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Examining Cross-Age Peer Conversations Relevant to Character: Can a Digital Story About Bullying Promote Students' Understanding of Humility?

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Successful character education programs are commonly marked by components including conversations about moral issues; however, little is known about what students actually talk about in such programs. Using initial data from the Arthur Interactive Media Buddy Project, this study examined whether a digital comic about bullying generated meaningful conversations surrounding humility. The sample was 52 cross-age peers in elementary school. Analyses involved an iterative, deductive-inductive coding process resulting in a total of ten codes, of which three were most readily identified in peers' conversations: perspective taking, affect labeling, and empathic responding. Limitations and implications relevant to character education are discussed.

Character education programs have grown in the United States, and programs that show success include components such as cooperative learning and conversations about moral issues (see Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006 for reviews). However, little is known about what students actually talk about in relation to character (Seider, 2012). A better understanding of how children discuss character-relevant issues and scenarios could help in designing more authentic, ecologically valid, and effective character education programs (Lerner & Callina, 2014a). Moreover, most character education programs continue to be delivered in traditional formats involving teacher-led or small-group discussions that largely ignore student-led interactions and prosocial content in digital interactive media (Bailey, Tettegah, & Bradley, 2006; Falloon & Khoo, 2014). Yet there are positive implications of students using media together,

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especially when presented with character-relevant content that is also relevant to students' lives and personal experiences (Bailey et al., 2006; Takeuchi & Stevens, 2011).

In the present study, elementary school students were presented with a digital story or comic about school bullying that was intended to communicate concepts related to the relational character virtue of humility. As part of the initial phase of launching the Arthur Interactive Media (AIM) Buddy Project, and situated within a relational developmental systems (RDS) model of character development (Lerner & Callina, 2014b) that emphasizes mutually influential relations between individuals (individual⇔individual relations) as well as individuals and their contexts (individual⇔context relations), we capitalized on cross-age peer mentoring and interactive media to help engage children with content specific to the character virtue of humility. This study sought to examine whether the content in peers' conversations reflected children's understanding of concepts related to humility.

The RDS Model of Character and the AIM Buddy Project

Character refers to a person's relations to others in the social world and, in particular, describes social relationships that are mutually beneficial for the self and society (Berkowitz, 2012; Lerner & Callina, 2014b). As such, Lerner and Callina (2014b) describe *character* as a relational construct developing through "a specific set of mutually beneficial relations that vary across time and . . . place, between person and context . . . and, in particular, between the individual and other individuals that comprise his or her context" (p. 323). The AIM Buddy Project is a collaboration between developmental scientists and children's media experts to develop, implement, and evaluate a character education program that embodies this RDS-based perspective. The program capitalizes on cross-age peers' mutually beneficial relationships and the salient context of media in their lives (Bowers et al., in press). Specifically, the program helps teachers pair their students with buddies of different grades (first graders with fourth graders, second graders with fifth graders), for the purposes of promoting meaningful conversations and reflections relevant to character. To enhance these conversational and reflective opportunities, the program uses digital interactive features (i.e., comics and games) adapted from episodes and characters of the *Arthur* cartoon series, which airs on PBS and follows an 8-year-old aardvark and his third-grade friends as they experience the challenges that many children face in navigating their world.[1]

The AIM program curriculum is built around the cross-age peers, or buddies, engaging with the interactive features. In the present study, the little (first and second graders) and big (fourth and fifth graders) buddies engaged with one interactive feature, a digital comic, where Arthur acted like a bully. This and other interactive features allow children to truly engage with the content—to explore, make choices, and delve into the thoughts, feelings, and actions of Arthur and his friends and, in turn, to reflect on their own thoughts, feelings, and actions. As such, the program serves as a potential springboard for promoting character-relevant conversations and reflections about issues that are relevant to young children.

[1]Produced by the WGBH Educational Foundation, *Arthur* first aired in 1996 and is the longest running animated series for children in the United States. Episodes have an all-animal cast whose characters are faced with a variety of issues that young children also face, such as friendship and family problems.

