



The Rights and Wrongs in Children's Literature

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Keywords: kindergarten, fairy tales, philosophy, right and wrong, morals, characters, motivation, rules

Teaching Standards: See [Appendix 1](#) for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

Synopsis: In this unit, the students will explore the morality of characters in children's literature. They will decide if characters are right or wrong in their actions. They will also explore the motivation of characters in regards to their choices. Lastly, we will explore rules and if or when there is a time that it is acceptable to break them.

I plan to teach this unit during the coming year to 16 students during our literacy block with my kindergarten students.

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Erin (Muffler) Murray

Overview

When originally looking at the various seminars, Human Agency stood out to me. It is a topic that piqued my interest and seemed to have so many different fascinating ideas to explore. More so than that though, it is a topic very relevant to my kindergarten class. During the Human Agency seminar, we discussed many philosophical issues surrounding human behavior, such as motivation, free will, empathy, and moral responsibility. These are ideas which have provoked opinions among the Charlotte Teachers Institute (CTI) fellows. These ideas are also prominent in our lives and the lives of students of all ages.

A concept which often came up in our discussions is free will. Free will is the ability and power to make choices. Perhaps the most important question surrounding free will is the question of whether we actually have free will.ⁱ Some philosophers may argue that choices are not based on free will at all, but instead made solely as a result of a series of events or because of existing patterns and tendencies which have groomed a person to choose in a certain way.ⁱⁱ Assuming that one does have "free will," it can often be complicated by other things. These can include certain motivations, one's understanding of relevant factors, and life circumstances. An example we discussed during our seminar was a child going to college. An eighteen year old raised in a home of generational poverty may be at a crossroads upon graduation as to what life course he will take. He may have the free will to choose college, trade school, a career, or to sit home on welfare. His free will is affected by the circumstances in his life however. His motivation may be just to help out his family financially in that moment. If his family needs him at home and it would be a burden for him to go to college, this may not seem to be a real choice for him. Therefore, does he truly have the "free will" to choose any path in life? Often understandings (or lack of understandings) and certain life circumstances can affect one's choices in life. A child who grows up in generational poverty may not have been told that it is financially possible to go college. Therefore that lack of understanding may eliminate the free will he has to go to college, because he does not understand that this is a true choice for him.

In our seminar, we also discussed how a person's actions are also a result of a variety of motivations. A person may act in a certain manner because of several reasons. One reason may be because of a desire to do so. If there are chocolate chip cookies on the counter that are supposed to be for company coming later, my desire to have one may override the part of me which is saying that I should wait. Another reason for an action may be a trigger. Often we see this when people quit smoking. They may be doing very well and then have a stressful day and wish to go back to their old vice. A person's

actions may also be due to an alternative that is construed to be more evil. An example may be if a person should save the job of a friend by lying to cover up the friend's actions. Both lying for a friend is evil as well as telling the truth and causing a friend to lose her job. Therefore, a person would be forced to pick the lesser of the two evils. Actions could also occur due to a lack of understanding of the implications. An example of this is with a child in my kindergarten class. We were planting in the garden and he had a metal trowel in his hand. I was across the garden and asked if I could use it. He threw it at me. Luckily, I reacted quickly and was not injured. He did not mean to cause me any harm, yet was unaware of the potential implications of throwing a metal trowel at someone's face. Lastly, some actions occur simply because the person does not care. Some high school students who have "given up" on schooling simply stop coming to school and stop completing assignments. They have given up on school and simply do not care to do the necessary work to complete it.

Background

I originally graduated with my Bachelor's degree in Journalism and Media Studies from the State University of New York in Geneseo. I tried to find my niche in a career field in western New York and was unable to find something that was fulfilling and interesting to me. After two years of searching, I went back to school to obtain my Masters degree in Childhood Education. One of my student teaching placements was in a Gifted and Talented teacher role. I really loved it. I enjoyed working with highly motivated students and finding a way to challenge them. So after I finished my masters degree, I went to the University at Buffalo to get an advanced certificate in Gifted Education. It was during this process of obtaining my degrees that the economy crashed. This had a profound impact on teachers. Teachers in New York were being laid off, making it impossible for a new teacher to obtain a job. On a whim, I applied to jobs in Charlotte, North Carolina. I almost immediately received a phone call from a school. The job was teaching kindergarten in a gifted magnet school. It sounded like the perfect job for me. I have now been teaching in this position for four years and am enjoying finding different ways to challenge my group of students.

