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The portrayal of teachers in children's popular fiction

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Abstract

This study explores cultural messages about teachers and teaching, as delivered by current children's literature. Our findings confirmed that teachers are still portrayed, in text and picture, as White, kind, conservative, women who teach for the love of children. More surprisingly, we also found that: 1) the stories conveyed strong themes of students acting as agents of teachers' identity work, 2) that students often position teachers as sex objects, and 3) that teachers' social class is characterized as working class. The results imply ambivalence about teachers' identities and suggest that the teaching profession keeps women in a powerless and objectified job.

Since its re-emergence after WWII as a popular medium of entertainment in the United States (Meigs, 1953) researchers have analyzed children's fiction as a possible tool for cultural dissemination (Adams, 1953; Fraser, 1978; Jan, 1974; Kohl, 1995; Sadker & Sadker, 1977). Apart from general inquiries about the nature and content of these stories, researchers have looked at how the disabled are portrayed (Baskin & Harris, 1977), how race and ethnic diversity are represented (Fox, 1993), and frequently, how gender is portrayed in children's fiction (Creany, 1995; Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Fox, 1993; Heintz, 1987; Lehr, 2001; Narahara, 1998; Singh, 1998; Temple, 1993; Turner, 1998; Weitzmann et al., 1972).

Investigating the school story as conveyed in children's popular fiction has also been a subject of inquiry (Barone, Meyerson & Mallette, 1995; Sandefur & Moore, 2004; Triplett & Ash, 2000), although often as a subset of gender investigations of the literature (e.g. Fox, 1993; Sadker & Sadker, 1977). Because almost everyone has a ready-made image of a classroom, children's popular fiction draws on a common mental template, creating school scenarios that draw from a near-universal Western experience. Authors have successfully capitalized on the telling and retelling of the school story and its various elements – the lunchroom, homework, friendships – with one character almost always a constant: the teacher.

Interestingly, few studies investigate the portrayal of teachers in children's fiction. Those studies that do exist have so far focused on picture images (Barone, Meyerson & Mallette, 1995; Sandefur & Moore, 2004; Turner, 1998), relationships with students (Triplett & Ash, 2000), or as part of a discussion of women's occupational representations (Creany, 1995; Heintz, 1987). As with broader analyses of school stories, research on the portrayal of teachers in children's fiction focuses on the child as the recipient of the authors' messages. That is, the analyses call into question the effects of literature on children's socialization, moral development, gender identity, and attitudes about school. There is ample evidence that children's literature transmits cultural attitudes and morals (Baskin & Harris, 1977; Lehr, 2001), and acts as one of many cultural conveyors to children about expected social, emotional, and intellectual behavior (Diekman & Mummen, 2004; Kohl, 1995). However, to focus mostly on children's reactions to literature omits a significant point in the inquisition of popular media and its effect on society: how the portrayal of teachers in children's popular fiction reflects *adults'* relationships to and thoughts about schooling and teachers in contemporary culture.

In this study, we investigate the portrayal of teachers in children's popular fiction. Specifically, we investigate how authors write about teachers and how illustrators visually conceive them in their stories. This study explores common characteristics presented about teachers, as well as the cultural messages about teachers and teaching delivered by children's literature authors and illustrators. Overall, we examine what these stories imply about adults' social relationships to schooling: are the stories reflections of past experiences and/or are they current opinions of what school should be? Since books are significant vehicles for social messages, shaped by and shapers of readers' beliefs, it is vital that we who are teachers ask, "How are we portrayed?" and eventually, "How does this portrayal affect the way in which society regards our work?"

We relate the authors' and illustrators' portrayals of teachers to cultural practices and the power relations that structure them (Weedon, 1997). We frame our study using critical theory as we investigate the portrayal of teachers through the socio-cultural artifact of children's fiction. Denzin & Lincoln (1994) note the evolution of critical theory to include discourse; textual analysis, we feel, is representative of one kind of discourse between writers and society. And, as Kohl states, "power relationships in literature reveal the politics of both the story and, frequently, the author" (1995, p. 4). We suggest that the analysis of text as part of the larger context of writing and consuming children's fiction carries with it significant, ongoing questions about societies' conflicting conceptions of teachers and ultimately education.

Methods

Data sources/evidence

The initial inquiry phase consisted of an exhaustive search for children's fiction in which teachers are a main or significant supporting character. Using the *Children's Literature Comprehensive Database* (an on-line source whose mission it is to provide reliable one search access to all important and relevant information about Pre K-12 media of all types ... [and] to connect...[to] subscribers with information about books, authors and illustrators around the world..." (www.childrenslit.com)), we first selected books for ages 13 or younger, and then selected fiction books that contained the word "teacher" in any field - title, description, or review. This process established a list of 4,098 books. We then crossed this list against both the library standard *Children's Catalog* (2001) and the sales rankings of children's fiction about teachers from *Amazon.com* to establish a "popularity" metric. Combining these, we used a random number generator to sample a representative but manageable list of books. Finally, we cross-selected titles that appeared in either the *A to zoo: Subject access to children's picture books* (Lima & Lima, 2006) index of children's literature under the section identifying a focus on teachers or on schools, or the *Norton Anthology of Children's Literature* (Zipes et al., 2005), again focusing on school or teacher stories. These final selection cuts eliminated books which appeared on the list because of a reference to the book as a "teaching tool" or a "valuable resource for teachers," but contained no teacher as either a central or peripheral character. As a result, we were able to establish a list of 74 titles that represent the available children's books that include teachers as a character in the story, with an emphasis towards those to which children have the greatest access (as reflected by library and purchase popularity).

