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Imagining Ourselves in Children's Literature Power Dynamics and Epistemologies amid the Pages and in the Classroom

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Abstract

This critical literary analysis aims to investigate depictions of schooling within children's literature, including classroom power dynamics as well as how knowledge is defined and the role it plays therein. I aim to understand the ways in which these depictions of schooling affect our collective constructions of education as well as the ontological and epistemological 'truths' that are upheld as a result. Literature must not be underestimated for its ability to influence a collective social vision of the world in the minds and lives of its readers. As such, educators and young people alike must be cognizant and critical of the messages conveyed through children's literature as such messages have a hand in shaping collective understandings of the intellectual and social possibilities available to us within the sphere of our own lives.



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[M]y teachers in Alabama...had the courage to use the curriculum as a means to change...[a] struggle for freedom...they used curriculum to engage our minds in understanding social reality....They taught that knowledge has a moral purpose.

—Beverly Cross, 1998, p. 37

Pedagogy is a...political practice...always implicated in power relations... offer[ing] both a particular version and vision of civic life, the future, and how we might construct representations of ourselves, others, and our...environment.

—Henry Giroux, 2004, p. 33

Introduction

Public education has long been constructed to reproduce those societal traits and cultural capital deemed worthy and valuable to the dominant society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/1990; Freire, 1970, 2007; Giroux, 2004; Johnston, 2004; Yosso, 2005). According to Beyer and Apple, (1998), schools are social sites which represent and perpetuate inequalities that exist in the greater society in which they are rooted, a social structuring that legitimizes the world view of the dominant class (Darder, 1988). According to McLaren (2003), this cultural hegemony is a gradual and longstanding social process of normalization in which the beliefs, values, and privileged position of the dominant class go unchallenged, instead perceived as “natural, commonsensical, and inviolate” (McLaren, 2003, p. 204). Our collective understanding of the world and ourselves comes to us from all directions—a tightly knit web of culture that includes images, dreams, words and stories that together prescribe what is seemingly real and true in this life. As social beings, we continuously configure relationships between what we see and what we imagine for ourselves (Sumara, 2005). According to Kornfeld and Prothro (2005) “students... become a part of the world of the characters in the books... they emerge from the fictional worlds with a better understanding of their own” (p. 221).

Bradford (2011) exposes the illusory divide between collective and individualized authorship, claiming that all texts are in reality “produced as much by cultural discourses as by individual writers” (p. 341). Children’s literature is laden with the ideologies of the society that created it—through stories and narratives, the social constructs of power and privilege are conveyed in powerful ways, “offering a selective version of reality... reproduc[ing] the dominant values of a culture” (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 9). While illustrators that create these narratives are recognized and celebrated individualistically within a Western tradition, Achebe (1988) draws a sharp contrast between the author or artist who “ploughs his own furrow” only (Plamenatz, 1963, as cited in Achebe, 1988, p. 49), and the artists of the Igbo *Mbari* tradition, the *ndimgbe*, who make no claim of artistic ownership and serve instead as vessels through which divine gifts may flow. Within the *Mbari* tradition, art both creates a collective, common culture and is created by it, speaking in the voices of many.

Literature has much to teach us about the “truths” that are upheld within any particular society—through the stories that we tell our children and each other, there is revealed our collective vision for the world and for them. According to the work of Kornfeld and Prothro (2005) who studied diverse depictions of schooling in young adult and adolescent literature, “scholars and teachers often champion literature as a tool for teaching in particular content areas, but rarely do they recognize its potential” for socializing students into “their position[s] and role in schools” or conversely, for “reconceptualizing” (pp. 234-235) possibilities for what could be. Kornfeld and Prothro’s (2005) study provided opportunities for adolescents to analyze literature depicting schooling structures that ranged from oppressive and rigid to empowering alternative visions for schooling that afforded new possibilities for student engagement. While these students gained great perspective on the many educational alternatives available to them and the empowerment and inspiration that can be born within these possibilities, the challenges researchers found were perhaps even more telling for our purposes here.

Kornfeld and Prothro (2005) noted that, even when given the complete freedom to design their own ideal school structure, students departed little if at all from curricular models that conveyed knowledge in a fragmented, compartmentalized manner, and very few of the schooling models that students created positioned students as central and active agents within their own learning. This tendency for students to adhere to traditional, confining, and even oppressive forms of schooling despite exposure to models that ran counter to them raises some interesting questions: Do students’ concretized understandings of schooling made long before adolescence make epistemological and ontological transformation ever more difficult in later years? Furthermore, what early impact does children’s literature have on students in their social constructions of schooling and their role within it?

Through the critical literary analysis of titles illustrating schooling in children’s literature, I hope to more deeply understand and perhaps challenge current “visions of what is and what could be” (Kornfeld & Prothro, 2005, p. 218) in children’s literature that may otherwise go unnoticed and unquestioned—visions that may likewise be reflected in the way real-life schooling is constructed and experienced. I analyze particular versions of reality depicted within the pages of four titles that have received mainstream recognition as determined by sales and literary commendations. *Miss Nelson is Missing!* (Allard & Marshall, 1977) is the story of a disruptive and disrespectful class that learns the ultimate lesson when their teacher is replaced by a harsh substitute teacher. In *David Goes to School* (Shannon, 1999), the reader sees young David struggle with authority and academic focus in his elementary school classroom. McCully’s (2005) *School* tells the story of what happens when a young mouse who is not yet ready for the classroom follows her siblings there and hides among the students, while *The Berenstain Bears Go Back to School* (Berenstain & Berenstain, 2005) paints the picture of Brother and Sister navigating the culture of schooling and the frames of discipline as they return for another semester at the Bear Country School.