The Connection Between Bullying and Humility

Bullying is pervasive in the lives of children and can thus serve as an appropriate but also authentic and ecologically valid issue that conveys concepts to children related to the relational character virtue of humility. Bullying is often associated with limited empathy, particularly the affective component of empathy, that is, feelings of concern and care for others in distress (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). In contrast, humility involves empathy so as to be able to honestly "own" and acknowledge one's mistakes and have positive relations with others (Baehr, 2013; Davis et al., 2013). Thus, a story about bullying can teach children about humility, and in particular about the importance of recognizing and acknowledging how teasing or picking on another child can easily go too far and become bullying (see Monks & Smith, 2006).

Defined as repeated aggressive behavior in which an individual or group of individuals harm another person who is perceived as physically or psychologically less powerful (Olweus, 1993), *bullying* is increasingly understood as a dynamic social process involving multiple participants (e.g., bullies, victims, bully victims, and bystanders; e.g., Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). Younger children (ages 5–8) tend to have an "overinclusive" understanding of bullying, one that is not as reliant on repetition or intent to harm, as in older youth; rather, it is focused on the harm felt by the victim (Smith et al., 2002). In addition, in a study of students aged 8 to 18 years, Vaillancourt and her colleagues (2008) found that 8 to 10 year old children associated bullying with physical aggression (e.g., hits, kicks), general harassing behaviors (e.g., picks on, makes fun of), and verbal aggression (e.g., name calling), whereas children aged 11 to 18 years also mentioned more indirect, relational forms of aggression (e.g., gossip, exclusion).

In the present study, bullying was depicted in the form of repeated verbal harassment (i.e., mean jokes) that started off as mild teasing but quickly turned into bullying. This bullying storyline was presented as a digital comic adapted from the *Arthur* episode "So Funny I Forgot to Laugh," in which Arthur calls his friend Sue Ellen a sheepdog because of her new sweater. Their friends Buster, Muffy, and Francine are positioned as bystanders and initially laugh off the teasing, but when Arthur continues with his teasing, the friends and Sue Ellen no longer find it funny. As the comic progresses, everyone becomes increasingly angry with Arthur, and their teacher, Mr. Ratburn, ends up defining the behavior as bullying and insists that Arthur apologize to Sue Ellen. Unable to come to terms with his wrongdoing, Arthur writes an insincere apology letter that only hurts Sue Ellen and disappoints their friends further. Overall, the comic portrays Arthur as unwilling to recognize and acknowledge why his actions and words are hurting Sue Ellen, even as his friends try to point out the need for Arthur to admit and "own," or take responsibility for, his hurtful actions and mistakes. This portrayal was meant to promote conversations containing implicit messages about what it means to have or to show humility: that is, Arthur's lack of self- and other-awareness reflected his lack of humility and, as well, his bullying behavior. At the end of the story, Arthur shows humility by finally acknowledging his mistakes and offering Sue Ellen a sincere apology.

Although there are no clear-cut definitions or validated ways to measure humility in children, there is burgeoning research that refers to *humility* as a multifaceted construct involving intra- and interpersonal qualities reflective of the ways in which we engage with others (Davis et al., 2011, 2013; Echols & Finkbiner, 2013). According to Echols and Finkbiner (2013), for instance, humility reflects a modest view of oneself as well as openness to new ideas and practices of others. Thus, individuals who are humble would shy away from praise or recognition and instead

demonstrate modesty and tolerance. Davis, Worthington, and Hook (2010) also define *humility* as a relationship-specific attribute comprising the following four elements:

> (1) other-orientedness in one's relationships with others, rather than selfishness; (2) the tendency to express positive other-oriented emotions in one's relationships (e.g., empathy, compassion, sympathy, and love); (3) the ability to regulate self-oriented emotions, such as pride or excitement about one's accomplishments, in socially acceptable ways; and (4) having an accurate view of self. (p. 248)

Taken together, therefore, humility is consistent with the RDS-based notion of character as a relational virtue.

Based on this conception of humility, key aspects of humility may include showing empathy (emotional sharing and concern for others in distress; Decety & Cowell, 2014), perspective taking (understanding another's point of view and emotional circumstance; Decety & Cowell, 2014), sympathy, self-worth, and self-regulation, for example, in the form of managing one's pride and being open to others' ideas. Although young children are still developing their sense of self and have some limitations in their perspective-taking skills (e.g., Heagle & Rehfeldt, 2006), they are capable of expressing empathy and concern for others as well as understanding other's needs and situations (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Knafo-Noam, 2015). These capacities can be attributed to children's growing development in language, the ability to recognize and label emotions, and the ability to grasp other's perspectives as early as age 4 (Denham, 1998). Such capacities also demonstrate the capacity for children—particularly older children—to develop an implicit understanding of humility (Echols & Finkbiner, 2013).