Analytic Perspective

In this study, we used critical narrative analysis as the analytic framework of the study. The unit of analysis is the narrative (story) of the teacher. Narrative analysis has been used in a number of different analytic forms (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994) and this study combines critical theory's focus on power relations with textual analysis. Using critical narrative analysis as an analytic framework allows us to take multiple contexts of text into account in a way that content analyses do not (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994, p. 464).

By treating the narrative of the teacher – as created by authors – as the unit of analysis, we analyze it through several lenses. First, we analyze it as a cultural artifact, namely, a book in which the teacher is the main character or theme. The majority of studies of children's literature have followed this line of thought, using content analyses of books as a way to indicate quantitatively what images appear in which books (e.g. Narahara, 1998; Sandefur & Moore, 2004; Weitzman et al., 1972). While some of our analyses initially

compared content of the books, the focus was on the story of the teacher, which we believed could have had little to do with the content of the books themselves.

The second lens through which we have analyzed these data is through the socio-cultural contexts in which these teacher stories are situated. “Texts never exist separately from context,” states Dalton (2004). “When a reader engages ... a text, the act is never separated from that reader’s own lived experience...” (p. 10). Popular texts require a “double [analytic] focus” according to Fiske (1992), meaning that we must look at deeper structures of texts as well as the meanings that people already bring to those structures. In this analysis, we defined context as the underlying meanings and subtexts that the authors and illustrators bring with them to the writing of the teacher story, as well as the readers’ individual contexts.

This focus on authors’ and illustrators’ contexts as well as on the words and pictures themselves was necessary for several reasons: writers’ contexts and influences are under-examined in children’s literature analyses, and, doing so more thoroughly investigates the possible origins of the Western teacher narrative. “Literature is only part of the cultural media available to our children, but ... they learn to read in close relationships with adults, we teachers, parents, and writers ...” (Fox, 1993, p. 88). Children, particularly young children, are at the mercy of adults’ guidance and they quickly learn what adult culture wants them to know. “Books provide role models; from books, children learn what behavior is acceptable for them, for their peers, and for adults around them...” (Kohl, 1995, p. 4). Surely authors and illustrators understand more than most cultural arbiters that language is power, and that it can be used to influence children. What we want to understand, then, is what messages authors and illustrators want children to receive about teachers.

Louie (2001), in one of the few articles that partly addresses children’s literature authors, writes that, “Authors have an undeniable responsibility in creating gender balance since they are the creators of images in text” (p. 143). She postulates that some of the reasons children’s authors use stereotypes include: motivating male readers by using archetypal characters, the easy availability of male historical figures about which to write, and the sheer difficulty of eliminating gender stereotypes (pp. 143 – 145). Only the last of these reasons seems a plausible explanation for the portrayal of teachers in children’s fiction. Nonetheless, the lack of study surrounding authors’ and illustrators’ socio-cultural contexts is one of the compelling reasons to investigate the contexts in which the stories of teachers are situated.

After collecting the representative texts, we searched for common themes in teacher characterization, depiction, story line, and in pictures where appropriate. We gathered and sorted these themes according to commonality and difference, as well as by other emerging similarities. While we expected to find distinctions in teacher portrayal according to teachers’ gender, ethnicity, and race, we also left ample room for completely unexpected teacher portrayals.

Initial orientation. We originally suspected that our findings regarding content of children's fiction about teachers would echo those findings of Sandefur & Moore (2004) and Dalton (2004), as well as the more general findings of Weitzman et al. (1972) and Diekman & Murnen (2004). Specifically, we expected to find that:

- Gender/sex is an important organizing category in children's fiction about teachers;
- There would be significantly more women than men depicted as teachers in books; most of the teachers would be white; most would embody middle class characteristics;
- Teachers would be portrayed as women who do not reflect the characteristics of "normal" women: they would not have outside lives, they would be considered "strange" by their colleagues and students, they would be uncharacteristically (for American society) independent;
- Male teachers would be portrayed as effeminate;
- There would be a great deal of emphasis on discipline and behavior;
- An idealistic and conservative view of schooling and schools would be realized.

However, we did not maintain these findings as pre-existing conceptions concerning what the contexts of these narratives might imply about writers, teachers, and parents' beliefs about schooling. We allowed the texts to reveal a contested and conflicted view of schooling, reflecting, we suspected, both adults' idealized memories and long-held resentments of their own childhoods, as well as their hopes for their own and future children's experiences in school.

Emergent coding. In addition to the teacher characteristics portrayed in the literature, we also coded for ways in which the act of teaching or the actions of teachers were characterized. These codes included the nature and type of interactions described/depicted between the teacher and other adults (teachers or parents) as well as between teachers and students; the instructional activity described/depicted; non-instructional activity (including discipline as well as support or nurturing); and finally any evidence of the teacher's knowledge or skills (content knowledge as well as pedagogical evidence).

Findings

Our findings about teachers' physical characteristics, as we initially suspected, reflect prior content analyses of children's fiction (e.g. Dalton, 2004; Sandefur & Moore, 2004) and, as well as the more general findings of Weitzman et al. (1972) and Diekman & Murnen (2004). Specifically, we found that:

- Gender/sex is a central theme in children's fiction about teachers;
- There were significantly more women than men depicted as teachers in books; in our sample of 74 books, 56 were women, 18 were men.
- Most of the teachers in our sample were white (70% identifiable as white);
- Most of the teachers were human (10 out of 74 were animals or aliens).