This critical literary analysis aims to identify, code, and more deeply understand emerging patterns and underlying messages present within the literary text, artistic images, the depiction of characters, overarching themes, and the location and positioning of these elements within the greater narrative of these works as well as within the

physical pages of each book. These texts are critically analyzed regarding the ways in which knowledge is defined as well as how teacher/student power dynamics are depicted therein. The analysis of the four mainstream works that have been carefully chosen in this study is perhaps helpful to the larger conversation of critical pedagogy because of the high circulation and familiarity of these titles as award winners, bestsellers, and enduring traditional favorites. In choosing titles that have achieved such high visibility in the children's book market, I aim to enrich the conversation regarding the formation of a collective social construction of ourselves, the world we live in, the purpose of schooling, and the particular roles assigned to us therein in order that we may increase our critical awareness of the version of reality that children's literature has a hand in creating (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Kornfeld & Prothro, 2005). I analyze the aforementioned titles through a lens of critical pedagogy which aims to illuminate the often hidden and seemingly depoliticized representations of reality and versions of truth present in curriculum and schooling environments that shape and perpetuate current inequitable power dynamics and the societal stratifications that are manifest within the walls of schooling and beyond (Collins, 2009; McLaren, 2003; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995).

Foundational Literature

Knowledge as Fixed and Disconnected Capital

Since its earliest beginnings, public education in this country has long been characterized by conflicting ideologies over the essence of knowledge and the role of schooling. School knowledge is deeply rooted in notions of legitimate and illegitimate understandings of the world, "ordered and structured in particular ways; its emphases and exclusions partake of silent logic...a *social construction* [emphasis original] deeply rooted in a nexus of power relations" (McLaren, 2003, p. 196). According to Kleibard (2004), educators who saw schooling as a means of preserving the social order from which they themselves benefited positioned themselves "guardians of an ancient tradition tied to the power of reason and the finest elements of Western cultural heritage" (p. 23). Within this educational tradition, training of the mind through mastery of specified knowledge had the capacity to direct one towards refinement and control of one's natural world. While this educational tradition gained much ground historically and continues to color the academic landscape within many public schools, it was not without its critics.

John Dewey in particular argued against teaching knowledge as a fixed object whose mastery stood for intellectual development; he argued that the dangers of such a perspective on education that values mimicry results in the "ability to repeat catch-phrases, cant terms, familiar propositions, giv[ing] the conceit of learning and coats the mind with a varnish waterproof to new ideas" (Dewey, 1910/2005, p. 146). Similarly, Kleibard (2004) argues that conveying knowledge as "finished abstractions not only distorted their origins but widened the gulf between knowledge and human affairs" (p. 56), leaving precious little room for development of the skills and curiosities necessary for the cultivation of the whole person. While some would argue this training of the mind placing high value on repetition and skill mastery is characteristic of a school system dead and gone, modern critical scholars argue to the contrary.

According to Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Bransford (2005), not much has changed in the context of modern schooling—many novice teachers continue to come to the profession with the misconception that learning is a simple, mechanical process—a transfer of knowledge “from texts to teachers to students who acquire it through listening, reading and memorization” (p. 369). According to Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989), the nature of schooling continues to be “the transfer of...abstract, decontextualized formal concepts” (p. 32) from teacher to student. Surveying the current state of education illuminates that this disconnectedness between student and knowledge found within a socially reproductive educational tradition still remains. Within this model, the gulf between the two is continually reified through classroom practices that position students in a secondary position to the fixed set of facts and skills they must master. The commonsensical ordering of societal structures that disempower the many while upholding the privileged and centralized positioning of the dominant class are maintained through prescribed roles for students and teachers within classroom contexts that again go unquestioned and untouched.

Divisions of Power and Labor in the Classroom

Within traditional models of education patterned after an industrial Fordist system of production, students are led “in the direction of a singular norm” in an attempt to “neaten up the boundaries of cultures” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2003, p. 204), and as such students’ “minds are mined” (Robinson, 2010) for a particular resource and transacted upon in order to take on prescribed roles within larger socioeconomic structures. In this model, students are developed in a top-down fashion in which knowledge is transferred to them while they are required to passively receive and reproduce it as evidence of their learning (Freire, 1970/2002). This transmission model of education is evidenced and embodied through a classroom discourse pattern in which the teacher *initiates*, students *respond* and teacher *evaluates*, a classroom discourse pattern, abbreviated as IRE, in which the instructor accounts for as much as three-fourths of that which is spoken (Wertsch, 1998). The assumption that undergirds the IRE discourse pattern is that the teacher is the sole source of knowledge and wisdom, “therefore tak[ing] the role of judging the quality of the student’s responses” (Johnston, 2004, p. 54). Students within this model are silent and passive consumers of knowledge they had no hand in shaping. This disempowering, silencing discourse is representative of a power dynamic that all too often taints relationships within the classroom (Kornfeld & Prothro, 2005) and prevents students from seeing themselves as dynamic beings capable of transforming the world around them (Brown, et al., 1989; Bruner, 1996; Freire, 1970/2002; Johnston, 2004).