Cross-Age Peer Mentoring and Digital Interactive Media

Based on the RDS individual⇔individual, relational conception of character (Lerner & Callina, 2014b), we capitalized on cross-age peer mentoring to promote children's conversations relevant to humility. An extensive body of research recognizes peers as a key contextual resource for promoting positive skills relevant to character (e.g., Larson, Jensen, Kang, Griffith, & Rompala, 2012). In particular, a 2-year age difference between peers has been found to produce more optimal outcomes than peers closer in age, with outcomes including positive interpersonal skills, moral reasoning, and understanding of difficult concepts (Karcher, 2007). Positive outcomes have also been found in mentors and mentees alike, as they actively engage in learning (Fair, Hopkins, & Decker, 2010; Tasca, 2002).

Another salient resource in this study was children's joint engagement with media. Digital media have been a largely unexplored avenue in character education, likely due to the overwhelming focus in the literature on the negative implications of media use, including its links to aggression and bullying (Saleem & Anderson, 2012). However, there is also research indicating that prosocial media content can have many positive implications for children's development, including building children's emotional competencies, reducing their aggressive attitudes, and providing scripts and skills for dealing with challenging situations (e.g., Boyd & Dobrow, 2011; Narvaez, Mattan, MacMichael, & Squillace, 2008; Sestir & Bartholow, 2010). Despite debate among educators, practitioners, and advocacy groups about young children's consumption of screen-based media content (National Association for the Education of Young Children & Fred Rogers Center, 2012), it seems inevitable that today's children live and learn with media, as they spend almost as much time with digital technologies and media as they do learning in school

(Calvert, 2015). In addition, the positive impact of media on children's development is moderated by how much guidance and support they are provided through joint engagement by more knowledgeable coviewers (Takeuchi & Stevens, 2011). Thus, there is a need for making media a constructive tool that supports children's learning, and one way to enact this goal is to make media content interactive and experienced through the collaborative engagement of peers. Through such engagement, children can actively explore and navigate issues salient to their lives in dynamic and reflective ways (Bailey et al., 2006).

The Present Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the content in cross-age peers' conversations related to humility. We capitalized on cross-age peer relations and interactive media to assess whether a digital comic about bullying could generate meaningful conversations and understanding of concepts (e.g., labeling affect, perspective taking) related to the relational character virtue of humility. Given that young children can label emotions, feel concern for others, and see others' perspectives, we hypothesized that little buddies would demonstrate understanding of these concepts as well as their big buddies. However, because young children still have some limitations in their perspective-taking skills (e.g., Heagle & Rehfeldt, 2006), we sought to explore whether the little buddies could recognize Arthur's unwillingness to "own" his hurtful actions and sincerely apologize to Sue Ellen, thereby his reluctance to show humility.

METHOD

Participants

Cross-age peer groups (49 dyads, three triads) participated in the first phase of the AIM Buddy Project (Bowers et al., in press). This phase involved developing, implementing, and evaluating the humility-based comic on bullying. Students were recruited from four public schools in suburban Boston, Massachusetts, with the goal of having a sample that was predominantly comprising first- to fourth-grade pairings ($n = 20$) and second- to fifth-grade pairings ($n = 24$) as well as diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. The majority of peer groups were same-sex (17 male–male dyads, 22 female–female dyads), seven were cross-sex dyads in which the older peer was male, and the remaining dyads or triads were balanced in regard to the gender of younger and older peers. Twenty seven of the participating peer groups (about 51.9% of the sample) attended a school that was racially and ethnically diverse (45.1% Hispanic, 26.6% White, 14.2% African American, 13.2% Asian) and in which 84% of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The remaining 26 peer groups were somewhat evenly distributed across the three other schools (21%, 17%, and 11%, respectively); these schools were not as racially or ethnically diverse (they were majority White), but the majority of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

Procedures

Written Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from the authors' university as well as the participating school districts prior to conducting the research. Investigators trained teachers

on implementing the program for a one-hour period prior to their involvement in the study. All students within each classroom participated in the program; however, data were collected only from students who received parental consent and who provided assent to participate.