Additionally, we found that

- None of the teachers were portrayed in either text or picture as disabled;
- Teachers' general appearances were characterized as young and beautiful, old and ugly, or inhuman;
- Teachers' clothing was portrayed consistently across many of the texts; males were dressed in child-friendly clothing (i.e. soccer ball ties, brightly colored striped shirts) while females were dressed conservatively (drab dresses, hair in buns). The majority of the young, pretty female teachers were blond.
- In the 32 texts in which a principal is named (either in passing or as a character), most (80%) were male.

These findings are consistent with the content analyses of previous studies, including the most recent study by Hamilton et al. (2006), which found that occupational stereotyping in children's books "has not gone underground [and that] men were seen in more than nine times as many traditional as nontraditional jobs, and women were portrayed in traditional jobs over ten times as often as they were portrayed in nontraditional jobs" (p. 764).

Yet as we originally believed, we found that the texts in our sample – the descriptive and spoken language used by the characters and narrators of these stories in which teachers figure prominently – communicated messages about teachers not found in content analyses. Specifically, we found:

- These stories conveyed strong themes of students acting as agents in teachers' identity work. We found that in the texts of children's literature, it is the children's objective to reveal or "unmask" teachers, to see who they "really are."
- In some of the stories in our sample, children position teachers as objects of heterosexual desire. The result of this process is that teachers' and students' power becomes equalized, or that teachers' adult power is diminished.
- Evidence that teachers' social class, as reflected in the texts' descriptions of teachers' actions in and outside the school, is characterized as working class, and not professional or white collar.

We elaborate on each of these findings in the following section.

The unmasking of teachers, or, who teachers really are

In 18% of the books in our sample, teachers are literally or figuratively “unmasked;” that is, through the course of the story, someone, almost always a student, tries to discover the “true identity” of the teacher. This process is displayed with several variations:

- A student (or students), suspicious of the teacher’s unorthodox behavior, investigates the teacher’s outside-of-school life and discovers that the teacher is really an alien, masquerading as a teacher;
- A student sees evidence that his/her teacher interacts with the outside-of-school world (see her in a store or other public place), and tries to reconcile his/her belief that the teacher lived in the school all the time;
- A student, or students, greatly dislikes her/his teacher. Something happens in the course of the story to the student, the teacher, or both (in interaction with each other or separately), the result of which is that the student likes or even admires the teacher.

In 13 of the 74 books in our sample, the students discover throughout the course of the study that their teacher is an alien, and by the end of each story, they literally “unmask” him or her. In all of these cases, the children encounter disbelief from the human adults, both in and out of school, when they reveal that their teacher is an alien; in *Troll Teacher* (Vande Velde, 2000), the student Elizabeth even expects the adults’ reactions: “Elizabeth could see right away that her new teacher was a troll...But her parents didn’t see. Parents never do” (p. 5). The students in each story, regardless of age or grade level, work to unmask their teacher and when they do, at the end of each book, the alien teacher leaves the school, in some cases replaced by a new human teacher and in others by another alien teacher.

Also common to all of the “alien” teachers in these stories are their unorthodox teaching methods. In approximately two-thirds of the “alien” teacher stories, the alien’s unorthodox teaching methods are portrayed as significantly better than the regular teacher’s methods; in about one-third of the cases, the teaching methods are portrayed as bad, wrong, or menacing.

In the stories where the alien teacher uses teaching methods that are better than the original teacher’s methods, the alien teacher almost always requires the students to think, and this requirement is presented clearly as *not* what the students are used to doing for themselves. For example, in *Mister Fred* (Pinkwater, 1994), Mr. Fred gives the students a five-question test:

1. Why do you, personally, come to school every day?
2. If you didn’t come to school, what would you do with your time?
3. If you could go anywhere in the world, or out of it, where would you be?
Why?

4. If you could be anything in the world, what would you be? Why?
5. If you had a choice between Miss Cintron coming back to school to please you or staying in South America to do what she has always wanted to do, which would you choose? Why? (pp. 43- 44).

One of the students, upon seeing the questions, complains, “What kind of test is this? You don’t have to know anything.” Mr. Fred replies, “On the contrary, you have to know yourselves” (p. 44). Alien teachers are also invoked to teach “proper” behavior. In three of the stories, it required an alien to instill “appropriate” behavior (usually meant as discipline) in students who are overstepping the bounds of what regular teachers can possibly handle. Miss Swamp, teaches students to behave using fear, rude remarks, and physical threats in the popular “Miss Nelson” series.

In approximately one-third of the alien teacher stories, though, the teacher is simply teaching incorrect information. In *Troll Teacher* (Vande Velde, 2000), Miss Turtledove says, “ $2+2=17$, except on Tuesdays” and in *Mister Fred* (Pinkwater, 1994), Mr. Fred alphabetizes the students’ names by their first names. In *Apple Island, or the Truth about Teachers* (Evans, 1998), Mrs. Gross explains that,

Teachers have made spelling easier for you. Dictionaries are incorrect. All those nasty silent letters in words are preposterous! From now on you can leave off the silly *e* at the end of come, give, and have. Forget that idiotic *i* in the middle of friend. Why bother putting the dumb *b* at the end of climb? And never write phone with a *ph* or laugh with a *gh* again. Enough already! If you hear and *f*, just put an *f*! (pp. 17 – 18).

The alien teachers in *Apple Island* are dictatorial as well, displaying classroom rules as a long list of “no” rules.

