages and disadvantages of alternative approaches; determine what additional information is required; judge the most effective response and be able to justify it. (p. 45)

The Alberta Department of Education (1989) defines decision making as a "strategy of using values, and a variety of skills to determine a solution to a problem or issues that involves a choice and that requires a decision for action" (p. 2). In comparing these two definitions, it becomes apparent that the Presseisen definition omits any reference to the influence of personal values when making decisions. Ochoa (1981) cautions that any definition of decision making must include the values aspect, and she declares that the decisions we make must be guided by a concern for the welfare of others, not just ourselves. Engle (1986) agrees and states that "to duck the question of values is to cut the heart out of decision making" (p. 17).

The four complex processes of creative thinking, critical thinking, problem solving and decision making are broad strategies. Each of these complex broad strategies is based on different underlying essential

skills. These discrete skills are sometimes called micro-processes. It is not necessary to list all the discrete skills involved in the four complex processes here. However, the micro-processes involved in decision making are essential for further understanding of decision making. The discrete skills associated with decision making include: (a) direct information gathering such as observation, listening, asking questions; (b) gathering information from prepared sources, such as reading, using maps, graphs, tables; (c) application; (d) analyzation skills; (e) synthesis of ideas; (f) prediction; (g) evaluation; (h) judging; (i) inferring; (j) logical deductions; and (k) visualization. Beyer (1984) admits that precise descriptions of all the discrete skills that make up decision making are not available. Educators must make personal efforts to identify the components. Thus it is helpful to be aware of the discrete skills named above which effective decision makers must possess.

#### Models designed to teach decision making

There are numerous models that have been designed to teach thinking skills. Some have specific components that deal with decision making. Only one

was found that focused exclusively on teaching decision making.

The model which is designed to teach decision making is called Guided Design (Wales & Stager, 1978). In this approach, decision making skills are used in conjunction with subject matter content. An open-ended problem that emerges from the subject matter is given to a group of 5-6 students. They must proceed through the decision making steps, gathering information from the content and using it in each step. Proponents of this approach claim that the students are motivated to learn, and the learning is retained because the facts and information of the subject matter are serving as tools to solve problems. Generally, this model has been used with college and secondary students, although adaptations can be made for use with elementary age children. The premise of the Guided Design approach is that "information is no longer something to be remembered until the next test, but one of the tools that can be used to solve present and future problems" (Nardi & Wales, 1985, p. 223).

Schlichter (1981) discusses Talents Unlimited, a program using the multiple talent approach to teaching,

which includes decision making as one of its five talent areas. The other four talent areas are productive thinking, planning, forecasting, and communication. The five talent areas can be used collectively as a problem solving model, or they can each be taught separately. When decision making is taught separately, the students use four steps to complete the process: (a) think of many varied things they could do, (b) think more carefully about each alternative, (c) choose one alternative that they think is best, (d) give many varied reasons for their choices. This model is designed to be integrated into regular content areas in the elementary grades, kindergarten through sixth grade.

Several models exist in the literature that have been developed by individuals or school groups. These models are not total programs, but they outline the steps taken to make decisions. The social studies teachers resource manual published by the Alberta Department of Education (1989) includes a decision making model that in combination with Ochoa's (1981) and Fulcher's (1965) models provides a complete picture of the decision making process. An outline of these

steps follows. Ideas from Ochoa (1981) are starred once, steps added from Fulcher (1965) are starred twice.

1. Understand the issue and define the problem
  - \*Identify the goals of the decision maker and relate them to human dignity
2. Develop questions and procedures.
  - What do you know?
  - \*\*Ask what difference would it make if I...?
  - What do you need to know?
  - Where can you get information?
3. Gather, organize, and interpret the information.
  - How can we organize it?
4. Think of alternatives and their consequences.
  - What are the choices?
  - What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?
  - \*\*Visualize consequences.
  - \*Rank the alternatives, in relation to human dignity.

5. Make a choice. State what and why.
6. Take action.
7. Evaluate the action - was it good?

Why or why not?

\*Justify in terms of human dignity.

These additions to the model from Ochoa's (1981) all are concerned with relating the decisions made to human dignity. Ochoa feels that:

for too long many in the social studies have given lip service to a value neutrality in the curriculum. They have argued that it is not important WHAT young people think; rather it is important THAT they think. Such a stance is not acceptable. (p. 107)

Whatever model is utilized to teach decision making, educators cannot overlook the part that values play in the decision making process. Students must be made aware that real-life decisions are value decisions.

