

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You by Barthe DeClements

Book Information

Barthe DeClements, Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You
Quiz Number: 245
Scholastic Book Service, 1985
ISBN 0-590-40180-7; LCCN
146 Pages
Book Level: 4.3
Interest Level: MG

Helen fears that lack of improvement in her reading may leave her stuck in the sixth grade forever, until a good teacher recognizes her reading problem.

Award: Young Reader's Choice Award/Nominee

Topics: Behavior, Obedience; Family Life, Growing Up; Humor/Funny, Funny; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Choose a Challenge: Decisions; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice

Main Characters

Carole Martin Louise's younger sister, who pesters Helen and Louise as they walk to school

Diane Gates Helen's friendly classmate who tries to save Helen from being embarrassed by Sharon

Emily Nichols (Mother) Helen's insecure mother, who tries to keep her daughter out of the special ed classroom by giving her remedial instruction

Fred Nichols (Dad) Helen's understanding father, who realizes that Helen needs special help; he helps both Helen and her mother cope during this difficult time

Helen Nichols a sixth grade girl who is having trouble learning to read and frequently misbehaves in school

Jack Hanson Helen's classmate who often gets into trouble

Jimmy Helen's good friend and classmate

Leon Helen's classmate who asks her for answers on a math test

Louise Martin Helen's best friend, who is very interested in boys and often quarrels with her many siblings

Miss Sleek Helen's music teacher, who likes Helen

Mr. Douglas the principal of Helen's school, who believes Helen needs special education

Mr. Marshall the sixth grade teacher who becomes Helen's teacher in the middle of the year; his sympathy for Helen helps her decide to get special help in reading

Mrs. Lobb Helen's strict sixth grade teacher, who is frustrated with Helen's poor reading skills and bad behavior

Sharon Hinkler Helen's classmate who likes to gossip

the Lindstroms Fred Nichols's clients with whom Mother does not like socializing because they make her feel self-conscious

Uncle Leo Helen's sympathetic uncle, who gives Helen advice about how to deal with difficult situations

Warren Keller Helen's classmate who, in Helen's opinion, smells bad

William the boy in the special ed classroom who befriends Helen

Vocabulary

assured encouraged

progress advancement

psychology the study of the way people think and act

remedies ways to fix problems

solemn very serious

suited appropriate

Synopsis

Helen Nichols dreads the first day of sixth grade in spite of her mother's reassurances that she is not dumb. When Helen arrives at school she learns that she is in Mrs. Lobb's class, while her friend Louise is in Mr. Marshall's class. Helen is disappointed because Mr. Marshall is known for being a kind teacher. Her discouragement only increases when Mrs. Lobb enters the room and scolds Helen's friend

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You by Barthe DeClements

Jimmy for fighting over a seat with Leon.

The day goes from bad to worse when Mrs. Lobb trips over an obstacle Helen has purposely placed in the aisle. When Helen turns in a misspelled apology, Mrs. Lobb warns her that she expects her students to work in class, not play.

At home, Helen's mother immediately begins working with Helen on her reading assignment. While Helen does well in math, music, and P.E., she has a severe reading problem that has caused her great embarrassment. She is so frustrated that she tells her parents that she wants to quit school when she turns sixteen.

The next day, Mrs. Lobb assigns students to read parts in a play. Helen is given a part that has only a few lines. Relieved, Helen reviews her lines at home until she knows them so well that she can read them without stumbling. Unfortunately, her part is given to a new boy, and she is given the part of the daughter, a major character with many lines. Helen is humiliated as she flounders through her new part. After school, Mrs. Lobb calls Helen's mother. Mrs. Lobb recommends that Helen be placed in a special education class, but Helen's mother adamantly refuses. She wants to continue to help her daughter herself so Helen can avoid the social stigma that comes with being in special ed.

As the end of the first quarter draws near, Mrs. Lobb tells the students that the majority of their grades will be based on tests. This is not good news for Helen, as she realizes that she will fail since she had always counted on her homework, P.E., and music grades to help her pass.

Several days later, she helps another student on a math exam. Mrs. Lobb throws away her test, giving her a zero. When Helen receives her report card with the comment that she is in danger of failing sixth grade, Helen's mother asks for a conference with Mr. Douglas, the principal. At the conference, Mr. Douglas suggests that the school psychologist test Helen and make a recommendation. Helen's father thinks this is a good idea, but her mother is

strongly opposed and wants Helen transferred to Mr. Marshall's class. Mr. Douglas says they will wait until the end of the semester to see how Helen does.

Helen's frustration mounts, so she plays pranks in an effort to cope. For example, one day she sets an alarm clock to go off in a trash can. Mrs. Lobb thinks it is a fire drill and leads all of the students outside. On the last day before Christmas vacation, she sets off a firecracker outside the school. Mrs. Lobb catches her with the matches in her hand and sends her to the principal's office.

As punishment, Helen's parents restrict her to home and make her study every day until Christmas Eve. At the end of January, Helen receives her semester report card and learns that she is still failing. In exasperation, she spray-paints a wall of her school that night. The next day she is transferred to Mr. Marshall's class. When Mr. Douglas visits the classroom to try to discover the identity of the guilty student, he tells the students that the taxpayers will be burdened with the cost of repairing the vandal's damage. She feels guilty about this and asks the janitor how much it will cost.