The second kind of unmasking story is that of a figurative revelation – the student attempts to discover where his/her teacher “really” lives, thereby unmasking the identity of teacher as someone who exists only in school to reveal a teacher who lives in the “real” world. The young student in *My teacher’s secret life* (Krensky, 1996) is “suspicious” of his teacher, Mrs. Isabelle, when he sees her both in the store and in roller skating in the park. After seeing her “hold hands with a man,” he decides to watch her “extra carefully” to see if her behavior continues. In *Miss Malarkey doesn’t live in room 10* (Finchler, 1995), the boy is alarmed when he sees his teacher in the student’s own apartment building; he spies on her as she takes out the garbage, paints her toenails red, and has dinner parties. In neither case is the student happy about these revelations; both books end with the student’s ambivalence about his teacher’s “new” life and his vow to watch the teacher very carefully. Both stories describe male students who are convinced that their female teachers live in their schools with all the other teachers. In each case, the student accidentally sees his teacher outside the school – in his apartment building, or in the park, roller skating – and begins to question his belief.

The third way in which a teacher is “unmasked” is when a student discovers or reveals a different, and almost always nicer or more human (oddly enough) part of her personality. The most direct way authors achieve this revelation is through the device of the “mean teacher” becoming nicer as the result of a traumatic event and/or from the help of an understanding student. In *The incredible shrinking teacher* (Passen, 2002) and *The abominable snow teacher* (Passen, 2004), author Passen characterizes the gray-haired, portly, Miss Irma Birnbaum as the “toughest teacher in town.” In both books, her class dislikes her and considers her very mean; when she is accidentally shrunk in the first book and turned into a snow person in the second, Miss Birnbaum gains perspective on what it is like to be small or to have fun as a small child, and when she returns to her regular appearance, she becomes, at least for the day, a “nice” teacher.

In *The Landry News* (Clements, 1999), Mr. Larson is the “kind of teacher parents write letters to the principal about, letters like, ‘Dear Dr. Barnes, We know our child is only in second grade this year, but please be sure that he [or she] is NOT put into Mr. Larson’s class for fifth grade’” [original italics and caps] (pp. 2 -3). Cara Landry, as a new student, challenges Mr. Larson’s neglectful teaching and, though initially angering him, ends up reinvigorating him and helping him to restore himself to the excellent teacher he once was. Jerome Brooks’ *Knee Holes* (1992) mirrors this theme: Hope Gallagher believes that her teacher, Dr. Everett Rogers, can do no wrong, while her teacher Dr. Bialek is, to Hope, unjustifiably mean. Through the course of a school year, and the actions of a special group of students, Hope realizes that Dr. Rogers is not perfect and that Dr. Bialek has reasons for being so angry.

In another story entitled *The Library Dragon* (Deedy, 1994), a little girl is the change agent in turning the mean librarian dragon into a warm, beautiful, young blonde woman. We learn through the little girl in *The Library Dragon* that the teacher is lonely. The little girl disregards the dragon’s tough exterior, disobeys the library rules, and crawls into the dragon/librarian’s lap. The little girl connects emotionally to the librarian, and her scales melt away revealing the beautiful, young, blonde teacher. However, the librarian keeps her tail; we speculate that the author intended this as an implication that a certain amount of discipline is needed when one is an authority figure in school.

A teacher can also be “unmasked” by having her/his humanity revealed, as is the case with 12 books in our sample. Finchler & O’Malley (2004) illustrate a teacher’s limits in *Miss Malarkey’s Field Trip*, wherein the first person narrator/student notices that his teacher “holds her head a lot” during their class trip to the science museum. Mel Glenn unmasks Mr. Chippendale posthumously in his novel, *Who killed Mr. Chippendale?* (1996) by providing multiple students’ first-person perspectives on their now-dead teacher, essentially revealing numerous identities and yet no complete picture.

In *Keep Mrs. Sugarman in the fourth grade* (Levy, 1992), Jackie comes to like, respect, and trust her teacher, Mrs. Sugarman, though Mrs. Sugarman, as with Mr. Larson (from *The Landry News*, 1999), does not have a good reputation among the school children.

In the story *I remember Miss Perry* (2006), Pat Brisson and illustrator Stephanie Jorich unmask the feelings and memories of a well-loved teacher as seen through one little boy's eyes. The brilliant Miss Perry is in an accident on the way to school and dies. The little boy portrays for the reader that his teacher is a professional, in every aspect of the word. He comments on the how Miss Perry was loved by the other teachers and parents. The African-American female principal (one of two in our sample) cries as she explains to the children that their beloved teacher is gone forever. It seems that one way that "good" human teachers get unmasked is by leaving the class by transfer or death.

Students positioning teachers as objects of heterosexual desire

Prior content analyses (e.g. Fox, 1993; Sadker & Sadker, 1977) suggested that most of the teachers portrayed in our sample would be women (76%); this statistic alone makes the data gendered in the most basic sense. But we were surprised to find that in part of our sample (about 20%), interactions between students and teachers were also gendered in that the expected power differentials that rightly occur between student and teacher were, in many cases, negated by the students' positioning of their opposite-sexed teacher as an object of heterosexual gaze.

Students in our sample accomplished this interaction largely through language, through students' third person descriptions of teachers' actions or through one-to-one conversations between teacher and student. Young boys, for example, were able to position their female teachers as objects of their gaze by using language of control in their descriptions of their teachers' actions. In *My teacher's secret life* (Krensky, 1996), the elementary school boy of the story is determined to find out what the teacher's "secret" life is. He describes Mrs. Isabelle Quirk's actions as "suspicious" and, when he learns that she "likes" a man, by watching his teacher hold the man's hand, he vows to "watch her extra carefully" in the future. Likewise in *Miss Malarkey doesn't live in room 10* (Finchler, 1995), the first grade boy in Miss Malarkey's class decides to spy on her when he sees her in his apartment building. By secretly following her, he finds that she also goes to parties, paints her toenails red, and goes shopping.