Another method that stems from a different perspective is proposed by Riecken and Miller (1990). They state that all the models and frameworks for decision making originate from scientific theory and

technique. These models rely on the Western world's logical thinking pattern and rational application of knowledge. Further, they maintain that decision making is very different from these logical procedures and models presented to students. Riecken and Miller found that "when we analyze the way that we as adults make decisions and solve problems, we often find that we do not follow the idealized logic found in curriculum materials" (1990, p. 60). Therefore, they propose the use of children's literature to introduce children to decision making. Brown (1986) agrees and emphasizes that children's literature includes a variety of different problems. Many are similar to children's own real-life problems, and may be solved in a variety of ways.

The list of models described in the previous paragraphs is not comprehensive. It is a sample of what is available for teaching decision making in a specific way.

#### Empirical Support for Teaching Decision Making

Many, including Beyth-Marom, Novik, and Sloan (1987), Sternberg and Bhana (1986), Nickerson (1984) and Norris (1985) agree that empirical evidence to

support the teaching of thinking skills, and in particular, decision making skills, is scant. Its effectiveness is unknown. Models that propose to increase decision making ability have not been extensively researched, for several reasons, including the fact that many programs are fairly new, educational evaluation is difficult, thinking skills are difficult to measure, and program developers have not conducted evaluations of their programs. Evaluation data that does exist is not strong enough to recommend one program over any other. An attempt has been made here to gather available data and to show the difficulty of recommending a model.

Sternberg and Bhana (1986) set out to gather a synopsis of research on five well-known intellectual skills programs, in order to "uncover whatever evidence existed to advocate or oppose the use of such programs" (p. 61). Their findings revealed several deficiencies in the research studies. In many cases, these studies were sponsored by the program developer, which may represent a biased view. Sketchy reporting limited replication in some studies. Limitations of the studies were not discussed by the researchers, nor were



interference by variables. They also found that some studies had inadequate or no control groups and that very few of the studies were published in refereed journals. Some of the same deficiencies were found in studies concerning decision making programs. For instance, claims are made in all the literature concerning the Guided Design model (Nardi & Wales, 1985, Wales & Stager, 1978) that their model increases motivation to learn and therefore increases retention. These claims were made without reference to research which would support their position. The reader infers that the developers of the program are basing their claims on what they believe the Guided Design approach will accomplish.

Research on the Talents Unlimited program, (Schlichter, 1981) notes that students in 32 of 40 experimental groups who received training in the 5 talent areas made progress on the post-test. It is further postulated that those students who were in the experimental groups developed more favorable attitudes toward school, interacted more with peers, and worked more consistently without supervision. The report does not indicate what device was used to measure attitude

toward school, interaction with peers or works with less supervision. In addition, the Mobile, Alabama schools where the research was conducted had a vested interest in the outcome. They received federal funding after the project was validated by the research to disseminate the Talents Unlimited model, and the school continues to receive recognition for using an innovative educational program. These examples illustrate the difficulty of proposing one model for the teaching of decision making skills above the others on the basis of research.

Although no model can be recommended, there are studies which indirectly validate the view that teaching decision making is worthwhile. Mancini, Cheffers, and Zaichkowsky (1977) found that students who were encouraged to participate in decision making relevant to their learning in physical education showed a more positive attitude toward their learning than those not involved, and also had more positive interaction patterns with the teachers.

In 1977, Martinek, Zaichkowsky, and Cheffers conducted a study to determine the effect of decision making on self concept and motor skills. Elementary

children were given autonomy in the physical education classroom, which had a positive effect on the development of self-concept.

Later, in 1983, Schempp, Cheffers, and Zaichkowsky found that children who were encouraged to make decisions scored significantly higher in attitude toward learning, self-concept, motor skills and creativity measurements. Although the students in these studies were not directly taught decision making skills, the results indicate that decision making is worthwhile to teach due to the powerful impact it makes self-concept and attitude toward learning.