My school is a large urban magnet school in the west side of Charlotte, North Carolina. My school is part of the Charlotte Mecklenburg School District. We service students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade. The school is unique in its make-up. It has three very different programs within it. One program my school has is an Academy program, which is made up of African-American students who come from homes suffering from generational poverty. The second program is the gifted magnet program, called Learning Immersion (K-2) and Talent Development (3-5). These students are bussed from some of the wealthiest areas of Charlotte to attend our magnet program. These students are a variety of ethnicities and often fluently speak two languages. Many are second generation immigrants from countries such as Ghana, India, and China. The last program in my school is a very selective program for highly gifted

students, where a few students from the whole Mecklenburg county come to our school for a specialized rigorous academic program. Although our school is diverse, we work together as a grade level to plan activities and arrange field trips.

Though the majority of our Academy students qualify for free and reduced lunch, only a small portion of our Horizons and LI/TD programs do. Therefore the percentage of free and reduced lunches at the school falls short of Title I status. These affect the school greatly, because we do not get the extra funding and support for the students suffering from generational poverty that neighboring schools get. We lack technology in the classrooms that the majority of other CMS schools have. With a dedicated group of teachers and administrators, however, we have been able to apply for grants and find ways to get a couple IPAD carts. We are also working on getting SMART boards for every classroom.

Our school offers a variety of extracurricular opportunities for students before and after school. They include chess club, Girls on the Run, Science Olympiad, basketball, Odyssey of the Mind, Lego Robotics, Robotics Club, and Safety Patrol. From creative thinking to running, we do a good job of offering “something for everyone” at Barringer Academic Center.

In my class in particular, I have a very diverse group of students. I teach kindergarten as part of the Learning Immersion magnet program. This program does not have “qualifications” for students to be a part of it, but does select students based on a lottery process. I therefore get a wide range of students in my class. I have some students coming in not able to recognize a single letter of the alphabet, while others are fluently reading chapter books. It presents a unique challenge to me as the teacher to make sure I am challenging each and every student. Being a part of the Learning Immersion program, the students are working on a rigorous curriculum with higher level thinking skills in preparation for entry into the Talent Development program in third grade. I have several students that are already in the AIG (Academically and Intellectually Gifted) program. Because I have such a wide array of students, I spend a good portion of time finding academically appropriate resources and ideas I can implement that both align with kindergarten common core standards and yet have a rigor appropriate for some of the brightest and highest achieving students in my class.

Upon entering kindergarten, my students often have limited experiences in a formal educational setting, so it becomes a year-long process of adapting to school and learning how to learn. The students struggle with classroom rules at the beginning of the school year and we slowly work as a class to negotiate class rules and norms. The students also negotiate social relationships with one another. Some students have had many opportunities to play with neighborhood friends and socialize through various programs.

Rationale: *Why should we teach philosophy in elementary school?*

Philosophy already presents itself in many ways in my classroom. One key philosophical issue that I explore is motivation of actions. I find a larger portion of my day than I would like to admit exploring motivations of incidents. It is common for a student to come up to me at recess and say, "Johnny hit me with the ball!" Several thoughts flood my brain. *Was it an accident? Was it on purpose? Did Johnny know he would hurt you if he threw it at you? Was your injury a casualty of a sport or a malicious attack on a classmate?* It is important for me to understand why it occurred in order to enact a proper punishment and make sure the incident does not reoccur. It is also important for my students to start to distinguish the answers to some of these questions as well in their quest for justice. It is important that they understand that while another child's actions may have hurt them, the motivation behind those actions are just as important as the action itself.

Another reason philosophy should be taught in elementary schools is that students are natural philosophers who ask open-ended, difficult questions that we as adults struggle to answer. The idea that we can help the students to discover the answers for themselves through critical thinking, seeking information, and forming their own opinion is one that is appealing to me as an educator. The thinking skills utilized and developed through philosophy are some that can be applied through so many facets of a child's life even beyond education.