Marvin, the third grade protagonist in *Marvin Redpost: Alone in his teacher's house* (Sachar, 1994), actually spends time in his teacher's house alone, as the title indicates, because Mrs. North asks him to watch her dog while she is away. While in her house, his friends urge him to snoop through her things and are vicariously thrilled when Marvin tells them he used her bathroom. Cases where the student is female and the teacher is male happened less frequently in our sample (n = 4), but occur primarily in books written for older children. In these cases, the female student clearly notices that her teacher is male and that this awareness has a sexual component; the students in these books also position the teacher as being watched or under surveillance. For example, in *My teacher is an alien* (Coville, 1989), sixth grader Susan describes the human face of her teacher as "handsome – a strong, lean face, long nose, and cheekbones to die for" (p. 6). But, as

with the young boy characters who want to find out who their female teachers really are, so too, do the female characters position their male teachers as objects of suspicion; Susan suspects that her teacher is not who he pretends to be, and follows him home, breaks into his house, and spies on him in his bedroom. Anya, the sixth grade student in *Mister Fred* (Pinkwater, 1994), also surreptitiously follows her teacher, Mr. Fred, as he does errands after school, hoping to discover where he goes and if he has other aliens with him.

In both *The Landry News* (Clements, 1999) and *Knee Holes* (Brooks, 1992), the main female characters do not follow their male teachers, but in both cases develop deep feelings for them and subsequently turn their gazes on them as a way of being close to their objects of affection:

His voice reaches out to me over my shoulder and snares me with this. —Hold on there, won't you? I've got a question." I've stepped only two or three feet toward the door.

My heart fibrillates. But I turn anyway.
Since I'm a good head shorter than he, I focus on the blue and red rhombohedrons lying tip to tip on his tie. They are like stained-glass church windows shot through by golden sunlight on a summer day (Brooks, pp. 6 – 7).

Since neither girl can admit that she has romantic or sexual feelings for her teacher, both achieve nearness by constantly talking about their teacher, or by putting themselves physically near them while possible, positioning them with internal monologue and external dialogue as objects of their desire.

Teachers as "pink" collar workers

Knapp and Woolverton (2004) define social class as more than just economic wealth; they also include in their definition the less tangible components of political power, status prestige, and cultural power (p. 658). Acknowledging social classes as social constructions, they state that social class in relation to schooling is ~~an~~ "an attribute of all individuals engaged in the enterprise of schooling, of educators as well as learners" (p. 658). Yet educators' social class is rarely a topic of research on schooling. Not surprisingly, then, its existence is not often found in studies of children's literature: researchers cannot see what they do not acknowledge is there. In our study, however, we found that teachers are portrayed as having a social class. As reflected in descriptions of teachers' actions in and outside of school, we found evidence that authors characterize teachers as working class, and not, as we had expected, as professional or white collar.

We used several different measures to define social class as it is portrayed in teachers. Knapp and Woolverton (2004) define teachers' social class as partly deriving from their class of origin, partly from the professional lives, and partly from their patterns of association outside of school (p. 665). Metz (1990) adds to this definition: ~~—~~While

teachers have formally similar educational credentials, ... they not only come from a range of social class backgrounds but participate as adults in networks that vary significantly in their social class" (p. 94). While teachers might do the same job, they are not all of the same social class.

The authors of children's books, then, are free to color their characters' social class as they decide. Given the freedom to characterize their teachers as professionals or as workers, we found that the authors in our sample colored their teachers pink – female education workers. As social class in teaching is as much a gendered issue as it is an economic one (e.g. Weiler, 1988), noting the components of these stories that indicate teachers' socio-economic statuses reveals how subtle messages about teachers may go undetected in children's fiction. We found the following working class aspects of many of the teachers in our study to include:

- Limited access to power within the school (almost always a male principal who tells the teacher what to do, even if the principal is characterized as not very smart)
- Modest indicators of economic wealth – teachers have small homes or apartments
- Teachers find wealth meaningless when measured against their job fulfillment.
- Students' economic means are modest or limited (indicative of school community). For example, in *My great aunt Arizona*, the student does not have the money to travel. However she does not mind; she travels in her imagination.
- Teachers' linguistic patterns are consistent with working class speech – use of commands in classroom, slang, limited academic vocabulary
- Clothing is modest and conservative; the teachers' collars are high on their necks, their dresses are below the knee, and their jewelry is small
- Teaching responsibilities are conscientiously completed and superiors obeyed
- Nature of teaching and learning is narrow; knowledge is held by the teacher, to be given out to the students.

There were notable exceptions to this theme – some teachers in our study defied the expectations of their superiors and the culture of the school. When this exception happened, though, they were cast as radical and more often than not, were literally written out of the classroom.

Not surprisingly, the nature of the job of teaching is represented differently for male and female teachers. With the exception of one text, female teachers do not interact with subject matter. If they are described/depicted as young and beautiful, then they are described as patient, kind, helpful, and liking children, but not described in the act of teaching. Even in stories where male teachers are teaching, this pattern is consistent. In *Sparks*, a chapter book about a fifth grader with learning difficulties, the special education teacher is a pretty white female. The boy describes her as kind, patient and fun. This description is contrasted to the students' new general education classroom teacher,

an African American male, who works with mathematics, discusses *Charlotte's Web*, explains equations, and is academically challenging. The boy learns from the male teacher, while he only has fun with and is helped by the female.