This initial phase of the AIM Buddy Project included content development for the comic intended to relay concepts related to the character virtue of humility. In addition, we developed and implemented four classroom sessions—getting ready to meet your buddy, getting to know your buddy, reading and talking together [when the buddies get together to play with the comic], and reflecting together. Each session lasted 30 to 40 minutes and was facilitated by the teacher with the assistance of the research team. For the purposes of this study, we describe findings from the reading and talking together session only.[2]

Comic Design

During the reading and talking together session, buddies engaged with the comic[3] as they manually clicked through it to get to subsequent scenes. Interspersed throughout the scenes were unique sets of questions strategically designed to encourage buddies to talk and reflect on the content more deeply. After each set of questions, buddies were also presented with "What were they thinking?" interactive screens, or images of the main story characters—Arthur, Sue Ellen, and Buster—that contained thought bubbles depicting how they were really feeling or what they were really thinking at those particular points in the story (despite what they may or may not have been vocalizing to one another). These interactive screens provided scaffolding for inferences about the characters and allowed buddies to discuss whether the characters' thoughts, feelings, and actions were consistent or inconsistent with what the buddies discussed in response to the questions. After each interactive screen, a question was then presented. It asked buddies what one of the characters could or should do in the subsequent scenes. At the conclusion of the comic, three different story endings for each of the three main characters were also presented and buddies were able to explore various choices and consequences for Arthur and his friends.[4]

To gather data on the types of conversations during the reading and talking together session, we recorded and transcribed the conversations between the buddies as they engaged with the comic. Buddies' interactions were video recorded using handheld recording devices placed in front of the buddies. The buddies' conversations from these recordings were then professionally transcribed and reviewed for consistency and accuracy by the research team.

Analysis Plan

The analytic plan was to develop a coding manual describing the concepts related to humility as they were embedded in the comic content. First, we used Davis et al.'s (2010) four-component definition of humility, as well as concepts from the work of Echols and Finkbiner (2013), which

[2]For a more detailed description of the sessions and procedures for pairing buddies, see Bowers et al. (in press).

[3]The comic's homepage is sourced on the official PBS-hosted Arthur website and can be found here: http://pbskids.org/arthur/games/comic_sofunny/index.html. If the site cannot be accessed, please contact the first author.

[4]For example, Sue Ellen's endings included children exploring what would happen if she had simply ignored the problem, talked to her parents about what was going on, or retaliated against Arthur. As well, students had a similar range of helpful and less helpful behaviors to choose from for for the Arthur and Buster characters.

emphasized children's capacity for understanding humility by understanding what it means to be reluctant to receive praise or recognition (modesty) as well as to be open to others' ideas (tolerance). Then, we divided the comic's storyline into 30 coding opportunities, ones reflecting the number of scenes as well as the number of questions and interactive screens we had placed in the story. There were nine scenes in total, with a series of four questions and four accompanying interactive screens following four of the nine scenes. The coding opportunities then facilitated the development of codes to reflect how buddies responded to the comic content, or in particular the characters' feelings, thoughts, and actions, representing the main concepts of humility. We relied on the literature (e.g., Davis et al., 2010; Echols & Finkbiner, 2013) but also immersed ourselves in the data by reading through five randomly selected transcripts from the 52 total transcripts and discussing the topics that arose during each coding opportunity.

Using an iterative, deductive-inductive coding process, we arrived at a total of 10 codes (see Table 1 for descriptions, and Results for more details): affect labeling, perspective taking, empathic responding, sympathy, "owning" ones' mistakes, openness, learning from others, modest self-worth, envy/jealousy, and pride. Using these codes, three additional transcripts were coded, discussed, and agreed upon by the entire coding team (10 people total). These transcripts were used to train hired coders, who were instructed to code the three transcripts independently and compare their codes to the codes collectively agreed on by the initial coding team. These transcripts were referenced throughout the iterations of the coding manual and adjusted as needed. All remaining transcripts ($n = 49$) were coded by two people, with the exception of one that

TABLE 1
Descriptions of Codes Reflecting the Main Concepts of Humility and the Number of Times They Were Identified in Cross-Age Buddy Conversations During the "It's So Funny I Forgot to Laugh" Digital Story or Comic