Teaching kindergarten, some of the most important lessons that I teach my students are the moral lessons regarding the differences between right and wrong. At first thought, this seems like it would be easy to teach. But as situations have arisen, I have realized the complexity of moral issues. This is because most moral issues are not clearly black and white; there are shades of gray. Those shades of gray make a great opportunity to explore morality and ethics.

In my unit, I would like to explore morality through age-appropriate literature. We will explore different characters in fairy tales, such as Cinderella. Was she justified in sneaking out of the castle because she knew she was going to meet her Prince Charming? Was the Stepmother really wicked? She put a roof over Cinderella's head and required her to do chores, however she did not treat her the same as her other daughters. It forces the students into thinking deeper into a story that they would have already been reading anyway.

This type of thinking about characters would also translate into the students' own moral development. Biskin suggests that "since children's thinking is influenced by the activities in which they are engaged, the use of children's literature to stimulate moral thinking and moral development has great potential."ⁱⁱⁱ Once students spend such a large portion of their day in school, it becomes essential that educators help shape a child's moral development in a positive direction.

Philosophy also will force students into being critical thinkers and seeking out evidence and information in support of their opinions before they form them. “Society as a whole will reap the benefit of having more critical, skeptical citizens who have learned not to trust authorities simply because of their social positions, but look for evidence and reasons that they themselves find convincing.”^{iv}

It is important to incorporate philosophy into an elementary classroom because of the level of rigor and level of critical thinking it can provoke. Students are so often given facts and information and are not often enough given opportunities to really think, interpret, and defend their opinions. It is an invaluable lesson to be able to dig deeper to formulate ideas and articulate opinions. With the common core curriculum, teachers are often teaching to make sure they hit a certain standard, instead of providing authentic learning experiences. The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) says there is a “call for general education teachers to recognize and address student learning differences, and incorporate rigorous content and application of knowledge through higher-order thinking skills.”^v The curriculum that I have developed will allow for teachers to challenge every student in their classroom with that thinking.

Content Objectives

The objective of this unit is for students to explore characters in books and think critically about characters’ motivations, considerations about the rightness or wrongness of characters’ actions, and the moral issues regarding rule-breaking. The students will use higher levels of Blooms Taxonomy, such as analyzing and evaluating, to defend their opinions on each character. They will also use key details in the story to defend their opinions.

By the end of the unit, students will be able to think more deeply about characters in stories, exploring characters’ motivations and relating it to the students’ own lives. By using characters and stories that the students are likely to be familiar with, they will be able to challenge the ideas and thoughts that they already had about those characters. They will then be able to use this knowledge when reading less familiar stories and when reading independently.

The unit is designed to last about three weeks, however it could certainly be extended through the addition of more stories. It can be implemented into a “read aloud” portion of literacy instruction with an entire class or alternatively in a small group setting. Since reading books aloud to students is a common practice in an elementary class, it should be easy to incorporate the lessons. It is versatile in its implementation.

This unit was designed for my kindergarten class, which is part of the Learning Immersion/Talent Development program. Many of my students are above grade level academically; therefore the rigor in these lessons could allow it to be used for K-2

classrooms or even higher elementary grades with slight modifications. The structure of the program is based upon discussions, which is something that can occur on various levels of depth and understanding with students of varying grade and ability levels.

Teaching Strategies

Text to Self Connections

Students will connect to the text through various life experiences.

Collaborative Groups

Students will work in groups of three or four to brainstorm ideas and arguments. The participants will be expected to work all together to achieve a task.

Interactive Read Aloud

Throughout the unit, there will be various interactive read alouds. During an interactive read aloud, the teacher will read a story to the children, while engaging them through picture walks, predictions, vocabulary explanations, turn and talk, and discussions of pictures.

Socratic Seminar

Socratic Seminars will be used throughout the unit. The seminars will be formal discussions that take place after the “leader” poses an open-ended question based upon the children’s book which had been read aloud to the class. The students will listen closely to the comments of the other students and respond either in agreement or to counter a classmate’s opinion.

Think, Pair, Share

Students will think of ideas independently. Then they will share an idea with a neighbor and receive feedback on it. Lastly, the class will come back together and share a few ideas with the entire class.