In each portrayal of male teachers, they are shown as actively engaged in making academics accessible to children. This depiction was done in warm, wonderful, creative ways, but always in the context of the act of teaching. Males were depicted as doing the real work of teachers with both strong, affective demeanors and strong cognitive abilities, while the vast majority of females were shown only performing the affective qualities of teachers. For example, in *Thank you, Mr. Falker* (Polacco, 2001), the male teacher promises –“We’re going to change all that, girl. You’re going to read—I promise you that.” We are privy to the best practice methods Mr. Falker employs to teach the young student to read. This instruction is done after school on Mr. Falker’s own time. The male teacher described in the text *I don’t want to go back to school* (Russo, 1994) teaches a geography lesson as a small group activity, reads stories in a –good story voice,” and introduces the students to the class pets. The pattern indicates an underlying message of the work of teachers -- male teachers provide instruction, female teachers provide nurturance and support. The gender divide of the work corresponds with work conceptions underlying a ‘pink collar’ divide in social status.

Discussion

The surface content of the books in our sample reveals nothing new about the portrayal of teachers in current children’s fiction: as it has for over 50 years in the United States and the United Kingdom, children’s fiction characterizes teachers as female, White, straight, and non-disabled. These findings reflect other researchers’ conclusions about the content of children’s fiction regarding teachers (Sandefur & Moore, 2004; Weber & Mitchell, 1995; Weitzman et al., 1972) and we have not found any significant differences in even the most recent books about teachers.

Whether this literal picture of teachers is due to authors’ desire to reflect the reality of Western teaching forces – teachers are in fact overwhelming White, female, straight, and non-disabled – or whether it reflects authors’ childhood reminiscences or even their hopes that the teaching force will stay as it is, we cannot say. Yet we know children’s literature transmits cultural attitudes and morals (Baskin & Harris, 1977), and acts as a conveyor of messages to children about social behavior (Kohl, 1995), and so what we can say about the unchanged demographic content is that it cannot yet be considered a source to help children to imagine teachers differently.

Although our findings regarding the typical demographic profile of teachers were not a surprise, our data did reveal that authors of children’s fiction display deep ambivalence about whom and even what teachers are. On the surface we can say that teachers are literally what authors say and draw them to be: White women. But the overwhelming evidence from our study -- teachers’ identities are something to be uncovered, teachers

are objects to be watched, and they are workers to be controlled -- suggests that the ~~real~~ identities of teachers are to be denied, hidden, and even feared.

Most striking was the overwhelming number of works that dealt with revealing teachers' identities. Whether the teachers were aliens in teacher-masquerade, or whether their non-school lives or personalities were in question, students in most of the texts were tremendously concerned with finding out who their teachers ~~really~~ were. This theme was by far the most compelling of those we discovered. What is so taboo, we wonder, about teachers revealing their real selves to their students?

Dalton (2004), studying teachers' portrayal in commercial films, notes this bifurcation between school and private life, stating that, ~~undercutting~~ all of the other categories [of women as teachers] are the divided lives that are imposed on female teachers.... We must consider the ways in which female teachers are asked to deny their experience as women in their teaching" (p. 97). If the teachers in children's fiction are not supposed to have other lives, why then are students written as anxious to discover them?

A reason may be that students fear losing an authority figure whom they have constructed as ideal. The main teacher character from *The Landry News* (Clements, 1999) suggests that the fear of the loss of a ~~perfect~~ teacher may be, in fact, damaging to a student:

Mr. Larson remembered his own fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Spellman. She had been perfect. Her clothes and hair and lipstick were always just so. Her classroom was always quiet and orderly. She never raised her voice – she never had to. She wrote in that flawless cursive, and a little gold star from Mrs. Spellman was like a treasure, even for the toughest boys. Then young Karl Larson saw Mrs. Spellman at the beach on Memorial Day with her family. She was sitting under an umbrella, and she wore a black swimsuit that did not hide any of her midriff bulges or the purple veins on her legs. Her hair was all straggly from swimming, and without any makeup or lipstick she looked washed out, tired. She had two kids, a girl and a boy, and she yelled at them as they wrestled and got sand all over the beach towels. Her husband lay flat on his back in the sun, a large man with lots of hair on his stomach, and it wasn't a small stomach. As Karl stood there staring, Mrs. Spellman's husband lifted his head off the sand, turned toward his wife, pointed at the cooler, and said, Hey Mabel, hand me another cold one, would you? (pp. 20-21).

It is the now-adult teacher's reaction to *his* ideal childhood teacher that offers insight as to what authors imagine students may feel when they see their teacher as real:

Karl was thunderstruck, and he turned and stumbled back to where his own family had set up their picnic on the beach. This big, hairy guy had looked at *his* Mrs. Spellman and said, Hey Mabel. At that moment, Karl Larson realized that the Mrs. Spellman he knew at school was mostly a fictional character, partly created

by him, and partly created by Mrs. Spellman herself. The students and ...and *Mabel* created Mrs. Spellman together in order to do the job of schooling [Original italics.] (p. 21).

Clements does not allow Mr. Larson the teacher to explain what it is about ~~the~~ job of schooling,” though, that requires teachers to be fictional characters. What can ~~perfect~~ teachers do that imperfect – real – teachers cannot? What is gained – by students, teachers, and society – by having ~~perfect~~ teachers? According to Clements’ little-boy-turned-teacher, teachers are socially constructed fictions who exist to do what real women apparently are not allowed or able to do.

Moreover, the sexual overtone in Mr. Larson’s fifth grade reflection suggests that only a made-up, perfectly-coiffed woman can be a teacher and that ugly teachers cannot really exist. Such reasoning might explain the preponderance of aliens, trolls, and vampires masquerading as teachers – students are immediately suspicious of such teachers’ humanness for the simple reason that they are ugly.