Creating classrooms in which young people can work together towards improving societal conditions connects them in meaningful ways to each other and to their own agentic capacities as they combine newly acquired skills and knowledge with deeply contextualized understandings they have developed and accumulated over a lifetime. Active engagement and participation in the construction of knowledge fosters a deep sense of how this knowledge can be utilized within their local and greater communities (González, et al., 1995/2005). In contrast to the current divisions of power that exists in traditional models of schooling stands student-centered curriculum, which contains at its core authentic and meaningful activity in which students may collectively engage (Brown et al., 1989; Dewey, 1910/1997; Horton & Freire, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978).

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Within student-centered curriculum aimed towards emancipatory knowledge—that knowledge, which reveals and problematizes the ways in which social relationships are created and consciously manipulated—students become active agents in constructing or deconstructing societal power relations. The learner must be at the center of the creation of knowledge and therefore at the center of their own empowerment. Freire (1970) states that “[a]uthentic liberation—the process of humanization—is not another deposit to be made in men [*sic*]. Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (p. 79). Educational structures that seek to impose a vision of the world that sustains current power dynamics found in a stratified and inequitable society rely heavily on individuals following the roles prescribed for them within this model (McLaren, 2003). For students within these oppressive structures, a central determining factor of their success within their prescribed roles is compliance through silence.

Silence is Golden

Within societal structures that seek to prescribe identities and corresponding roles along an inequitable continuum of power, only certain kinds of people are capable of theorizing reality (hooks, 1994; Rich, 1986) or deemed worthy of the “mental panorama” (Fanon, 1963, p. 299) that contributes to the whole of legitimate collective knowledge. Student voice, whether expressed or silenced—has everything to do with who has and who does not have authority in the classroom. Distributions of authority in the classroom between teachers and students are often couched within notions of respect, “support[ing] various forms of oppressive educational practices at the expense of student voice” (Darder, 1991, p. 109). Within a stratified society and the institutions that are built to uphold it, teachers who are charged with making and disseminating knowledge “have a habit of monopolizing continued discourse” while student voices are often relegated to “answering questions in brief phrases, or in single disconnected sentences” (Dewey, 1910/2005, p. 153). Ball (2000) notes that in communities of low socioeconomic means and communities of color in particular, classroom management translates into obedience, docility and silence on the part of students. As educators, we are either “preparing students to accept the societal status quo (and in many cases, their own inferior status therein) or...preparing them to participate actively and critically” (Cummins, 1996, p. 17) in the society in which they live and work. Education is not neutral—the agents who shape and guard it assign value and legitimacy through both the sanctioning and negation of voice within the spaces of the classroom (Giroux, 2004; McLaren, 2003).

Critical educators view silence and voice through the lens of authority and power; students—especially those on the margins due to the intersections of cultural, linguistic, and gender oppression—must reclaim voices that have been both physically and metaphorically silenced through years of manufactured illegitimacy within educational institutions (González, 1999; Gutiérrez, 2002; hooks, 1990; Martínez, 1999; Montoya, 1999; Moraga, 1983). Anzaldúa (1987) illustrates her own journey from imposed silence to self-empowerment: “I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice...I will have my serpent’s tongue...I will overcome the tradition of silence” (p. 59). According to Freire (1970), the greater the silence and passivity involved in the storage of “deposits entrusted to them, the less [students] develop the critical consciousness... [and] the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the

fragmented view of reality deposited in them” (Freire, 1970, p. 73). As such, current social realities and the cultural products that reflect and perpetuate them must be critically analyzed and understood. Students must be centrally positioned within their own learning, for as long as education follows an oppressive top-down model sustained through silence and passivity, students will struggle to see themselves as active agents capable of transforming the social circumstances that most impact their lives (Cross, 1998; Ball, 2000). It is in discovering this efficacy, this voice for change, that draws students into the great joy and freedom that is education.

The Study

The sample of books that I use for this analysis reflects careful consideration and an attempt to choose books that reflect a larger array of what is currently available in classrooms and libraries, both school and public. I use four books representative of the following categorizations: a long enduring classic of wide cultural recognition, a contemporary title of wide circulation, a Caldecott Award winner, and a title hailing from a highly well-known collection. *Miss Nelson is Missing!* (Allard & Marshall, 1977) tells the story of an unruly class who is taught a lesson when their kind, sweet teacher disappears and is replaced by a Miss Viola Swamp who controls the class through force and a heavy workload. This title appears on the Publisher's Weekly 2001 Bestselling Children's Books of All Time, a list of books that have topped one million in sales over the years. This title has been highly visible in school libraries and countless stage productions across the country (Bird, 2012; Graeber, 2005). According to the School Library Journal's 100 Best Books for Children, this title ranked #29 in 2012, a full thirty years after its original publication.

Another highly recognizable title utilized for this study is part of a larger series that boasts a wide circulation and mainstream popularity. In *David Goes to School* (Shannon, 1999) our main character, David, gets in trouble in class for disrupting his elementary classroom and challenging authority. David Shannon is one of the most recognizable names in contemporary children's literature circles—he has received recognition as a Caldecott winner of national and international acclaim who has over 17 million books in circulation as well as a place in the School Library Journal's Best Books of the Year (Carpenter, 2010). This specific title in the series was chosen chiefly because of its treatment of schooling.