Unit Design

	Activity	Materials Needed
Day 1	- The students will discuss why people make the choices that they make.	
Day 2	- Teacher will read <i>The Three Little Pigs</i> to the class. - Students will have a discussion as to whether the wolf's actions were right or wrong.	- <i>The Three Little Pigs</i> book
Day 3	- Teacher will read <i>The True Story of the Three Little Pigs</i> to the students - Students will discuss if their feelings about the wolf's actions have changed.	- <i>The True Story of the Three Little Pigs</i> by Jon Scieszka
Day 4	- Teacher will read <i>Cinderella</i> . Students will talk about the characters in the story. Students will also discuss the rules that Cinderella was asked to follow. Students will discuss whether it was acceptable for Cinderella to break the rules.	- <i>Cinderella</i> - paper - pencil
Day 5	- Teacher will present the idea of "free will" to the students. - Teacher will read "Cookies" from <i>Frog and Toad Together</i> . - Teacher will ask students if Frog and Toad displayed will power.	- "Cookies" from <i>Frog and Toad Together</i> , by Arnold Lobel
Day 6	- Teacher will read <i>Stone Soup</i> to the students. - Students will discuss the motivation of the man in stone soup and whether the man's motivation made it right to fool the townspeople.	- <i>Stone Soup</i> by John J Muth
Day 7	- Teacher will read <i>Miss Nelson is Missing</i> . - The students will discuss whether it was right or wrong for Miss Nelson to deceive her students.	- <i>Miss Nelson is Missing</i> by Harry G. Allard Jr. and James Marshall
Day 8	- Teacher will read the story <i>Hey, Little Ant</i> to the students. - Students will then discuss if the action of squishing the little ant would be right or wrong and to defend their opinion.	- <i>Hey, Little Ant</i> by Philip and Hannah Hoose

Day 9	- The students will discuss different scenarios and discuss whether the actions are right or wrong.	
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Lesson 1: Introduction

The unit will begin with a discussion led by the teacher regarding choices that people make. *Why do people make the choices that they make?* The teacher will create an anchor chart with a list of reasons as to why people make choices that they do, which could include:

- peer pressure
- selfishness
- rules
- church (religious reasons)
- fear of punishment
- because other people are doing the same thing
- because you do not think you will get caught
- because it is the right thing to do

If students need help, the teacher can use different scenarios to help provoke ideas about choices.

Lesson 2: The Three Little Pigs

The teacher will do a read aloud of the story of *The Three Little Pigs* to the students. The teacher will then ask the students to consider the wolf's motivation throughout the story. The teacher will ask the students to think about *why he was doing what he was doing*. We can refer back to our anchor chart from yesterday to get us to think about ideas. Students will think-pair-share regarding the wolf's motivations.

Ideas to explore

- Are all of our actions always done on purpose?
- What was the wolf's motivation for blowing down the house?
- Was the wolf right or wrong to blow down the houses?

Lesson 3: The True Story of the Three Little Pigs

The teacher will do a read aloud to the students of *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka. This story gives an alternative motivation of the wolf for "blowing" on the houses. The wolf says that he had a bad cold and did not mean to knock the houses down with his sneezes. The students can think-pair-share to decide how the motivation of the wolf was different in this story.

Ideas to explore:

- Is the motivation of the wolf in this story different than the motivation in *The Three Little Pigs*?
- Has your opinion of the wolf changed?
- Do you feel that the wolf was trying to blow the houses down on purpose to eat the pigs or on accident because he sneezed?
- Why would the wolf lie about his actions? What would be a motivation to do that?
- Have you ever lied about something? Why?

Lesson 4: Cinderella

The teacher will do a read aloud to the students of the story of *Cinderella*. In this story, Cinderella sneaks out of her house to meet Prince Charming. The students will work in collaborative groups to explore which rules Cinderella broke and if she should or should not have broken them.

Ideas to discuss:

- What are your feelings about the Stepmother? Cinderella? Step-Sisters? What pieces of the story made you feel that way?
- Cinderella had rules to obey. (Ask students to think about the rules). Was it okay for her to break those rules? Why or why not?
- Can you think of a time that it would be okay for you to break a rule?