It may also be that it is somehow dangerous for students to acknowledge that female teachers are ~~real~~” women. “[Teachers] negotiating between their public and private selves amid the constraints imposed upon them from their supervisors and their communities has historically been a balancing act for women teachers” writes Dalton (2004, p. 93). If students, particularly elementary and middle school aged children, are supposed to see their teachers as transitional objects between mother and outside worlds as Grumet (1988) suggests, then to see their teachers as something other than ~~substitute~~ mother” is to be subject to the realities of the outside world. If students gain the knowledge that their teachers are not perfect, all-knowing, beautiful, nurturing creatures, then perhaps their mothers are not perfect either. For teachers and mothers to be human means that they have economic, sexual, intellectual, and social needs that neither children nor Western culture may be ready to acknowledge.

The student gaze that positions teachers as objects of students’ heterosexual desire can be read on the surface as merely school crushes – students’ transfer of affection from parent to teacher, the nascent development of human sexual desire. Yet the number of instances within the sample texts where the student, through his discourse with the teacher, positions her as powerless – calls into question any simple reading of these relationships. Walkerdine (1990) cautions against reading any interchange as simple, ‘noting that ~~a~~ particular individual has the potential to be read’ within a variety of discourses” (p. 5). In the cases of these texts, many students hold simultaneous dual positions as powerless student and powerful male; ~~an~~ individual can be powerful or powerless, depending on the terms in which her/his subjectivity is constituted” (Walkerdine, 1990, p. 5).

Most of the young boy students in our sample who engage in direct or third person positioning of their teachers do so in an adult context; they are young boys (as young as first grade, in some cases) and yet they are spying on their teachers who are painting their

toenails, shopping, having dinner parties, and holding hands with others; they are writing to nominate their teacher for president, taking care of their pets in absence of a husband or partner, and critiquing their face make-up or lack thereof. As individuals are produced, in the process of discourse, into relations of power (Walkerdine, 1990), it is possible to see these boys as both powerless (students) and powerful (male). The boys' power is gained when they refuse the powerless student role and recast the teachers as powerless in their discourse, even if that discourse is a third person narrative.

There are a few instances in our sample where girl students position male teachers as well, but in these cases the power differential remains in place – male teachers, though objects of girl students' desire, remain adults, likely because the girl students accept the student (powerless) role even as they also position their male teacher as an object of desire:

–Please forgive me,” he [Dr. Rogers] suddenly blurts out. –I shouldn't have let this go so far, forcing *you* to have to bring it to my -- ”
 Damn, but I'd like to kick myself! Now I'm beginning to churn in the old direction wildly. *His* blasted pain's completely mine again.
 Italics original (Brooks, 1992, p. 106)

Reaffirmed in our data analysis is Grumet's (1988) assertion that even in a profession where women dominate, the teaching profession brings little power to women.

Lastly, our findings of teachers portrayed as working class suggest that current children's fiction may reflect the existing push to –teacher-proof' school curricula and routines, to make education a collection of common beliefs and rituals, as opposed to a place where teachers and children are free to think for themselves. The teachers in our study who leave their regular positions – the aliens, those who leave and are replaced by aliens or other substitutes, those who are threatened with being fired or being ostracized by their peers – are those teachers who challenge the thinking of their students. The teachers who stay are those who do not challenge the system, the ones who do what they are told and do a good job within the confines of the job. Casey & Apple (1989) note this trend in *non-fictional* teaching positions, explaining how –jobs filled by women are structured so that there are greater attempts to control the content of the job and how that job is performed” (pp. 179 – 180).

The class position of teachers is also infused with gender in the way that fictional teacher characters, mostly female, are told what to do by almost exclusively male principals. The schools within these stories, as with real schools, exist in communities where teachers are further controlled, and caught, between the expectations of families, (mostly left to mothers) and expectations of the state (mostly left to men, in the form of patriarchal expectations). It seems no wonder that even little boys in the stories we analyzed felt empowered to tell their teachers what to do. –Helpless to raise our own class status through our work,” Grumet (1988) writes, –female teachers may be the least-equipped

persons in our society to show students how to bridge the distance between effort and social class status” (pp. 56 - 57). The sheer numbers of women in the profession are contradicted ironically by the lack of power that the teachers in these texts display – teaching is a feminized profession displaying few indicators of feminism.

We began this study investigating the portrayal of teachers in children’s popular fiction suspecting that there was more to be found than demographics reflective of the current Western teaching force. What we found surprised us though perhaps it should not have: these stories imply that the cultural aesthetic surrounding teachers and teaching remains as unchanged in fiction as it does in reality. Ambivalent and hopeless about our contradictory positions as women, teachers, and professionals, children’s fiction tells us that we teachers are female workers who should take care of children, do what we’re told, and keep the masks of teacher identity intact. Quinn (1996) states that “real secrets can be kept by publishing them on billboards” (p. 188). In the case of how Western society regards teachers’ work, perhaps we should say that if we want to hide society’s feelings about teachers, we should publish the message in children’s storybooks.