Codes	*Descriptions of Codes*	*Number of Times/% of Codes Identified*
Perspective taking	Understanding and describing characters' points of view	671 (43%)
Affect labeling	Identifying and naming characters' emotions	396 (25%)
Empathic responding	Feeling what characters are feeling or demonstrating an emotional connection to a character	111 (7%)
Sympathy	Feeling sympathy or concern for characters' situations	20 (1%)
Pride	Identifying characters' boastfulness or bragging	15 (.9%)
Learning from others	Recognizing when characters learn from others to correct or better their own actions	10 (.6%)
"Owning" one's mistakes	Recognizing when characters make and/or admit mistakes, and the implications of admitting (or not admitting) their mistakes	3 (.2%)
Modest self-worth	Recognizing when characters demonstrate self-worth that remains modest or realistic	3 (.2%)
Envy/jealousy	Identifying characters' negative feelings towards others' success	3 (.2%)
Openness	Recognizing characters' openness to others' ideas or experiences	1

Note. The number of times codes were identified was computed based on the 1,560 possible coding opportunities (30 opportunities × 52 cross-age peer groups).

had to be discarded because the dyad did not engage in any verbal conversations. After all coding was completed, each coded transcript was then reconciled between two coders until 100% inter-rater reliability was obtained. Reconciliation entailed both coders discussing the disputed codes to determine a final code, and the coding manual was continually updated as double coding progressed through all transcripts (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). Through this procedure, coding of completed transcripts was adjusted with each iteration of the coding manual.[5]

RESULTS

Across the 1,560 possible coding opportunities (30 opportunities × 52 cross-age peer groups), there were a total of 1,233 times, or counts, that the humility codes were reflected in the buddies' conversations. Some buddies talked more than others, and thus some codes were identified more in some conversations over others. However, the variation in length of conversations was not related to the patterns of buddy conversations, or the codes and content we examined. Specifically, we describe the patterns below in two ways: (1) the codes that were most frequently identified across all buddy conversations and (2) the content of what buddies talked about, as reflected in these codes.

Identification of Codes

Overall, perspective taking (671 counts) and affect labeling (396 counts) were most commonly identified in buddies' conversations, with the former reflecting buddies' ability to comprehend and interpret the perspectives of characters and the latter reflecting buddies' ability to identify the feelings of characters accurately. Empathic responding, or the ability to emotionally connect with characters and, in turn, to make connections with personal feelings, was the third most common code, though not as highly prominent (111 counts). Likely due to there being few opportunities explicitly asking or prompting buddies to discuss sympathy for characters or to identify pride in characters, these codes were identified only 20 and 15 times, respectively. Similarly, there were few opportunities explicitly asking or prompting buddies to discuss the importance of learning from others, and thus, this code was identified 10 times. "Owning" one's mistakes, modest self-worth, and envy/jealousy were each identified three times, and openness to others' ideas was identified once.

It is noteworthy that the substantial portion of codes identified most (1,056 counts) occurred during four of the nine scenes,[6] when the number of coding opportunities was also the most prominent. That is, there were four scenes containing questions and interactive screens prompting buddies to talk, whereas the remaining five scenes were not followed by questions and interactive screens. The amount of conversations during those five scenes and coding opportunities was small and largely centered around perspective taking.

[5]For more detailed information about the coding process, including the coding opportunities, and the final coding manual, see Bowers et al. (in press).

[6]A detailed description of the scenes and specific coding opportunities within scenes is available upon request to the first author.

Content of Buddies' Conversations

The section below focuses on describing the content of buddies' conversations involving perspective taking, affect labeling, and empathic responding, given that these were the codes identified most based on the coding opportunities within the comic. Although these empathy-related codes were identified much more frequently compared to the other codes that more directly connote humility (e.g., modest self-worth, openness to others' ideas), we believe that the description of these codes illustrates that buddies' conversations appeared to reflect an implicit understanding of Arthur's lack of humility, as reflected in discussions surrounding his lack of self- and other-awareness. Overall, big buddies asked the questions and probed little buddies with additional questions, but little buddies were equally responsive to the comic's content, with explanations or attempts at explanations of the content. Nonetheless, little buddies appeared to struggle with some of the concepts of humility, namely the need for Arthur to acknowledge his unacceptable behavior and sincerely apologize to Sue Ellen.