Lesson 5: Cookies

The teacher will introduce will power to the students and explain that the story that they read will explore the topic of will power. The teacher will do a read aloud to the students of “Cookies” from *Frog and Toad Together*. In this story, Frog and Toad eat lots of cookies. They eat so many cookies that they fear they will get sick, so Frog throws all the cookies out for the birds to eat. Frog says that he is showing “will power” by not eating all of the cookies.

Ideas that can be discussed with this book:

- Has there ever been something that you continued to do even though you might have gotten hurt or gotten sick? Why would you do that?
- Have you ever wanted to do something and not wanted to do something at the same time? Why? How is this possible?
- Does Frog really have will power? Why or why not?
- Will Frog go to Toad’s house for cake later? Why or why not?^{vi}

Lesson 6: Stone Soup

The teacher will read *Stone Soup* to the class. This story is about a soldier who comes to a town and asks the townspeople for a warm meal. They all tell him that they do not have any food for him. He finally asks to borrow a pot, fills it with water, and places a stone in it. He then begins to “cook” it and the townspeople become curious. He allows them to share the soup if they add an ingredient to it. Finally in the end, there is a wonderful soup full of vegetables and flavor. The soldier shares the soup, even though those same people who wanted some soup were the ones who were not willing to offer him food when he needed it. He tricked them into sharing with him.

Ideas to discuss:

- Did the soldier do the right thing when he tricked the townspeople into making soup for him?
- What was the motivation of the soldier?
- Who was more dishonest, the soldier or the townspeople?
- Is it ever okay to trick someone?^{vii}

Lesson 7: Miss Nelson is Missing

The Teacher will read the story *Miss Nelson is Missing* by Harry G. Allard Jr. and James Marshall to the students. In this story, the students are not listening to the teacher and following classroom rules. So a new teacher comes, named Viola Swamp who wears all black and is very mean. The students all behave for her. At the end of the story, Miss Nelson comes back and it is alluded to that Viola Swamp is in fact Miss Nelson in disguise.

Ideas to discuss:

- Did Miss Nelson trick the students or lie to them? Is there a difference?
- Is there ever a reason that it would be okay to lie about something? If so, when? Is lying okay if it is for something that is good (such as getting students to do the right thing)?
- Were Miss Nelson’s actions right or wrong? Why or why not?
- How would you feel if your teacher lied to you, but it was for your own good?^{viii}

Lesson 8: Hey Little Ant

The teacher will read the story *Hey, Little Ant* by Philip and Hannah Hoose to the students. In this story, a young boy contemplates if he should squish an ant or not. The ant gives several reasons why he should not be squished. In the end, the boy needs to decide if he should squish the ant or leave the ant alone.

Ideas for Discussion:

- What are reasons the boy gave for why he should squish the ant?
- What are reasons the ant gave as to why he should be left alone?
- Would you squish the ant if you were the boy? Why or why not?
- Is it right or wrong for the boy to squish the ant?^{ix}

Lesson 9: Conclusion

This unit will end by seeing what kinds of conclusions students have come to about the issues we've been discussing. Key questions that you could ask the students would include:

How do you choose what is the right thing to do?

After a discussion, the class can come up with a general idea which could be that "morals help you decide what the right thing to do is." Unfortunately the "right" idea is not always clear. The teacher can then give the students scenarios where there may not be a clear right or wrong answer. The students will split up into groups of three or four and be asked to defend a "right" or "wrong" position.

- Should you betray a friend's trust to tell the teacher that your friend broke the teacher's picture frame?
- Should you steal a sticker from the teacher's drawer if everyone else is doing it?
- Should you share a snack with a friend who forgot one even if the rules say that you are not supposed to share snacks?
- Should you run down the hallway if no one is looking?

The teacher will then wrap up the discussion by concluding that not every situation has a clear-cut answer, but that we need to think carefully and try to make the best choice we can.

Materials Needed for Lessons

The Three Little Pigs book

The True Story of the Three Little Pigs by Jon Scieszka

Cinderella book

paper

pencil

"Cookies" from *Frog and Toad Together*, by Arnold Lobel

Stone Soup by John J Muth

Miss Nelson is Missing by Harry G. Allard Jr. and James Marshall

Hey, Little Ant by Philip and Hannah Hoose

Appendix 1: Implementing Teaching Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.K.1: With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text.

