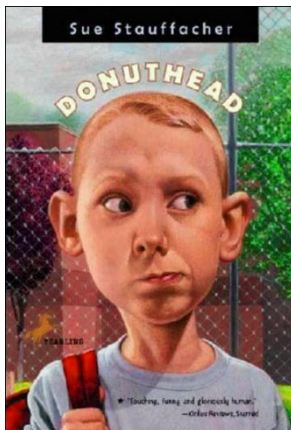




by Sue Stauffacher

EXPLORING COMPASSION WITH *DONUTHEAD*



“‘Donuthead’ is a wonderful choice for inclusion in a character education program/curriculum. You have our most enthusiastic stamp of approval.”

—Bernice Lerner,

Acting Director, Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character, Boston University

The following materials are intended for use with the “Internalizing Virtue Framework” (IVF) developed by Dr. Karen Bohlin of Boston University’s Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character in Education (CAEC.) To download a reproducible version of the IVF and learn more about using it, go to

<http://www.bu.edu/education/caec/files/IVframework.htm>.

Essentially, literature like *Donuthead* can help students to become aware of the concepts underlying virtuous conduct, understand what those concepts mean, and inspire them to take action based on their new understanding. Finally, students can reflect on what this new knowledge and these new behaviors mean to them.

Most teachers regularly schedule read aloud time for their students. This curriculum has been designed to fit comfortably into that time slot, with teachers reading a chapter 4 out of the 5 weekdays and discussing on the fifth. It’s best to read through the entire lesson before beginning as you may choose to change the order of the elements. These materials can be used for children as young as grade three and as old as grade eight, with slight modifications for age-appropriateness.

PART I: AWARENESS

In the week preceding your “Donuthead” unit, take some time to help students bring any prior knowledge they have about compassion to the forefront. As a class, come up with a definition for what it means to be compassionate. Explain the Latin root of the word (com-, together + pati, to suffer). Share the following definition of compassion from the Webster’s New World Dictionary: To feel sorrow for the sufferings or trouble of another or others, accompanied by an urge to help; deep sympathy; pity.

Ask students, does everyone have the same amount of compassion? What is it that makes people compassionate? Do you think that people can increase the amount of compassion they feel for others? How? Can you feel compassion for people you don’t know personally? Can you give examples?

Read the Franklin Delano Roosevelt quote that precedes the book.

“The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.”

Spend a few moments talking about this quote with the children. What does it mean? Why do you think the author would put a quote like this at the beginning of her novel?

Assignment for Week 1:

Talk to your parents or grandparents or neighbors about compassion and ask them to tell you a story from their childhood in which they felt compassion or in which someone felt compassion for them. Be prepared to retell a story in class.

PART II: UNDERSTANDING (CHAPTERS 1-4)

Together, recall the discussion you had last week about compassion. Ask the students if they observed a compassionate action during the week. Did they feel compassion toward someone or something? Have a few relate stories they heard from their parents. Relate a story of your own to them.

Make a list of the characters you have met so far: Franklin Delano Donuthead, Julia Donuthead, Gloria Nelots, Sarah Kervick, Marvin Howerton, Rita Linski, Mr. Perkins, etc. See if you can come up with four words that describe each character.

Of all these characters, ask students who they liked the most. Why? If Donuthead were in their school, do any of the students feel they would be friends with him? Why or why not? What about Sarah? Would any students want to be friends with her? Would they want Julia to be their mother? Why or why not?

Now ask the students to tell you the three best parts in the book so far. They might say “Sarah Kervick punched Marvin Howerton,” or “Sarah Kervick made Donuthead comb her hair” or “Franklin tries to steal something from the drugstore,” or “Julia finds Franklin behind the school with Sarah.” Whatever they come up with, write down the major interaction on the board. The above examples might look like this:

Sarah and Marvin (punch)

Sarah and Franklin (comb)

Franklin and Mr. Perkins (steal)

Julia and Sarah and Franklin (discovers kids behind school)

Go back to each interaction and ask the students if compassion was involved. Point to the character’s name and ask, “Did Marvin feel compassion for Sarah?” “Did Sarah feel compassion for

Marvin?” Ask the students to back up their answers. Ask ‘How?’ ‘In what way?’ or ‘Why not?’ These kind of discussions can help students see that compassion can be encouraged by creating the right climate for it. Why was it so easy for Mr. Peterson and Julia Donuthead to help Sarah, while Franklin and Marvin were not so good at it?

Assignment for Week 2:

Tell the students that, in this book, some of the characters will change and grow, and some of the characters will stay the same. As we read together, try to notice when a character does something different or unexpected and see if you can figure out why. Also try to notice, once again, when you have feelings of compassion or when you observe compassionate acts.