Unlike Shannon's (1999) and Marshall's (1977) long-enduring and bestselling works, McCully's 2005 *School* is included in this analysis in large part because it was a recipient of the Caldecott Medal, which made it a common holding within a number of class, school, and public libraries. It is important to note that because of the great deal of recognition and visibility that is given to award-winning books, circulation and availability is increased (Short, 2011). Likewise, in terms of its ability to inform the larger conversation regarding mainstream messages of power dynamics and epistemological constructions conveyed through within children's literature, it is perhaps helpful as it is sanctioned noteworthy within a mainstream book market through this recognition. *School* (McCully, 2005) tells the story of a young mouse named Bitty who sneaks away from her “Mama” and her home for the morning to attend school with her older siblings. The next title, *Berenstain Bears Go Back to School* (Berenstain &

Berenstain, 2005), was chosen as part of this study because of its honored and longstanding position as part of a book series that has been available to children since the mid 1960's and has thus become a staple in school libraries, classrooms, and homes. According to *Publisher's Weekly* (2002), this series has produced as many as ten to thirteen titles in any given year, having a large impact on children's book publishing throughout the years. The series itself has sold more than 250 million copies worldwide and been a visible cultural phenomenon for over fifty years (Staino, 2012). This story details Brother and Sister Berenstain's return for another school year. The book describes their journey as they confront stern teachers, rigorous academic content, and the stresses that accompany a new learning environment.

I utilize literary analysis (Short, 2011) in the search for a critical understanding of representations of reality in regards to power dynamics and the constructions of epistemology across these four titles. I coded for themes across the data utilizing a theoretical lens of critical pedagogy. I analyzed illustrations within the four texts, looking towards subject placements in relation to the page as well as to each other. I also analyzed how characters are positioned in relation to the content knowledge in the classroom as well as in relation to each other across the lines of teacher and student. Textual content was also analyzed according to this critical pedagogical framework. One of the prominent themes I discovered pertained to the nature of knowledge itself—how it is defined, how it may be shared, who possesses it, and by contrast who does not. Another theme that emerged was that power and control in the classroom reside solely in the role of teacher, and that students' collective role was to accept this distribution of power and behave accordingly.

The author contends that a critical multicultural analysis and the construction of a critical consciousness illuminates interlocking manifestations of power and privilege through a multilayered approach to understanding and dismantling the structural domains of power (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Collins, 2009; Willis et al., 2008); for the purposes of this paper, however, a more universal critical approach is taken that highlights the dynamics of power present in classroom interactions and constructions of knowledge therein. The intersectionality of race, class, and gender present within the identities of the students and teachers is not dealt with explicitly in this research. That being said, it is imperative to note that these intersections never cease to shape the culture or social outcomes of schooling. Gender dynamics, for instance, are continuously present in the identities of the educators and in the roles of power that they assume—teacher identities that are overwhelmingly female, for instance, depicted alongside male administrators. Additionally, the culture and class that is singularly and visibly portrayed is that of dominant and White middle class society in dress, language, character and place names, and subject matter. A multilayered, critical multicultural approach is beyond the scope of this analysis though not standing apart from it. Further research may be considered to incorporate these intersections into the discussion of how schooling and the dynamics of power are portrayed within children's literature.

Findings

Knowledge Stands Apart

In each of these children's books, teachers are positioned as responsible for both possessing and conveying knowledge to the students in their classrooms who sit passively by, taking notes and answering the questions posed to them. It is interesting to note that in most of the classroom scenes depicted in these texts mathematics figures prominently, combined with geography, factual research, and memorization. It seems as though, regardless of the subject matter being treated in each of the four books, the construction of knowledge centers upon those most easily quantifiable and knowable, while altogether avoiding endeavors of problem solving or critical thinking. The construction of knowledge in these texts harkens back to Dewey's "conceit of learning" that superficially "coats the mind" and "reduces the individual to a parasite living on the secondhand experiences of others" (Dewey, 1910/2005, pp. 146-147). This dynamic is reflected in the classroom dynamics of traditional, real-life school structures as well, as knowledge is constructed as that which stands apart from student experiences as opposed to that which is intimately connected (Omatsu, 2009). Inherent in the realities conveyed within these texts is the assumption that teachers are "the ones who educate and the learners the ones who are educated" (Freire, 2007, p. 17). In essence, students become inert objects that classroom knowledge is directed towards while a privileged and centralized space is carved out for teachers' knowledge, expertise, experience, and voice. This disproportionate relationship to knowledge is evidenced strongly across each of the four texts analyzed here.

The classroom of students in *Miss Nelson is Missing!* (Allard & Marshall, 1977), it seems, are "misbehaving again...the worst-behaved class in the whole school" (p. 27). The reader sees a classroom of children who are making faces, holding trashcans over their heads, and facing in the opposite direction of their teacher. We see a large chalkboard behind the desk of the teacher that is blank. Sitting in front of this blackboard is a sweetly smiling, blonde-haired teacher, Miss Nelson, who seems perplexed as to what can be done as paper airplanes whiz by her head. We later meet Miss Nelson's substitute and class management solution, Miss Viola Swamp, a "woman in an ugly black dress" (p. 10) who has been sent to teach these students a lesson. Miss Swamp's appearance, dressed in an "ugly black dress" and a mop of hair to match—combined with the dank, dark, and generally foul last name of *Swamp*—seems to intentionally elicit negative feelings in the school children she has been sent to straighten up, and by extension in the intended audience interacting with this text.