Another study which impacts the teaching of decision making was conducted by Powers and Miller (1984). They investigated prior research that had indicated a relationship between low self-esteem, decision making skills and drug use in later life. They found that children are less likely to abuse drugs as adults if they can communicate well, make sound decisions and feel good about themselves. This study indicates that teaching children to make sound decisions would be beneficial, as it would decrease the likelihood that they will use drugs as adults.

DeBono (1983) proposes what he calls "soft data" to support direct teaching of thinking. His soft data is not measured by standardized tests or research studies, but by educators who notice changes in student behavior after direct teaching of thinking. The students show increased confidence, willingness to think about things, and more effective thinking and decision making. DeBono says that if the students begin to develop images of themselves as thinkers, then instruction in thinking has been effective.

The method recommended by Riecken and Miller (1990) and Brown (1986) for teaching decision making skills through the use of children's literature, also has no data base of research to demonstrate its effectiveness. This technique has its foundations in the holistic movement in education. It is a move away from "technical rationality" (Riecken & Miller, 1990) and reconstructed logics framework for decision making to one that reflects real-life decision making more accurately. Research has been done in science in 1983 by Driver and Erickson (cited in Riecken & Miller, 1990) that has implications for the teaching of decision making in social studies. This research has

shown that children come to the classroom with their own non-scientific explanations of the world. The problem for science educators is how to help children rethink these non-scientific explanations. Smardo (1982) advocates the use of children's literature, along with direct science experiences, to clarify and restructure their thinking. The same is true with social studies. Children come to the classroom with their own experiences in decision making, and educators build on this experience to refine it. Children's literature is proposed by Riecken and Miller (1990) and Brown (1986) as a way to provide relevant and experience-based teaching opportunities for decision making.

#### Issues in the teaching of decision making

There is controversy about several aspects of teaching decision making. The main areas of dissention include age at which to teach it, whether or not to integrate it into the regular curriculum, what methods to use, and whether or not a K-12 sequential curriculum is desirable. The following summarizes various viewpoints.

There are three viewpoints about what age decision making should be taught. Some, including deBono (1983), feel that thinking skills are best taught beginning with 9, 10, and 11 year olds because they enjoy thinking, motivation is high, and they have competent verbal fluency and experience. In addition, the curriculum in middle school is more easily modifiable to include thinking as a basic subject. Laney (1990) would agree, as he concluded from his study that students younger than 3rd grade were not developmentally ready to learn economic decision making concepts.

The second viewpoint is held by Beyer (1984), Smith (1987), and Presseisen (1985). They state that the micro-processes, such as predicting or analyzation, can be introduced to primary students, and students in grades 5-8 could be formally instructed in the higher-order processes of decision making, since the complex process of decision making uses more abstract skills. The skills to be taught at each grade level would be determined by prior experience and the developmental level of each student.

In contrast, Craycraft (1988) insists that one of the myths of teaching decision making is that developmental considerations prevent it from being taught to elementary children. He says that by beginning in the primary grades with very simple problems, and by establishing an environment in the classroom where decisions are allowed and the child feels free to think, decision making can be introduced at this early age. Advocates of the Guided Design approach (Nardi & Wales, 1985) also feel that primary age children can be introduced to the steps of decision making with very simple problems. The Alberta Department of Education (1989) recommends that decision making be introduced in the early grades, with instruction about the model directed by the teacher. As the children mature, they may take over the process and keep records, so by 6th grade, each student can go through the process independently. Reicken & Miller (1990), Brown (1986), and Markle (1987) all believe that children in the primary grades and older can be introduced to decision making and thinking skills by using children's literature. The children's literature used with different age groups would be carefully chosen to be appropriate for that age.

A second area of controversy is whether or not decision making skills should be integrated into the regular curriculum, or taught in a separate thinking class. There are two camps of opinion here. DeBono (1983) contends that direct teaching of thinking is most effective. He maintains that teaching thinking through content materials is not effective and that "whenever there has been an attempt to teach thinking skills and content together, the training in thinking seems to be weaker than when those skills are taught in isolation" (deBono, 1983, p. 706).

Conversely, Smith (1987) suggests that thinking skills should be integrated into the regular classroom content, rather than be taught in isolation. Beyer (1984) cites research that suggests that "skills taught in isolation from subject matter will not transfer easily to applicable situations. Also, skills taught in isolation from one another are not likely to become functional" (p. 559). Presseisen (1985), advocates of the Guided Design approach (Wales, Nardi, & Stager, 1986), and Glatthorn and Baron (1985), all support the integration of thinking and decision making skills with subject matter content. Beyth-Marom et al. (1987) agree



that decision making should not be taught out of context because domain-specific knowledge and strategies are necessary to make informed decisions.