PART II: UNDERSTANDING (CHAPTERS 5–8)

Before you begin class, have a list of the characters you’ve already discussed on the board. Have the students add the other characters they’ve met in chapters 5-8 and list them on the board as well: Mrs. Boardman, Bernie, Bryce Jordan, Mr. Kervick.

Have the students break up into groups of three or four, with one student designated as the recorder, to answer these questions about the Mrs. Boardman character:

1. Do you remember how Franklin describes her to us? What did you think she would be like?
2. Did you change your mind after you met her in the library scene with Sarah and Franklin? What did you think about her then?

3. When Franklin described her, would you have believed that Mrs. Boardman was a compassionate person? After you saw her with Sarah, did she seem like a compassionate person?
4. Why do you think there was a difference in the way she acted with Sarah?
5. Do you know people like that yourself? Can you think of someone who, at times, is tough and grouchy, but at other times can be really kind?

After ten or so minutes, call the groups back to the large group and discuss their answers. Discussions like these can help students to see that human beings are very complex. Sometimes we are more disposed to being compassionate than others. Help them think of examples in their own lives. Have they ever asked for help from an adult only to be dismissed? Are there times of the day when they try not to bother their parents? How do you make the world an easier place for people to be compassionate?

Assignment for Week 3 (Donuthead's Brain):

Pass around a piece of paper with two large circles on one side and a single circle on the back. The first should be labeled Donuthead's Brain. The second should be the brain of any other character in the book. Students must make a pie chart of the things that most occupy that character's thoughts. The more they think of a particular subject, the larger wedge it should be given in the pie graph. On the back, have students do their own heads.

In your discussions of what occupies the characters' time, ask students how the 'brain' would have to change for the character to be more compassionate.

PART III: UNDERSTANDING (CHAPTERS 9-13)

Begin class by asking the students to draw a square on a sheet of paper. Re-read the first four paragraphs of Chapter 13. Have the students answer the question for themselves by drawing or writing what would make them as happy as Sarah was when she opened her box. List out some of their answers on the board.

Ask them what they think Julia means when she says, “Things don’t contribute much to my happiness.” Make a list of what the students feel has made Julia very happy in the book. What do students feel would make Julia happy if they came to pass? Are any of these “things”? Do any of them involve compassion? What do you think made Gloria most happy in this book? What do you think made Mrs. Boardman most happy in this book? What do you think made Mr. Peterson most happy in this book?

Spend some time reflecting on Franklin, the main character, over the course of the book. What did you think of him when you first met him? What did you think of him at the end of the book? Did your opinion of him change? Did he change? In what ways? Do you think Franklin has become more compassionate? Why or why not? Do you think if he met someone like Sarah after this book ended that he would behave more compassionately toward her? Why or why not?

PART IV: ACTION AND REFLECTION

Throughout the book, compassionate action brings a reward. Mostly these rewards are not tangible things, but feelings, the good satisfying feeling that comes from helping someone. And, in this book, it is usually a stranger who does the helping (or at least a casual acquaintance.) Julia helps Sarah the first time she meets her. Mr. Peterson helps Sarah even though he’s never met her. Sarah helps Bernie after meeting him only once.

In working with kids, I've found that giving them a novel twist on a project ups the 'fun factor' significantly. So, just for fun, have the kids come up with a new word that plays off the understanding of compassion they've learned from the book (I'll use the word 'frippe.' You can supply your own:

frip•pel (frip'ple) **n. 1.** [Slang] an act of compassion done with no expectation of a reward for a person, place or thing unknown or barely acquainted to the one committing the act.

Go back through the book and count how many fripples you can find. In class, brainstorm how the students might commit their own fripples. Is there someone they've observed who could use some help? Spend some time looking through the newspaper, talking about events at your school or in your neighborhood and come up with a list of possibilities. Make a class goal to reach a certain number of fripples by the end of the school year. Does everyone in the class think they can do one? Teachers can create one of those temperature gauges used to track fundraising efforts and color in a red stripe each time someone in the class commits a fripple. Extra points can be awarded for an all-class effort.

Over the days and weeks following the completion of the book, allot a few minutes of class time to discuss your compassion project. Perhaps a child has come up with an idea to raise money. Or a student has read about someone in the paper who needs help. Or a few children want to report their good deeds. Have the kids rate how good it felt to do their fripple. Make another chart with a nickel, then a quarter, then a dollar bill, then a candy bar, then an A+ (or whatever you choose) stacked in a column. Call it a "Happyometer." Ask students to rate how good their fripple felt. "Was it as good as finding a dollar on the sidewalk?" "Was it as good as being given a candy bar?"

At this age, developmentally, children are straddling the concrete and the abstract worlds. Consciously focusing on the intangible rewards of compassionate service will help them to see that, in

addition to making their family and school and community better places in which to live, they will learn to take intrinsic pleasure in their accomplishments and feel better about themselves as well.