

# Children's Literature Fosters Foundational Skills

My journey toward enhancing a growth mindset with classroom visits

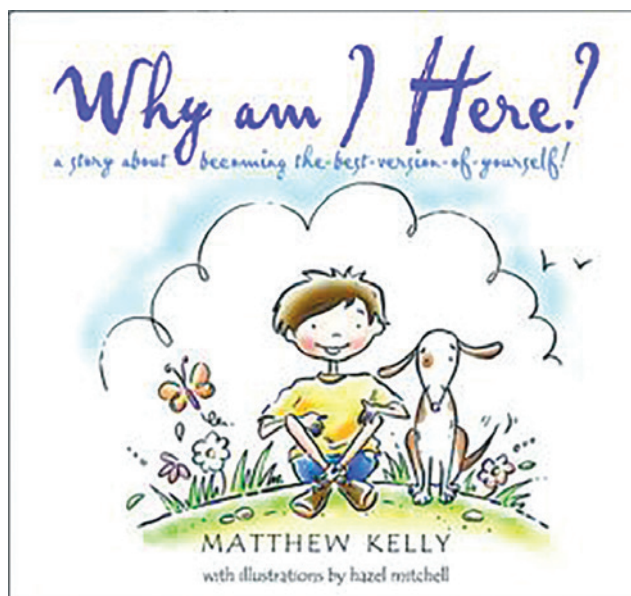
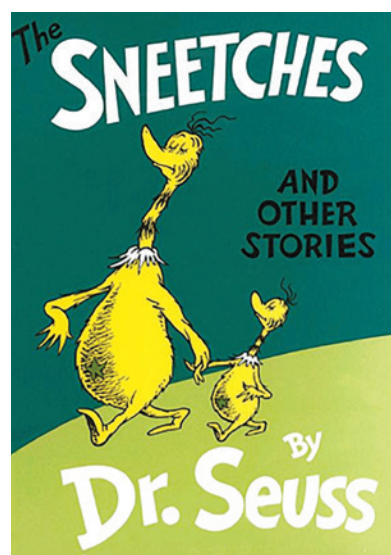
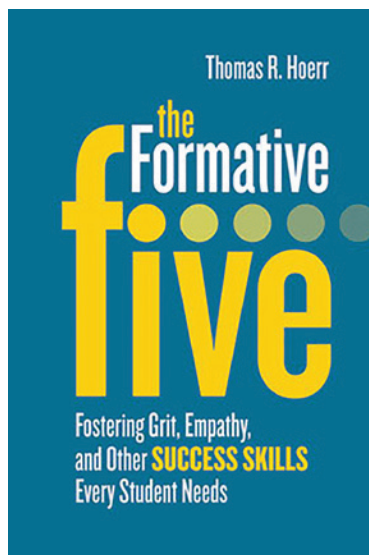
By Dan Butler

What will matter most to students when they have moved on from their time with us? As an elementary school principal, I keep coming back to this question. Even as I focus on leading efforts to develop a solid foundation for literacy, mathematics, science, and technology, I think continually about essential skills that will provide students with opportunities to experience a successful and fulfilled life five, 15, and even 30 years from now.

In *The Formative Five: Fostering Grit, Empathy, and Other Success Skills Every Student Needs* (2017), Thomas R. Hoerr identifies success skills needed to thrive in society: empathy, self-control, integrity, embracing diversity, and grit. This was a quick read with practical information and resources to develop and enrich these foundational skills with students. It fit well with my beliefs related to a growth mindset and the importance of leading this research with our students.

At the beginning of last school year, I promised myself to make intentional and purposeful visits to each classroom at Epworth Elementary School once a month. This was not just about visibility, but also about playing a more vital role in the essential skill-building of the “formative five” and beyond.

During these visits, I read a book and led a discussion or activity



related to some aspect of a growth mindset while enhancing foundational skills. I will briefly review three of the selections and the specific skills that we discussed during classroom visits. As I began planning for this endeavor, *Mindsets in the Classroom: Building a Culture of Success and Student Achievement in Schools* by Mary Cay Ricci (2013) provided excellent suggestions for books, videos, charts, and graphics.

***The Sneetches and Other Stories.***

Dr. Seuss. Random House, 1961, 72 pp.

Dr. Seuss is at his finest in this classic tale of embracing diversity while celebrating differences. This has been a favorite book of mine to teach students about empathy and seeing the world through a different set of eyes. As teacher candidates are preparing for interviews, they often ask me what are the most important skills to possess heading into their first interview or assignment. Without hesitation I share how critical empathy is to a successful career in education and life. The ability to walk in the shoes of another should never be undersold, and *The Sneetches* is an excellent piece of literature to teach this.

***Why Am I Here? A Story About Becoming the Best Version of Yourself!***


Matthew Kelly. Beacon Publishing, 2009, 54 pp.

This is a story of a boy named Max and the conversations he has with his grandfather while fishing. Max continually asks his grandfather, “Why am I here?” Grandfather responds, “You are here to be the best version of yourself.” As Max moves forward, he continues to ask himself this question, which guides the choices he makes. This book teaches a great lesson about living with passion and purpose while providing a common language for all students: Be the best version of yourself.

***Wonder.*** R.J. Palacio. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2012, 322 pp.

In this well-known novel, R.J. Palacio tells the story of Auggie Pullman, who enters fifth grade at Beecher Prep. Auggie was born with a severe facial deformity that caused him to be home-schooled up to this point. The book explores the importance of kindness, empathy, embracing diversity, and grit when times get tough, as a fifth-grader adjusts to a completely new setting. I have not read this book to classes, but I will be conducting a face-to-face book study with a group of students in the 2017–2018 school year. Between meetings, we will communicate and reflect through Kidblog. I am looking forward to this opportunity to facilitate authentic conversations with our students.

The movie version will be released November 17, and our book study group will see it together.

The academic content we teach students should never be ignored or underestimated; however, we must not forget about the power of enriching the foundational skills of all students. Children’s literature provides an amazing platform to open the doors to these skills while increasing the connection with students. If you are not reading to classrooms on a regular basis with intention and purpose, I would highly encourage you to participate in this work—you will not regret it. 

**Dan Butler** is principal of Epworth Elementary School in Epworth, Iowa.

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