Perspective Taking

Children spent a large portion of time talking about characters' perspectives and making connections between the characters' actions and feelings. Overall, perspective taking appeared to be most prominent in reference to Arthur's actions, followed by Buster's change in perspective that the teasing should stop. There were instances where children also emphasized what they would do if they were Sue Ellen in certain situations. As evidenced in the three sample excerpts provided below, big buddies generally asked the questions and reiterated the perspectives of the characters; but there were also instances where they clarified or extended the little buddies' responses so as to elucidate their perspective taking:

1. Big Buddy: Why do you think he [Arthur] made the dog joke?

   Little Buddy: Maybe he—well 'cause I heard that—because I heard that Arthur said to Sue Ellen that she was a sheepdog, so maybe he thought to make more jokes about dogs so that he's funny.

2. Big Buddy: So . . . what do you think Buster will think about the picture? [Arthur drew a picture of Sue Ellen wearing the sweater, and titled it, "Happy Sheepdog Appreciation Day."]

   Little Buddy: Buster will think why are you doing this, Arthur? Why? I thought Sue Ellen was our friend. Why are you making fun of her? It's just a sweatshirt. You don't go that far.

3. Little Buddy: Well, if I was Sue Ellen, I would be [puts fist down on desk] I'm gonna break the table. He's always so mad at me.

   Big Buddy: I would feel mad because the apology letter is supposed to be nice.

Although the little buddy in sample excerpt three could foresee Sue Ellen being upset because Arthur's apology letter was insincere, many little buddies struggled with accurately explaining the perspective of Arthur, that is, that he was unwilling to sincerely apologize to Sue Ellen. In the comic, Sue Ellen looks angry and tearful while reading the insincere letter, and the first question

provided to buddies after this scene is, "Why did Arthur write his letter like that?" Although most little buddies said it was because he was angry or sad, they did not accurately explain why he felt that way: that is, they did not perceive that Arthur was angry because he did not want to write the letter, thinking he did nothing wrong and that Sue Ellen was "over-reacting" (which he wrote in the letter). For example, one little buddy said Arthur was angry because he wanted to study for a history test instead, and another little buddy said Arthur was really mad at Buster (when in fact, he was mostly mad at Sue Ellen for telling on him and for what he thought was over-reacting).

Finally, some children seemed to understand that the characters' perspectives were subjective and could even be contradictory to one another. There were several instances in which children contrasted the ways in which Arthur and Sue Ellen interpreted or understood the same situation. For example, after the sheepdog picture, one big buddy stated, "Obviously, he [Arthur] thinks it's still funny, but I don't think anybody else does" and the little buddy agreed by stating, "Yeah, you can tell she [Sue Ellen] doesn't like it because of the tone of her voice." This latter little buddy statement was an example of affect labeling (see below) and the relative co-occurrence between perspective taking and affect labeling that was discussed across the comic.

AFFECT LABELING

There were many opportunities in which buddies demonstrated the ability to identify and appropriately label how the characters were feeling. Children were adept at describing the emotional states of characters, for example making statements like, "I think he [Buster] feels a little sad now," and "He [Arthur] is happy." Big buddies were especially skilled at identifying and labeling emotions, and they exhibited high levels of scaffolding for their little buddies, helping them find the appropriate words to describe characters' feelings. For example,

Little Buddy: Maybe she feels, maybe she feels like, maybe she feels . . . .
Big Buddy: Do you have any words, like sad, mad, angry, happy, excited?
Little Buddy: I think she's feeling sad right now.

Some children not only described characters' feelings but also made inferences about the targets and reasons behind those feelings. For instance, several buddies (including little buddies) said that Sue Ellen felt upset not only at Arthur but Buster as well, when he did nothing to stop Arthur from persisting to tease her. Other buddies also said that Sue Ellen felt sad because she was getting teased. In the few instances when buddies labeled Buster's or Arthur's affect, they directly tied their feelings to their circumstance. For example, one big buddy said, "Arthur is upset because he has to write an apology letter," and another big buddy said, "I think Sue Ellen might be getting a little upset, and he [Buster] can tell that . . . " Buddies could thus label affect and also make links or connections between characters' emotional states and the events of the story.