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Journal of Research in Education *Volume 21, Number 2*

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Appendix
List of Books Included in Content Analysis

- Allard, Harry, (1977) *Miss Nelson is missing!*
 Allard, Harry (1986) *Miss Nelson is Back*
 Allard, Harry (1988) *Miss Nelson Has a Field Day*
 Ames, Mildred (1985) *Cassandra-Jamie*
 Borden, Louise (1999) *Good luck, Mrs. K.!*
 Bosse, Malcomb (1996) *The Examination*
 Brandt, Amy (2000) *When Katie was our teacher*
 Brenner, Emily (2004) *On the first day of grade school*
 Brillhart, Julie (1990) *Anna's Goodbye Apron*
 Brisson, Pat (2006) *I Remember Miss Perry*
 Brooks, Jerome (1992) *Knee holes*
 Brown, Marc Tolon (2000) *Arthur's teacher moves in*
 Bunting, Eve (1992) *Our teacher's having a baby*
 Calmenson, Stephanie(1998) *The Teeny tiny teacher*
 Chardiet, Bernice (1990) *The Best teacher in the world*
 Choi, Sook Nyul & Dugan, Karen (1993) *Halmoni and the Picnic*
 Clavell, James (1998) *The Children's Story*
 Clements, Andrew (2002) *Jake Drake. class clown*
 Clements, Andrew (1999) *The Landry News*
 Clements, Andrew (2001) *Jake Drake, teacher's pet*
 Clements, Andrew (2004) *The Last holiday concert*
 Codell, Esme Raji (2003) *Sahara Special*
 Cohen, Barbara (1998) *Molly's Pilgrim*
 Coville, Bruce (1989) *My teacher is an alien*
 Coville, Bruce (1991) *My teacher fried my brains*
 Coville, Bruce (1991) *My teacher glows in the dark*
 Creech, Sharon (2001) *Love that dog*
 Crews, Donald (1993) *School Bus*
 Dahl, Roald (1988) *Matilda*
 Danneberg, Julie (2003) *First year letters*
 Danziger, Paula (1974) *The Cat ate my gymsuit*
 Deedy, Carmen (1994) *The Library Dragon*
 Evans, Douglas (1998) *Apple Island, or, the truth about teachers*
 Evans, Douglas (1997) *So what do you do?*
 Finchler, Judy (1995) *Miss Malarkey doesn't live in room 10*
 Finchler, Judy (1998) *Miss Malarkey won't be in today*
 Gelman, Rita Golden (2004) *Doodler doodling*
 Getz, David (2000) *Floating Home*
 Glenn, Mel (1996) *Who Killed Mr. Chippendale?*
 Glenn, Mel (1997) *The Taking of Room 114*
 Granger, Michele (1995) *Fifth grade fever*

- Greenburg, Dan (2002) *My teacher ate my homework*
 Greene, Stephanie (1998) *Show and tell*
 Guest, Elissa Haden (2004) *Iris and Walter and the substitute teacher*
 Gutman, Dan (2004) *Ms. Hannah is Bananas*
 Gutman, Dan (2004) *Ms. Small is off the Wall*
 Hahn, Mary Downing (1990) *December Stillness*
 Havill, Juanita (1999) *Jamaica and the substitute teacher*
 Henkes, Kevin (1996) *Lilly's purple plastic purse*
 Houston, Gloria (1997) *My Great Aunt Arizona*
 Hurwitz, Johanna (1988) *Teacher's pet*
 Howe, James (2003) *The Misfits*
 James, Simon (1991) *Dear Mr. Blueberry*
 Johnson, Doug (2002) *Substitute teacher plans*
 Johnston, Janet (1991) *Ellie Brader hates Mr. G*
 Kiesel, Stanley (1980) *The War between the pitiful teachers and the splendid kids*
 Kinerk, Robert (2005) *Timothy Cox will not Change His Socks*
 Klass, Sheila Solomon (1991) *Kool Ada*
 Krensky, Stephen (1996) *My teacher's secret life*
 Laminack, Lester (2006) *Jake's 100th Day of School*
 Langreuter, Jutta (1997) *Little Bear goes to Kindergarten*
 Levy, Elizabeth (1992) *Keep Ms. Sugarman in the fourth grade*
 MacDonald, Amy (2001) *No more nasty*
 McCully, Emily Arnold (1996) *The Bobbin Girl*
 McNamee, Graham (2003) *Sparks*
 Meyer, Carolyn (2007) *White Lilacs*
 Mills, Claudia (2005) *Makeovers by Marcia*
 Morgenstern, Susie (2001) *A Book of coupons*
 Murphy, Jim (2001) *My face to the wind: the diary of Sarah Jane Price. a prairie teacher*
 Nastick, Sharon (1981) *Mr. Radadast makes an unexpected journey*
 Nikola-Lisa, W. (2004) *MY teacher can teach--anyone!*
 Passen, Lisa (2004) *The Abominable snow teacher*
 Passen, Lisa (2000) *Attack of the fifty-foot teacher*
 Passen, Lisa (2002) *The Incredible shrinking teacher*
 Pinkwater, Jill (1994) *Mister Fred*
 Plourde, Lynn (2003) *Teacher Appreciation Day*
 Polacco, Patricia (1998) *Thank you. Mr. Falker*
 Polacco, Patricia (2001) *Thank You, Mr. Falker*
 Priceman, Marjorie (1999) *Emeline at the circus*
 Reynolds, Peter (2003) *The Dot*
 Russo, Marisabina (1994) *I Don't Want to Go Back to School*
 Sachar, Louis (1993) *Marvin Redpost: alone in his teacher's house*
 Sachar, Louis (1995) *Wayside School gets a little stranger*
 Smothers, Ethel Footman (2003) *The Hard-Times Jar*
 Spiller, Robert (2006) *The Witch of Agnesi*

- Tada, Joni Eareckson (2001) *The Meanest teacher*
Thaler, Mike (1994) *The Gym teacher from the Black Lagoon*
Vande Velde, Vivian (2000) *Troll teacher*
Viorst, Judith (1987) *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*
Wardlaw, Lee (2004) *101 ways to bug your teacher*
Willner-Pardo, Gina (1997) *Spider Storch's teacher torture*
Winters, Kay (2004) *My teacher for President*
Wood, Douglas (2002) *What teachers can't do*