Within two weeks, Mr. Marshall has discovered Helen's reading problem and asks her to consider going to a special ed class for part of the day. She visits the class with him and decides that it may help her. She talks to her father about it that weekend while her mother is away. Her father agrees to sign the paperwork, even though he knows his wife will be very upset. When Helen goes to the principal's office with her father, she gives Mr. Douglas six dollars to pay for the paint needed to cover her vandalism. Mr. Douglas hopes that this marks the end of her misbehavior.

The school psychologist tests Helen and explains that, while she will have to work hard in the special ed class, she will be able to go on to junior high with her classmates and will have only fifteen minutes of homework a day.

Helen's mother is furious when she returns and finds that her husband has enrolled Helen in the special

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You by Barthe DeClements

ed class. Her mother feels unneeded until her father remedies that situation by asking his wife to help him with his overload at work.

While Helen's self-esteem suffers because she feels she has been labeled "special ed," she does see improvement in her reading, and the special ed teachers help her to see her strengths.

In May, both sixth grade classes go to Orcas Island for a week of camp. Helen brings firecrackers with her and plans to throw one into a boy's cabin. Mr. Marshall catches her before she can and takes it away from her. The next morning he confronts her about her behavior. She feels guilty and is sure Mr. Marshall no longer likes her. Mr. Marshall assures her that he still cares for her and that it is only her misbehavior that he does not like. He assigns her to work in the camp kitchen that day as a punishment but offers her the pitcher's position on a girls' baseball team that summer.

Helen finishes the remainder of camp and the semester without getting into any more trouble. She does not even shoot off her last firecracker before the end of school. That, she says, she is saving for junior high.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

How does Helen's father feel about Helen going into the special ed classroom?

Helen's father has known for a long time that the teaching methods Helen's mother is trying are not working. He thinks that making Helen study extra hard in reading is only causing the entire family a lot of stress. He feels sorry for Helen because she is not getting the help she needs, and he feels angry with his wife for worrying so much about what others think. He seems relieved when Helen asks to be placed in the special ed classroom, but he still wants it to be Helen's decision.

Literary Analysis

What was the author's purpose in writing this story?

The author wants to show how frustrating school can be for children with learning disabilities. Specifically, the author wants to show the most effective way to help these children, as well as expose what is wrong with other approaches. Mrs. Lobb's method is to try to bully Helen into learning. Helen's mother thinks the solution is to use traditional teaching methods but to make the student study more. Only Mr. Marshall, whose approach the author suggests is exemplary, sees that Helen needs a compromise between a special ed classroom and a traditional classroom. The author wants to show that many talented and intelligent children are made to feel frustrated and worthless because their learning problems are not dealt with in an appropriate way.

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You by Barthe DeClements

Inferential Comprehension

Both Mrs. Lobb and Mr. Marshall want Helen to go to the special ed classroom so that she can learn how to read better. Why is Mr. Marshall's approach more effective than Mrs. Lobb's in getting Helen to accept extra help?

In the first place, Mr. Marshall likes Helen and does not make her feel like he is her enemy, while Mrs. Lobb very obviously does not like Helen and makes Helen resent her. Therefore, when Mr. Marshall suggests Helen go to the special ed classroom for reading, Helen is able to ask him bluntly if this means he does not like her. Once he confirms that he does like her and appreciates her other skills, Helen realizes that his suggestions are meant to help her rather than attack her. Second, Mr. Marshall wants to send Helen to the special ed classroom only for the areas in which she needs help, whereas Mrs. Lobb seems to want Helen completely removed from her classroom. Finally, Mr. Marshall also discusses the matter privately with Helen and talks to her about her feelings and needs. Mrs. Lobb merely lectures Helen and then tries to force Helen's parents to move her to the special classroom. All of these factors work together to make Mr. Marshall's approaches succeed with Helen while Mrs. Lobb's efforts fail.

Constructing Meaning

Mrs. Lobb surprises her students when she tells them how they will be graded for the quarter. How would Mrs. Lobb's news about the grading have made you feel? Why would you feel that way?

Many students do not like surprises when it comes to how they will be graded, so students may say that they would have been angry or upset if their teacher suddenly told them that they were going to be graded mainly on final exams rather than on their cumulative work. Also, many students like Jimmy would be frustrated to find out that much of the work they had already done would have only a small impact on their grades. Some students also feel stressed by tests, particularly ones that have so much significance. They may feel overwhelmed by having to recall large amounts of information in order to do well for the quarter. On the other hand, some students might feel that testing would give them an opportunity to redeem themselves if they had not been doing their work.

Teachable Skills

Understanding the Author's Craft Helen's mother seems to have as much difficulty dealing with Helen's problems as Helen does. Have the students write a journal from the mother's point of view during the time of this story. Have the students use details about Helen's mother so that their journal entries accurately reflect her personality.

Responding to Literature After Helen starts classes in the special ed room, several of her classmates make comments to her. Have the students think about how they would feel if they or one of their friends were in Helen's situation. Then have the students write a dialogue that reflects what they think Helen's classmates should have said to her.

Recognizing Details Helen finds that she learns much better in the special ed classroom because the teachers use special methods to help her overcome her learning handicap. Invite a special ed teacher to be a guest speaker in the

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You by Barthe DeClements

classroom. Have the teacher explain causes of learning disabilities to dispel stigmas and stereotypes. Also ask the teacher to demonstrate some techniques commonly used to help those with learning disabilities. Complete the presentation with a question and answer session.

Understanding Characterization In the chapter entitled "Big Mouth," Helen lists several traits that she admires. The special ed teacher shows her how these traits reflect her personality as well. Have students describe several of Helen's other traits. Then have them identify incidents in the story that reveal those traits. Have students discuss how these traits can be strengths in some situations and weaknesses in others.