In the scenes that follow, we now see Miss Swamp's students at the chalkboard performing additions and subtractions and walking with only their legs visible as they are loaded down with books titled, "Hard Words", "Grammar", "Civics", "Long Division" and the like (p. 13). While there is a clear indication that Viola Swamp is not an ideal teacher and therefore not to be emulated by educators, the notions regarding knowledge and the source of knowledge are very telling. By the end of the story, Miss Swamp's students seem to have developed more school knowledge than what Miss Nelson was able to teach them in her mild mannered kindness. On the chalkboard that had previously remained blank (p. 1) is written a long list of facts regarding capital cities of various

countries including England, Sweden, Japan, China and Greece. It seems as though there is no justification behind requiring these students in Texas (as indicated by the state flag and map now visible) to memorize the names of capital cities around the world in countries the reader can assume they are personally unfamiliar with due to their status as elementary students and their geographic location. While the text states that the students “were very discouraged” (p. 26) at the treatment they suffered under the watch of Miss Viola Swamp, the lessons that she teaches do not seem to be under scrutiny in this book, merely her tactics. Knowledge is presented here as isolated factoids to be found in libraries and heavy textbooks—knowledge wholly disconnected from the lives of students. Quantifiable and disconnected subject matter is likewise at the center of Shannon’s (1999) *David*, so much so that beyond math problems depicted in the first scene, the nature of knowledge students are to learn remains unclear.

In Shannon’s (1999) *David Goes to School*, a young David is seen standing in front of a blackboard holding a piece of chalk in his small hand. He is challenging the authority in the classroom by making a mocking face and accompanying stance. At the top of the page are the words, “Sit down, David!” (pp. 3-4) written on a torn piece of lined paper in childlike handwriting, which is continuously seen throughout the book. On the chalkboard are mathematical equations written in a handwriting that does not match the childlike handwriting at the top of the page, which conveys a sense that the teacher, and not the students, wrote the equations. Additionally, most of the equations are written at a height that is above where David is able to reach, again giving the impression that the teacher wrote them herself during a math lesson. While it seems as though David has chalk in his hands and is standing at the front of the room in order to contribute to or somehow solve one of these equations, it is evident that he has not had a hand in creating them, nor does he have an interest in shaping them. On pages 11 and 12, we again see knowledge that stands apart from David’s experience or personal interests.

The back of David’s head is seen in the middle of the two pages staring out the window of his classroom. He is framed by a windowsill on which stands a model rocket, a globe, and a potato that is growing in a glass dish. At the top of the page is written in all capital letters (again in children’s writing on a slip of lined paper), “PAY ATTENTION!” (pp. 11-12). David’s gaze is fixed out the window towards creatively shaped clouds passing by. While David is scolded for becoming distracted by the blue sky and sunshine, the reader is not privy to what his class is actually learning without him. David seems to be utilizing his imagination outside his classroom window, and the reader learns that there is little room for David’s imagination or curiosity in this model of schooling. The reader may assume that a more deserving target of his attention is the unidentified classroom lesson that is ostensibly going on behind his back. Based on precedent, the class lesson is perhaps led by the teacher whose words we see quoted at the top of the page—a figure we meet on the front page of the book who is standing in front of a teacher’s desk piled high with books.

In Berenstain and Berenstain’s (2005) work, knowledge again stands outside of student experience as the bears spend most of their time in class solving mathematical equations their teacher has constructed for them. As Brother and Sister Berenstain head down the road towards the schoolhouse, they see “waiting just up ahead is Bear Country School, newly painted bright red” (p. 6). The school building is positioned at the very top

of the hill at the top of the page with all else positioned below it. Behind the building emerge rolling clouds and majestic, bright rays of sunshine radiating out from the center. Two birds are in flight atop mountains which frame the schoolhouse in the distance, giving the reader a sense of awe at its glorious presence reminiscent of John Winthrop's civilized "city on a hill" (as cited in Takaki, 1993, p. 50), a shining, elevated example for all below who look to it for guidance. The positioning of the schoolhouse, a cultural representation of scholarship and learning, conveys that this building as the center of good—a repository of knowledge and refinement that stands above all else.

The schoolhouse is not the sole entity positioned as holding knowledge in this story. Teachers, too, are portrayed as possessing the knowledge that is to be doled out to their students. The text states, "whiteboards are waiting for the whine and screech of markers wielded by teachers with lessons to teach" (p. 7). In one classroom scene, Teacher Jane can be seen at the top of the page writing math lessons onto the white board. There lies a series of numbers being added together, all in the same handwriting that she is writing the current set of numbers. This illustration portrays her role in the classroom as teacher to be the one who prepares and delivers the knowledge. And while no students are shown solving these mathematical equations or copying what she is drawing onto the board, it can be implied from the illustration that there are students behind her, as she seems to be glancing over her shoulder (p. 16). The fact that she is again at the front of the room placed against a whiteboard filled with mathematical equations that she herself seems to have written places her as the sole entity in the classroom who has the responsibility for actively creating or delivering understanding, a role that stands in contrast to the silent group of students sitting behind her.

Inherent in the models of schooling depicted in these texts is the reality that teachers possess and dispense the knowledge in the classroom and therefore solely measure the contributions of students for quality, appropriateness, and correctness. Students situated within this socially reproductive model of education are taught to look outside of themselves for knowledge, either toward the schoolhouse, their textbooks, or toward teachers at the front of the room. Within the social construct of schooling woven together through these texts is conveyed the understanding that students' own ways of knowing are not only deficient and flawed but invisible in the classroom, and therefore must be replaced by outside sources (Dewey, 1910/2005; Freire, 1970). If young people are continuously exposed to children's books that uncritically present a vision of reality in which they are disempowered, passive recipients of information while teachers and textbooks hold and dispense all necessary knowledge, their capacity to perceive schooling as a space upon which to write change may be limited.