The students will master this objective as they make text to self connections and discuss philosophical issues surrounding details in the texts, such as *Cinderella*, *Frog and Toad Together*, *The Three Little Pigs*, *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, *Stone Soup*, and *Hey, Little Ant*.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.K.2: With prompting and support, retell familiar stories, including key details.

The students will master this objective through classroom discussions and talking with partners when comparing different versions of fairy tales.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.K.3: With prompting and support, identify characters, settings, and major events in a story.

The students will master this objective through classroom discussions and sharing with partners regarding analyzing characters and their actions in different stories.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.K.9: With prompting and support, compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in familiar stories.

The students will master this objective through classroom discussions and sharing with partners regarding familiar characters who show up in different versions of fairy tales.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.K.10: Actively engage in group reading activities with purpose and understanding.

The students will master this objective as they participate in classroom discussions regarding morality of characters in the stories.

Bibliography for Teachers

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http://www.teachingchildrenphilosophy.org/wiki/Stone_Soup. This website explains the story of stone soup in more detail. It also gives additional prompts and suggests questions which can be posed to students regarding philosophical questions in the story.
- "Miss Nelson is Missing."- Teaching Children Philosophy. Accessed October 22, 2014.
http://www.teachingchildrenphilosophy.org/wiki/Miss_Nelson_is_Missing! This website explains the story of Miss Nelson. It gives examples of several philosophical ideas present in the story and different open ended questions associated with those ideas which could be used in a Socratic Seminar.
- "Cookies from Frog and Toad Together."- Teaching Children Philosophy. Accessed October 22, 2014.
http://www.teachingchildrenphilosophy.org/wiki/%22Cookies%22_from_Frog_and_Toad_Together. This website contains an overview of the Frog and Toad story "Cookies." It explains the characters and plot of the story. It also points out ideas for students to ponder as well as lists additional questions which could be posed to the class. It focuses on text-self connections as well as "will power."
- "Hey, Little Ant." - Teaching Children Philosophy. Accessed October 22, 2014.
http://www.teachingchildrenphilosophy.org/wiki/Hey,_Little_Ant. This website explains the plot line of the book, Hey, Little Ant. It gives thought to ponder in regards to this book. It also contains several thinking prompts which could be used in a classroom discussion or Socratic Seminar.
- Wartenberg, Thomas E. *Big Ideas for Little Kids: Teaching Philosophy through Children's Literature*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2009. This book is a great resource for initially implementing philosophy in an elementary classroom. It gives background in regard to the value of teaching philosophy to children. It also has specific chapters dedicated to books which pose philosophical questions which can be explored in an elementary classroom.
- Wartenberg, Thomas E. *A Sneetch Is a Sneetch and Other Philosophical Discoveries Finding Wisdom in Children's Literature*. Hoboken: John Wiley, 2013. This book enlightens the reader about the philosophical issues that are present within Children's literature. Throughout the chapters of this book, it explores stories from Dr. Seuss to William Stieg and the thought-provoking ideas that are present in these stories. It also gives ideas of how you can start philosophical discussions with children, using literature as a springboard.

Notes

ⁱ Griffith, Meghan. *Free Will: The Basics*. (London: Routledge, 2013), 3.

ⁱⁱ Griffith, Meghan. *Free Will: The Basics*. (London: Routledge, 2013), 4.

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^{iv} Wartenberg, Thomas E. *Big Ideas for Little Kids: Teaching Philosophy through Children's Literature*. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2009), 6.

^v "Common Core State Standards, National Science Standards and Gifted Education." National Association for Gifted Children. Accessed October 22, 2014.

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^{vi} "Cookies from *Frog and Toad Together*." – Teaching Children Philosophy. Accessed October 22, 2014.

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^{vii} "Stone Soup." – Teaching Children Philosophy. Accessed October 22, 2014.

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^{viii} "Miss Nelson is Missing." – Teaching Children Philosophy. Accessed October 22, 2014. http://www.teachingchildrenphilosophy.org/wiki/Miss_Nelson_is_Missing!

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