A third area of disagreement is whether or not a K-12 sequential curriculum is desirable. Actually, the disagreement seems to center around a formal, skills oriented approach, versus a more informal, process oriented approach. Beyer (1984) outlines specific plans for a sequential, K-12 curriculum, which he believes is necessary to ensure that elementary children receive instruction in specific skills appropriate to their cognitive development, and that older children receive instruction in the more complex processes. He bases his suggestions for the curriculum on research done about how to teach skills effectively. Since decision making is a skill, research in the teaching of skills could be applicable. It has been shown that skills are best learned when the learners see the skill modeled, practice it frequently, and receive feedback during guided opportunities to practice the skill. Beyer (1984) states that the goal of instruction is the skill, and providing guided practice will ensure transfer. Nardi and Wales (1985)

agree with this. They believe that students must practice as much as possible. Elias and Clabb (1988) suggest that the first tenet of teaching social decision making is that an ordered sequential sequence of skills be established and used to organize the curriculum and the teaching of it. The steps in the process must all be included during instruction. Although expert thinkers appear to omit steps, it is because much of the thinking has become subconscious. This approach seems to be a more formal, structured program for teaching decision making.

No one directly disagrees with this suggestion by Beyer (1984), however; deBono (1983) and Craycraft (1988) both agree that the goal of instruction in thinking skills is the process. Teachers should be trying to promote creativity, not conformity. Lateral thinking (similar to creative thinking) should be part of the process, especially when students are to think of options or consequences (deBono, 1970). Riecken and Miller (1990) do not advocate a sequential hierarchy, as they maintain that real-life problem solving is "rarely as simple as the idealized process laid out in curriculum materials" (p. 61). Indeed, their premise

for the use of children's literature is to steer away from the "technical rational" decision making frameworks.

Other general suggestions for effective teaching of decision making include one in which deBono (1983) and Beyer (1984) agree. Both feel that the discussion method is not effective, but for different reasons. Beyer does not recommend including teacher-guided discussion and questioning because they do not bring strong results when applied to skill learning. DeBono does not recommend use of the discussion method because he claims it does not produce transfer.

Others, including Riecken and Miller (1990) and Brown (1986) who propose using children's literature to teach decision making would disagree with deBono (1983) and Beyer (1984). They both advocate use of the teacher-led discussion, and state that carefully planned questioning techniques used by the teacher can develop and strengthen thinking skills. Brown (1986) cites research done in 1975 that shows that "children's problem-solving skills significantly improve through exposure to higher level cognitive questions" (p. 103).

### Why Use Children's Literature?

There are many reasons for using children's literature for this purpose. Children's literature offers a wide variety of genres and types of problems that relate to real-life situations. A teacher may choose topics and themes that correlate with student needs and interests. Also, as Markle (1987) suggests, using children's literature gives students an opportunity to

relate to lifelike situations without actually experiencing their consequences. They may think about and discuss events without having to live through every crisis. They are given an opportunity to think through the consequences of certain behavior and to clarify their own values.

(p. 43)

Children's literature not only provides experiences that children have encountered in daily life, but it can also provide experiences to stretch their thinking. Polette (1984) states that "the field of literature is possibly the most important curriculum area for stretching young minds beyond the finite world in which they normally operate" (p. 1). All good stories are a

problem solving experiences because the nature of any story is conflict.

Other factors make the use of children's literature attractive. The cost of using children's literature to teach decision making would be minimal, since teachers could borrow the materials from school and public libraries. Access to the materials is quick and easy. Students would have the opportunity for individual reading and thinking after the lesson. The wide range of literature available makes it possible to integrate the content areas of science and social studies with decision making. It is a method that is appropriate throughout all grade levels.

Other skills related to the decision making process are developed while using children's literature. Markle (1987) states that children's literature is an excellent tool to stimulate visual images, which is a necessary skill for predicting consequences of actions. Values are also an integral aspect of the decision making process. McMillan and Gentile (1988) advocate using literature in the classroom to help teach ethics using themes including honesty, kindness, discipline, perserverance, sharing, and public service which are found in abundance in children's books.

