Bertha’s Secret Battle

Author: John Coldwell
Range: Sports story
Theme: Judging by appearance
Teaching Notes authors: Thelma Page and Gill Howell

Synopsis
Bertha and her twin sister are wrestlers. Bertha gets tired of being booed when her twin sister is always cheered.

Group or guided reading

Introducing the book
- Read the title and look at the picture on the cover. Decide where these two women are, and say what the story might be about.
- Turn to the back cover and read the blurb.
- Go back to the front cover and notice the initials on the dressing gowns. Notice what Bertha is holding and suggest reasons for this.
- Read the author’s name and talk about any other John Coldwell stories that the children have read.

Strategy check
- Look at page 10 and find ‘Fairplay’ and ‘Fearsome’. Ask the children to break each word down into two shorter words.
- Do the same thing with ‘cartwheel’ on page 13.
- Ask the children to tell you about other strategies they can use when they meet a new word, or are unsure of the sense of a sentence.

Independent reading
Focus: Explain to the children that you want them to think about the following question while they are reading independently: What is Bertha’s secret battle?
- Observe the strategies the children use when they meet new vocabulary, and prompt them as needed.
- Notice whether children use the punctuation to help them to read with expression.
- Praise children if they take into account how the subject matter of the story affects the way they read the story, e.g. ‘Ladies and Gentlemen. Silence please for tonight’s star fight’.

Returning and responding to the text
- Ask one of the children to tell you what Bertha’s battle was. Find evidence in the story that explains this, e.g. pages 10, 22, 23 and 30.
- Discuss the characters of Bertha and Fiona. Was Bertha really a rough and rude person? Ask the children to look for places in the story that show she was really as nice as Fiona (pages 9 and 10).
- What happened when Fiona looked like Bertha? (pages 18, 19, 20, 26)
Ask the children to explain whether they think Bertha did the right thing. Was the ending fair? Ask the children to give their reasons.

Can the children think of a different way to solve Bertha’s problem?

**Speaking and listening activities**

- Ask a volunteer to sit in the ‘hot seat’ to answer questions as Bertha.
- Praise children for thinking of good questions. Praise ‘Bertha’ for using the information and feelings in the story to provide the answers.
- Give several children the opportunity to be Bertha, then ask for a volunteer to be Fiona. Ask questions in the same way.
- Allow time to give children the chance to talk about any similar feelings they may have had, e.g. when a friend or brother or sister was given a lot of praise and they themselves were criticised.

**Further reading activities**

- Ask the children to use reference books to find out more about wrestling. Find ways in which wrestling is similar to boxing and ways in which it is different.
- Encourage the children to read another sports story, e.g. *The Big Chance*. Which story did they prefer?

**Suggestions for using ICT**

- Ask the children to design and print tickets to the Grand Wrestling Competition, and include the names of the stars, the date and time, seat numbers and price. Encourage them to experiment with different sizes and styles of fonts for the best effects, and to try out different layouts to see what looks best.
- Ask children to type ‘John Coldwell’ into a search engine. Can they find any other titles by this author? Ensure that the children only have access to child-friendly sites.

**Writing activities**

- Reread pages 3–6. Explain that you want the children to draw a poster for the wrestling match supporting one of the twin sisters.
- Ask the children to begin with a careful drawing showing what the person looked like and giving her stage name, i.e. ‘Fairplay Fiona’ or ‘Big Bertha the Bone Cruncher’.
- Then ask them to write some phrases and sentences (slogans) that say why the person should be supported, e.g. ‘She’s the meanest, but she’s the keenest!’; ‘Her hair’s fair, she plays fair’.
- Praise the children for including character traits in their promotion of the person.
- Encourage them to use a thesaurus to find synonyms to describe Bertha’s roughness and Fiona’s fairness, and to use the synonyms in the slogans.