Little and big buddies also used visual or facial cues to infer emotions, for example making statements like: "Sue Ellen *looks* upset," "I think she [Sue Ellen] was [upset] because I saw her face and she had a frown," and "Arthur looks shocked." Although most visual or facial inferences were about Sue Ellen (given that all questions about Sue Ellen were about her feelings),

there were some instances in which buddies spontaneously described Arthur's affect. For example, Arthur was shocked when everyone decided to give him the silent treatment because of his insincere apology letter. There were no questions or interactive screens during this scene and, yet, there were various buddies—little and big—who observed that he looked shocked or "stunned."

Empathic Responding

Although much of the engagement with the comic involved conversations describing the events of the story and the characters' perspectives and affective states, empathic responding was also coded in specific scenes and in response to specific characters. Little and big buddies were capable of making connections between the feelings of characters and their own feelings, and though little buddies did not describe the emotional states as heavily as the big buddies, they did exhibit very visceral reactions to Sue Ellen's experience. Overall, the buddies, and in particular the little buddies, demonstrated strong emotional connections with Sue Ellen, as evidenced by the examples below:

1. Big Buddy: Sue Ellen doesn't seem okay anymore.
   Little Buddy: It's even making my eyes water right now. It's not nice.
2. Big Buddy: So he's saying oh, he should stop now 'cause it's kinda getting a little bit annoying. It's non-stop, yep. Arthur's making me feel bad. Doesn't he know that? So she's feeling wicked bad. She's down in the dumps right now. She's like I'm kinda feeling stomachache because how Arthur just keeps going on and going on and going on. Wouldn't you kinda feel bad if you were her and he kept telling jokes?
   Little Buddy: Frustrated and I think she feels—I'm a little frustrated.

There were also many instances during which little and big buddies made connections to their own bullying experiences or what they would do in bullying situations. Most often, big buddies scaffolded the little buddies by asking and probing with questions such as, "Would you feel bad if somebody teased you or bullied you?" "Have you ever been bullied before?" and "Would you tell an adult or just do something on your own?" Some little buddies were very honest in sharing their own experiences, as one little buddy said, "I used to get bullied in kindergarten and stuff. And this is what someone did to me. They stabbed me with a pencil." Another little buddy agreed with Sue Ellen telling the teacher (Mr. Ratburn), saying, "My friend was bullying me, can you please stop, if he didn't stop, I would go to tell an adult." In some instances, little buddies also prompted or probed their big buddies to talk, as shown in the sample excerpt below.

Big Buddy: Yeah, right, in his dreams. He's being such a bully, right?
Little Buddy: That's really bullying. I don't like that. Would you like to be bullied like that, called a sheepdog? No.
Big Buddy: No, I would be so mad and frustrated with Arthur.

DISCUSSION

Based on the initial phase of the Arthur Interactive Media Buddy Project, and situated within a relational developmental systems (RDS) conception of the individual⇔individual relations involved in character development (Lerner & Callina, 2014b), this study capitalized on cross-age peer mentoring and interactive media to examine children's conversations related to the relational character virtue of humility, or the ability to honestly "own" and acknowledge one's mistakes and have positive relations with others (Baehr, 2013; Davis et al., 2013). Specifically, cross-age peers, or buddies, were presented with a digital comic about bullying that was intended to convey concepts related to humility. Consistent with the overall storyline and objective of the comic being to relay such concepts, the codes that were most frequently identified in buddies' conversations were perspective taking, affect labeling, and empathic responding. Little and big buddies exhibited understanding of the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the characters, but it was apparent that the little buddies struggled with understanding the concept of "owning" one's mistakes and thus, what it might mean to arrive at humility. Nonetheless, the comic's storyline resonated with buddies across all ages, as they grasped the fundamental empathy-related aspects of humility.

Consistent with research indicating that children focus more on the harm felt by the victim in bullying situations (e.g., Rigby & Johnson, 2006; Smith et al., 2002), buddies and especially little buddies resonated with the feelings of the victim (Sue Ellen) in the comic's storyline as they demonstrated affect labeling and empathic responding when asked questions about Sue Ellen's feelings. In contrast, perspective taking was more common in relation to Arthur's character, followed by Buster's perspective of how Arthur was treating Sue Ellen. However, examining the natural conversations that occurred during engagement with the comic also pointed to a high degree of cooccurrence of these aspects of humility. Children often linked the perspectives of the characters to their affect. That is, children would infer what a character was thinking based on the affect that the character displayed. These findings support the conception of humility as a multifaceted relational virtue (Davis et al., 2010).