Classroom Control

Control over classroom spaces is a theme that is conveyed strongly in each of these children's books. What seems to be communicated over and over again through illustrations and text is the importance of classroom decorum and control on the part of teachers and silent compliance on the part of students. Within these titles, adult control over the classroom is assumed, while challenging this authority results in negative consequences for students. Throughout all four texts, extrinsic pressures stand in for students' internal motivations for learning, which parallels Freire's (2007) assertion that

“even the simplest look at education...reveals in great detail...the sense of education as an instrument of domination” (p. 17). Within this construction of schooling, students must act appropriately in a dual attempt to please their teacher and avoid harsh punishment, and not out of true curiosity or deep personal engagement in subject matter—it is a reality strongly conveyed across these titles.

In *Miss Nelson* (Allard & Marshall, 1977), students “refused to do their lessons” (p. 7) and chose to be “rude during story hour” (p. 6) when their sweet teacher is trying to read to them. After Viola Swamp acts a substitute and scares the children into compliance, Miss Nelson notices upon returning that “during story hour no one was rude or silly” (p. 28) and that not one student acts out or disrupts the class. In this depiction, neither student engagement with the text presented during story time nor heightened interest in class time is presented as the goal of this classroom. Children’s either rude or good behavior is chiefly a function of their personal feelings towards their teacher and not their own interest in the subject matter. The “lovely change” (p. 28) that takes place by the end of the book when students have been reformed by Miss Viola Swamp illustrates that the control in this classroom revolves around each student “accommodat[ing] himself to what the teacher expects of him” (Dewey, 1910/2005, pp. 41-42) and not the curious engagement of each individual student for the purpose of creating or deepening knowledge. Students’ motivation (or lack thereof) to engage in classroom lessons appear to be similarly driven in *David Goes to School* (Shannon, 1999), in which student behavior is again illustrated as a vehicle for pleasing the teacher or causing disruptions.

The interactions between David and his teacher in Shannon’s (1999) text illustrate that good behavior is rewarded with teacher approval while bad behavior is punished. The goal of learning or building understanding is positioned as secondary to not getting into trouble. In one classroom scene, David is seen talking out of turn while another student quietly raises her hand, simultaneously sending David a disapproving look. At the top of the page is handwritten, “David, raise your hand!” (pp. 7-8). While David has a book in front of him, the reader is not made aware if David’s comment was inappropriate for its content or for its lack of adherence to class rules. In either case, it seems as though class control is of central concern here and not student engagement in the subject matter. By the end of the story, the reader sees that David has atoned for his disruptive behavior by staying after school to clean the classroom. The teacher, portrayed as a rather imposing and perhaps ominous figure that extends beyond the page, awards a gold star to a smiling David. At the bottom right of the last page are the handwritten words, “Good job, David!” Similar to the *Miss Nelson* (1977) text, good behavior here is depicted as pleasing to the teacher and therefore a vehicle towards getting rewarded, while engagement in subject matter and the development of mental processes is not mentioned nor depicted as a desirable educational goal.

According to Dewey (1910/2005), “many a teacher is misled into supposing that he [*sic*] is developing mental force and efficiency by methods which in fact restrict and deaden intellectual activity” when in fact, to “cultivate unhindered, unreflective external activity is to foster enslavement” (pp. 52-54). In Shannon’s (1999) text, David is expected to be well-behaved not in order that he may gain knowledge nor share what he knows with his classmates, but out of fear of receiving punishment in the form of

scolding or physical labor. According to LePage, et. al, (2005), “when children are given external rewards extensively, especially for the purpose of control, they will often...lose their sense of self-determination, along with interest in engaging the task” (p. 334). While classroom control did not seem to be attained through fear in in McCully's (2005) *School* as it was in the aforementioned texts, classroom control continues to reign supreme.

Rule over all aspects of learning in *School* (McCully, 2005) resides with the teacher who is invariably seen standing at the front of the room writing on the chalkboard. When students do speak, it is to answer a question that has been crafted by the teacher, as in the request, “How about you back there...tell the class your answer” (pp. 14-15). The teacher is seen using a pointing stick to indicate to the students where the desired focus is to be. In one scene in which the teacher is not looking directly at the class, the students do not seem motivated to engage in what is going on at the board. Two students are whispering to each other, one student is sleeping, and another seems to be playing with the heater while climbing on top of his/her desk (pp. 8-9). Only when the teacher pointedly asks the class, “Who knows the answer?” (p. 13) is their attention redirected momentarily towards the chalkboard. This lack of attention when the teacher is not looking at the class seems to indicate that these students are uninterested in what is going on at the front of the room unless they are experiencing the extrinsic motivation of being directly looked at or called upon by their teacher.

Upon seeing Bitty and recognizing that she should not be at school, the teacher states, “Well, never mind. You can be my helper” (McCully, 2005, p. 17), which translates into the teacher standing over young Bitty and handing her the pointing stick in what looks like a ceremonious transfer of power. The two figures stand directly in the middle of the page. The stick is held high in the air as Bitty reaches up towards it. On the next page, Bitty points to yet another math equation on the blackboard as the teacher seems to be looking simultaneously at both Bitty and the class. In this scene, all students are facing the blackboard and over half of the students are raising their hands excitedly, which stands in stark contrast to the previous scene in which the teacher was not at the time directing her attention towards the class. This contrast seems to indicate again that while the control of the classroom resides solely with the teacher—and can perhaps be temporarily lent out to students in the form of the pointing stick—the motivation for learning does not reside intrinsically within the students but is motivated externally by the prodding of the teacher. The prescribed role of the teacher as the sole driving force of learning negates altogether the internal drive of the students to be involved in what is being taught at the front of the room. Our brief reprieve from classroom control attained by force and fear has ended as Berenstain and Berenstain's (2005) students are again prodded toward learning through tactics of surveillance and threats.