Tunnell and Jacobs (1989) discuss the use of children's literature from the whole language perspective. A literature based approach in teaching children to read is highly successful, especially with disabled or disinterested readers. The use of literature has been found to have a positive effect on student achievement and attitudes toward reading. A similar effect might be achieved using children's literature to teach decision making because children are highly motivated by books.

The following thoughts from McMillan and Gentile (1988) summarize advantages of a literature program.

Basic skills notwithstanding, children's literature has a unique and indispensable place in the curriculum....Besides steeping children in analytical thought, literature provides them a wide range of historical, scientific, mathematical, artistic, and literary information. Moreover, literature stirs the imagination and creativity of youngsters instead of killing their interest. These are the basic foundations of lifelong learning. (p. 878)

## How to Use Children's Literature to Teach Decision Making

The use of children's literature to teach decision making is compatible with current whole language philosophy in which language is used to accomplish a real and relevant purpose. Children come to school with varied experiences and knowledge and have already made innumerable decisions. Smith (1988) states that children learn by relating their understanding of the new to what they already know, and then modifying prior knowledge. Teachers can begin with what the children already know about decision making, and use children's literature to build the students repertoire of decision making strategies.

There are several techniques for using using children's literature. One involves leading a discussion about the book. Riecken and Miller (1990) and Brown (1986) suggest that teachers take time for extended discussion about the issues/problems in the book. The teacher can begin reading, and stop at appropriate points for discussion. Special attention should be given to defining the problem, because Sternberg (1985) states, people frequently have trouble

with the first step of decision making, that of defining the problem. The class might brainstorm possible solutions for the problem, discuss the alternatives in terms of advantages and disadvantages. Later, after completing discussion, the remainder of the story would be read to discover what decision was actually made. The teacher also can include discussion encouraging children to relate the story to their own experiences. Riecken and Miller (1990) provide a list of questions to help initiate discussion (see Appendix).

A related technique is suggested by Brown (1986) who proposes using the taxonomy of educational objectives to formulate discussion questions. Turner and Durrett's research in 1975 (cited in Brown, 1986) shows that children's problem-solving abilities improve significantly when exposed to higher level cognitive questions. Questions using analysis, synthesis and evaluation, at the upper end of Bloom's taxonomy, are some of the micro-thinking skills that compose decision making. Thus, involving children in discussion with this type of question will actually result in instructing them in the "basic skills" of decision



making. Brown emphasizes that during use of the questioning technique, teachers must remember appropriate wait time. Probing and prompting should be done to help students continue with their thoughts. Questions such as "Why?" or "Can you explain your answer?" will enable them to expand on their responses. Other students may be drawn into the discussion by redirecting the interaction, asking questions of students such as "Can you add to this response?" "Do you agree?" or "Do you have another solution?" In this manner, children begin to see that there are many alternatives to making a decision, and that one correct answer is not possible. Polette (1984) notes several cautions. Some stories may touch a sensitive area with a student, especially in discussion of real-life problems, and the teacher needs to respond appropriately. It is also important to remember that discussion should be appropriate for the developmental level of the child.

Brown (1986) has other ideas for using children's literature to teach thinking skills. She suggests that students should be provided with a guide which might be a chart with the steps of the decision-making process

to be posted in the classroom. Or, each child could receive a personal copy for reference when making personal decisions, or when analyzing the decisions of the characters in a story.

Brown (1986) encourages modeling and indicates that the modeling of good decision making behavior can significantly influence children's thinking when making decisions. The characters in a story can be used as role models for effective or non-effective decision makers. The teacher can also model steps they use when making decisions.