Because the majority of the comic was about the lack of humility Arthur exhibited, it was not surprising that certain aspects of humility, like "owning" one's mistakes and openness (to others' ideas), were not as prominent in buddies' conversations as were perspective taking, affect labeling, and empathic responding. That is, much of the story was reflective of what happens when an individual lacks self- and other-awareness (i.e., perspective taking and recognizing others' and one's own emotions), which are salient aspects of humility. Only in a few of the comic's nine ending options does Arthur finally come to demonstrate humility consistent with Davis et al.'s (2010) conceptualization and definition of the construct, as comprising other-orientedness and positive other-oriented emotions in one's relationships. That is, Arthur comes to recognize that what he did was wrong and finally validates and sympathizes with Sue Ellen's feelings. It was during the ending scenes that the codes of "owning" one's mistakes, learning from others, and sympathy were identified in buddies' conversations, thereby also demonstrating that children have the capacity to understand and talk about more explicit concepts related to humility (Echols & Finkbiner, 2013).

It is noteworthy, however, that the younger children, or little buddies, did not fully grasp the concept of what it means to arrive at humility, as evidenced by their (mis)interpretation of Arthur's apology letter. In general, young children did not seem to recognize the insincerity in Arthur's letter to Sue Ellen. There could be three possible explanations for this occurrence. First, it is possible that children agreed with Arthur that Sue Ellen was over-reacting to his teasing

and therefore, Arthur's letter was appropriate. A second possibility is that some children were not cognitively advanced enough to accurately interpret the nuances in Arthur's letter, especially given that young children demonstrate limits in their perspective-taking skills (e.g., Heagle & Rehfeldt, 2006). Instead, the little buddies may have focused on the salience of the "apology" letter and perceived the act of letter writing as atonement for Arthur's behavior, which is consistent with Piaget's (1932) notion of heteronormous morality. Finally, it is possible that at least some little buddies did recognize the insincerity in Arthur's letter, but they did not receive sufficient scaffolding or probing from their big buddies to articulate or explain their thinking. Future work will be necessary to more fully investigate such misinterpretations.

Determining why little buddies did not fully grasp or articulate the comic's concepts of humility will influence potential enhancements of the interactive feature experience. Additional training of big buddies to more deeply scaffold the conversations may help little buddies better understand the nuances of the storyline. In addition, more explicit and focused questions may be needed, for example asking, "Why is Arthur's letter not a true apology?" However, we strived to create questions that did not place a valence on a character's actions, as we wanted to explore how children interpreted them. Alternatively, then, the younger children in particular could engage in more targeted class discussion following the interactive feature experience, where they can explore the characters and specific lessons of the comic with their teacher and classmates.

Limitations and Conclusions

The current study serves to illuminate our limited knowledge about children's understanding of humility but, as with any study, there were several limitations that warrant future research. First, the current study was limited by its use of cross-sectional, observational data that were not linked to individual data assessing students' humility and bullying involvement. Some conversations may have involved greater reflection than others because one or both buddies had high levels of humility, for example. Thus, a valid, age-appropriate measure of humility would also be integral to future studies seeking to examine children's understanding of humility. Relatedly, it is unknown whether buddies' interactive feature experience could promote individual and collective humility development (and less bullying involvement). Thus, longitudinal research is needed to assess if such a character education program can enhance elementary school students' character. Third, there was no other examination of children's understanding of the concepts related to humility beyond their verbal communication with their buddy throughout the comic. Individual students within each dyad or triad may have developed a better understanding of humility but did not show it through verbal conversation alone. Additional assessment or evaluation, for example in the form of interviews, would therefore be integral for obtaining a more comprehensive examination of students' understanding of humility.

Despite the limitations, the present study highlights the value of incorporating cross-age peers and interactive media into character education programs, especially when peers can engage with and talk about content that is directly relevant to their lives and personal experiences (Bailey et al., 2006; Takeuchi & Stevens, 2011). Closer examination of children's conversations about character relevant concepts also provides evidence of children's capacity for understanding phenomena that have proven difficult to define and assess in children. For instance, whereas humility might be a difficult character virtue to teach or promote in children, its underlying concepts related to empathy (e.g., affect labeling, perspective taking) resonate with children, especially when communicated through characters' thoughts and feelings that they can relate to and understand.

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