Appropriate student behavior in the Bear Country School is depicted by Berenstain and Berenstain (2005) in direct proportion to the amount of force applied by the adults who are in charge of overseeing school spaces. Similar to the aforementioned texts, teachers at the Bear Country School are depicted invariably in the front of their classes directing activities and behavior. What is even more startling in this text, however, is the use of fear in controlling the behavior of the young students. In one scene, students are walking down the hall in a line. At one corner of the page stands a man with

crossed arms and a stern look on his face. He is staring intently at the cubs through a small window as they walk through the hallway. On a nearby door are written the words, “Principal’s Office” (p. 13). An empty bench stands outside this office, and according to the text, it is where “naughty cubs wait, sitting so quietly awaiting their fate” (p. 14). Use of the word “fate” connotes fear that seems to accompany challenging authority in this school, which is echoed in the words of Dewey (1910/2005), “[t]o question...beliefs is to question...authority”, and within such a model, these cubs internalize external control over their behavior through force, a construct in which “[p]assivity, docility, acquiescence, come to be primal intellectual virtues” (p. 121). The doom and inevitability present in the word “fate” seems to fall heavily upon the minds of the cubs, as half of the line is glancing in the direction of the man standing watch, indicating an understanding of his domination over their personhood and the school alike.

In another show of predominantly extrinsic motivation for decorum, Teacher Jane writes the lessons for the day out on the board. As a paper airplane soars past her head, she states, “You know I’ve got eyes in the back of my head” (p. 16). Teacher Jane’s omniscience is further supported as the narrator states, “it’s just possible that she maybe had. She does always know just who’s being bad” (p. 16). The illustration shows her scolding “naughty cub Ned” (p. 16) with a stern look and one finger pointing towards his face. This scene seems to indicate that the biggest factor in student compliance is fear at being caught otherwise engaged by the surveillance embodied by the eyes in the back of Teacher Jane’s head. Meanwhile, in the 3rd grade classroom under the direction of Teacher Bob, fear is again a tactic for motivating students, rendering their own desire for learning invisible. In front of a white board where the words, “Teacher Bob/ Welcome to 3rd Grade” are written and underlined several times (in contrast, the 1st grade classroom welcome has no underline), a teacher stands with his arms crossed and a scowl on his face as he speaks to his class. He is standing with one foot crossed over the other as he leans upon his desk. Opposite him sits a row of four students with looks on their faces that range from shock to anxiety as he tells them, “Third grade is hard. Third grade is tough. There’s no more easy First-gradish stuff”, to which the cubs reply “with growing alarm...’Gulp!’ says Brother Bear. ‘Groan!’ says Freddy” (p. 18). This “alarm” in the room is palpable, and it seems to be presented as that which alone has the power to effectively push students along the path of becoming.

Access to power and authority as depicted within these texts is inequitably distributed between teachers and students. The role prescribed for teachers by both illustrations as well as text across all of these titles is that of overseer—a forceful external motivator for learning and engaging in class work and a presence of dreaded surveillance. The inequitable and even abusive power dynamics (Berenstain & Berenstain, 2005) portrayed within these classrooms creates a school climate in which internal motivations for student learning are overshadowed by the external forces pushing students to succeed and obey according to a prescribed role as passive occupiers of classroom desks. Whether students are obedient or unruly, the focus seems to be on teachers’ responses to behavior and not on the benefits of schooling for learning and growth.

While it may be argued that these texts are meant to serve as a critique of the very power dynamics that they portray students navigating through, this critique does not seem sufficiently salient in any of these works to stand as a strong enough push for the

transformation of these dynamics. The strongest example of this possible critique may be found in Shannon's (1999) *David Goes to School*. David's irreverence toward his schooling and the rigidity therein, as well as the playful ways in which David is depicted challenging what is expected of him by adults could be read as a critique of both power dynamics and the construction of school knowledge. In his lack of voice throughout the story and the continuous reprimands of the teacher (who incidentally is drawn only from the shoulders down), this author may be pushing upon the oppressive conventions of schooling, perhaps similar in aim to that of this research. What complicates this argument, however, is the fact that David apologizes for his unruly behavior by the end of the book and is rewarded. It is an act of atonement, which brings him back into favor with his teacher and earns him a gold star.

As author intention can in no way be argued with any concrete certainty, this critical literary analysis illustrates that the lessons learned by the young characters within each of these books can be characterized as redemptive through the adoption of proper student behavior and the reformation of previous academic attitudes. The resolutions at the end of each of these stories seem to point to the fact that students are wise to either remain within the good graces of their teachers or find their way back there through adherence to rules of decorum and established, acceptable teacher/student power dynamics. The reoccurring nature of this pattern of redemption, whether intentionally satirical or not, conveys a vision to the reader of what school may ideally look like and the role that students and teachers play in keeping it thus.