Role playing is another teaching strategy suggested by Brown (1986). Two or more people could be involved in role playing characters in a story, and encouraged to think of several solutions to situations. The players in a role play should choose among several courses of action, and discussion should follow the activity to assess the course of action taken. Creative drama can also be used to enhance decision making skills. Students are familiar with a story, its characters, the sequence of action, and the feelings of the characters. They use this knowledge to improvise dialogue and action. Folk and fairy tales are excellent vehicles for role playing and creative drama.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Although there has been considerable emphasis placed on teaching thinking skills for many years, little research has convinced us of long-term benefits, and many say that direct teaching of thinking skills has seldom been done. Almost all agree that teaching thinking skills is beneficial, particularly decision making skills. However, there is still disagreement about the definitions of the various thinking skills and their components, and how best to teach them. Therefore, it is not surprising that educators have not been teaching decision making. To further compound this problem, teachers who attempt to teach thinking skills, and read about it in the literature, find that every thinking skills expert adds different cautions when discussing their models. For example, Costa (1985) warns educators to beware of indoctrinating students to think about solutions to problems the same way adults do. He adds that skills must not be fragmented from contexts in which they are useful. In addition, one must make ensure that the environment is conducive to decision making, so the student feels free to express opinions. Ochoa (1981) warns teachers not to forget

values in decision making because they are an integral aspect of the process. Also, knowledge is necessary to make informed decisions, so teachers should not de-emphasize knowledge. Fulcher (1965) emphasizes that all steps of the decision making process must be followed, especially, the last step, in order to analyze the decision and how it worked. These cautions discourage many teachers.

I propose that the use of children's literature to teach decision making can help resolve many of these concerns. Children's literature has the potential to solve many of the problems which surround the teaching of thinking skills.

The first issue discussed previously in this paper deals with the appropriate age for teaching decision making. This issue is diminished when children's literature is used for the content of the curriculum. The teacher takes charge of choosing developmentally appropriate materials, rather than relying on a commercially produced program. Teachers know their classes, and where individual students are at in terms of development. They also know the students personal situations, so they are aware of which types of themes

or problems would be useful. Children as young as kindergarten will enjoy stories, and can benefit from discussion about decision making. They can even begin to identify problems, the first step in the decision making process. Older children also enjoy stories, and more complex literature can be used as the children mature.

The second issue, that of integration with subject content, is also less of a concern when using children's literature. Since children's literature is easily accessible and virtually free when borrowed from media centers and public libraries, this ensures teachers easy opportunities to integrate decision making skills. The question of whether to integrate decision making into the regular curriculum or to teach it separately can be resolved by compromise. The teacher can concentrate on the skills and steps involved in decision making while reading a book to the class. This could be done several times with different books, providing practice using decision making skills. Later, the content could assume major importance, and the decision making process would be secondary. By this time, the decision making skill would have been

introduced and internalized. The content of the book can assume top priority. In this manner, decision making has been both integrated into the curriculum and also taught separately.

Another area of controversy is whether or not a hierarchial curriculum is desirable. The use of children's literature, especially in the early grades, would make a sequential curriculum unnecessary. Again, teachers would choose literature that is congruent with their students' developmental level of functioning. Good teachers know when their students are ready for a higher level of thinking, and adjust instruction accordingly. Also, by using children's literature, decision making can be viewed less as a "skill" and more as a "process." This will enable teachers to be more creative with instruction, rather than following a prescribed pattern.

The issue of transfer will also be aided by the use of children's literature. Since the children will be motivated to read and think about the characters, new issues can be introduced that parallel problems the students are encountering. By personally identifying with the character, the relevancy is increased for each

student. As the children reach middle school, a more formal program might be adopted if the teacher does not feel that the literature is still maintaining student interest and ensuring transfer of skills.

Teaching decision making is a valuable goal. Using children's literature is a method worthy of consideration. Perhaps when a lesson on decision making is "only a book away" it will be taught more frequently, benefitting students and ultimately, society.

**APPENDIX**



Kinds of Questions Teachers Might Ask During Discussion  
to Facilitate Decision Making Skills

1. What is the problem here?
2. Why is it a problem?
3. For whom is it a problem?
4. How might the story character solve this problem?
5. What do you think the character will do?
6. Given the situation, what are three different things the character can do?
7. What would you do if you were in this situation?
8. Did the character's solution appear to work?
9. What can the character do now?
10. Does the character have to make a decision here?
11. What does the character have to decide?
12. What do you think the options are?
13. Are some of the options better than others? Why?
14. What do you think might happen if the character does (X)?
15. What might happen to the other characters in the story if he did (Y)?
16. How could the character decide what she/he is going to do?

17. What do you think the character will do? Why?
18. Have you ever had to make a similar kind of decision?
19. What would you decide to do if this were you?
20. How was your experience with this situation different from that in this story?
21. How was it the same?

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