Conclusion

While Short (2011) argues, "readers construct their *individual* [emphasis added] interpretations as they engaged...with the text" (p. 51), literature is foundational to the construction of a collective culture as well, a culture continuously mediated and prescribed by very powerful cultural forces. Through children's literature and the crafted stories and characters therein, students are ushered into understandings of who they can and must be in the world—groomed into that which is considered socially appropriate and 'normal' (Darder, 1988; Wertch, 1998). According to Johnston (2004), children in our classrooms are "developing personal and social identities—uniqueness and affiliations that define the people they see themselves becoming" (p. 22). The model of schooling that emerges through this analysis is that which portrays students as passive and silent recipients of expertise handed down by knowledgeable teachers. This inequitable dynamic of power in the classroom is so deeply entrenched within these mainstream and highly recognized literary works—for this reason, it does not seem unreasonable to extend caution beyond these four works to the ways in which power dynamics within the classroom may be depicted within children's literature at large.

While some educators may point to the great gulf that stands between the one-dimensional characters and simplistic stories portrayed in children's books and the everyday classroom interactions between living and breathing students and teachers, I argue: While there surely are differences between what goes on in real-life classrooms and that which is depicted in children's literature, the cultural products both created and consumed within any given society are deeply telling of the ways in which we construct social identities (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). By leaving student and teacher identities and

accompanying dynamics of power and privilege depicted within children's literature *untouched* by the critical eye (Freire, 1970), we are in essence preserving this social order as almost sacred, in essence perpetuating it. Healing the wounds inflicted by a model of schooling steeped in colonialism and social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Omatsu, 2009) must be foundational and structural—there is no transformation in curriculum alone that is inherently “liberating or just. It is in the blending of conscientious social justice constructs with democratic vigilance and a willingness to transform ourselves, as well as our classrooms” (Martin, 2009, p. 229) that has the power to change the current educational structures that continue to cloak both students and teachers alike with limiting and disempowering identities.

Implications

Children's literature must not be overlooked for its capacity to either create transformation or reify limitations in the lives of young people; children are socialized into their understandings of schooling and the distributions of power within it in large part through continued exposure to stories in varying forms that depict it. The stories we tell have the power to mold and shape us in profound ways, affecting our understanding of ourselves, our relationships to others, and to the world in which we live (Sumara, 2002). If, as Barthes (1997) suggests, readers become “the space on which all quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost” (as cited Botelho and Rudman, 2009, p. 4), it becomes necessary to deconstruct the visions and particular versions of the world (Giroux, 2004) that are finding a home within the landscape of the reader's mind and heart (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). Personal insights are gathered and sorted through “studying the details of other people's experience—with particular attention to how those experiences appear when used as the projection screen for their own” (Sumara, 2002, p. 156). If the “poem” between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1964), or in Sumara's words, the images upon the *projection screen* of our minds are continuously crafted in such a way as to concretize simplistic notions of obedient passivity and silent resign in the classroom on the part of students while ascribing expertise and empowerment to the role of teacher, the idiosyncratic interactions between text and reader enter instead into the realm of broader cultural formation.

By shedding light on the power dynamics and epistemologies conveyed within children's literature and working with students to navigate and deconstruct limiting portrayals of their role in the classroom, children's literature may instead become a site of critical consciousness development. Children's literature must not limit our understanding of the world but “should be a realm of possibility—a place in which teachers and students together examine their lived experience and envision ways to enhance their lives and sense of efficacy in the world” (Kornfeld & Prothro, 2005, p. 219). As educators, we must be cognizant about what we are teaching our children through literature about who they are, what role they are to take in the classroom, as well as what they may imagine for themselves within the sphere of their own lives. According to Jennings (2009), our efforts “must go further toward reform by shaping the curriculum content of schools...shaping classrooms methodologies for instruction” (p. 68). We must partner with students to develop a pedagogy containing the critical social lenses necessary to parse out the messages conveyed through literature—a critical pedagogy

through which students may re-envision and re-imagine themselves and the possibilities available to them (Ball, 2000) as they go about collecting the poems (Rosenblatt, 1964) that are written between themselves, the text, and the world that shapes them and that in turn is shaped by them.

The stories we tell as a society are ideologically bound and reflect deliberate social constructions of reality (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Bradford, 2011); as such, critical educators must work toward the creation of a critical consciousness that students may navigate skillfully through the messages presented to them within children's literature and beyond. According to Willis et al. (2008), this lens of critical consciousness must be a "matrix of understanding...challenging the underlying assumptions that work in the internal and external worlds" (pp. 4-5). We must work with young students to develop critical consciousness and critical literacy skills necessary to deconstruct hidden and taken-for-granted constructions of their world present in print material (Edelsky, 1991; Gee, 1991a; McLaren, 2003). We must collectively put hands and minds towards a *ruptura* (Horton & Freire, 1990; Omatsu, 2009) of socially mediated, collective epistemologies and societal distributions of power that continue to create inequitable power relations and unjust social conditions.

In the book, *The Killer's Tears* (2006), the notion of formation and metamorphosis emerge as the reader is led to question whether human beings have the capacity to evolve and develop new and multilayered identities. Ricardo Murga, a lumberjack, speaks of physical transmutation as one of the greatest mysteries to behold. He describes the subtle shifts in being that occur as objects are molded by the environment around them. "Wood...becomes books. Winter...becomes spring. Grapes...become wine"; however, he adds, "some changes are very subtle" such as "(t)hose which happen in our soul" (Bondoux, 2007, p. 109). Gradual and steady, molecules align and realign, reconfiguring all the while. Like the wood, the seasons, and the grapes, we are continuously in the process of becoming—as such, we must remain cognizant of the processes that shape our individual and collective understanding of ourselves and this world that we inhabit.

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