

Images of reading and the reader

How reading and readers are portrayed in children's literature may have ramifications for elementary reading education.

As we go about our daily lives, various media present us with a vast array of visual and textual images, many of which affect the way we come to understand the world and ourselves (Fleckenstein, 2002). Here, in particular, I focus on the images of the act of reading and what it means to be a reader in children's literature—specifically in contemporary children's picture books. Whether we acknowledge their possible effects on students, or whether we call students' attention to them when reading and discussing books in class, these images may affect the way young readers perceive reading and what it means to be a successful reader.

Images of what it means to be a reader are also included in educational documents, literacy standards, commercial reading programs, and in selections of children's literature. For example, the American Library Association has undertaken an extensive campaign to promote reading through a series of posters depicting sports figures, television celebrities, and movie stars reading their favorite books. These images of famous people reading are displayed in school libraries and classrooms to send the message to students that reading is "cool" and that it is important to become a reader. Public service announcements promoting the value of reading and the importance of staying in school have been airing on many of the major television networks in the United States for several years now. The intent of these images is to influence students' perceptions about reading and the importance of becoming a reader.

Selections of children's literature, like other cultural artifacts, are often used to portray particular aspects of reality and the human condition. Students become socialized to see the depiction of characters in children's fiction and its social construct as the way things are, an inevitable or unchangeable part of their social reality (Lewis, 1987). Allen (1997) contended that "the hidden messages in the curriculum, including the representations of people's lives in children's literature, can shape children's perceptions of the world and their roles in society and socialize children to maintain the status quo" (p. 521). Like the representation of people's lives, the images of reading and readers that students encounter in children's literature can shape their perceptions of what it means to be a successful reader in contemporary society.

Research on images in children's literature

Studies have been conducted to investigate various images in children's literature—for example, images of the classroom teacher (Barone, Meyerson & Mallette, 1995; Burnaford, 1994), the negative images of schools and schooling (Greenway, 1993), the image of the principal in a school setting (Radencich & Harrison, 1997), and teacher-student relationships (Triplett & Ash, 2000). One study focused on the characters in young adult novels and their relationship to literacy and literacy development (Kuhlman & Lickteig, 1998). In addition, content analyses have focused on various images in children's literature, including portrayals of the American Revolution (Taxel, 1981), gender roles (Westland, 1993), and African Americans (Sims, 1983). These studies were

undertaken to understand these various images and their possible effects on primary and adolescent readers.

Investigating images of reading

After reading *Wolf!* by Becky Bloom and before sharing it with a group of intermediate elementary students, I began to consider how the act of reading and the reading process were portrayed. I became concerned that the way reading was presented in this picture book differed from my own understandings of the reading process and did not address reading as the construction of meaning (Cambourne, 1988). The story focused on the wolf's ability to pronounce words and read aloud fluently. This experience prompted me to investigate how other contemporary picture books portrayed reading and readers and if the various portrayals differed from contemporary reading theories, including transactional or reader-response theories (Beach, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1978; Tompkins, 1980) and sociocultural theories (Lewis, 2000; Luke, 1995; McKormick, 1994).

In order to understand how readers and reading were portrayed by authors and illustrators in contemporary picture books, and how these images might differ from those offered by reading educators and theorists, I conducted an investigation focusing on the images of readers and reading, both textual and visual, in picture books published since 1975. A search of my local public library and university data bases, using the keywords *reading*, *library*, *readers*, and *literacy*, revealed approximately 40 children's picture books published during the last 25 years that contained a library as a setting, children learning to read, reading in school, or reading in general. At the time of this investigation, I was teaching a graduate course in children's literature and invited my students to recommend any additional titles that I might have overlooked. The final collection was approximately 50 books, and each one included some aspect of reading or had a library as the setting.

After an initial reading of the 50 stories, 20 were chosen that focused primarily on reading or becoming a reader (see list at the end of this article). Books that simply told a story about going to the library or the events that took place along the

way to the library, but did not address reading or readers, were not included in the final analysis. For example, *Can You Guess Where We Are Going?* by Elvira Woodruff and Martha Alexander's *How My Library Grew* by Dinah describe going to the library and a library being built, respectively, but don't discuss reading or being a reader.

The investigation centered on two questions: (a) What images of reading and the reader are portrayed in the text and illustrations of contemporary picture books? (b) Is there a difference between the images of readers and reading portrayed in children's picture books and those portrayed in transactional, reader-response theories? Eventually, the investigation led me to also wonder about the implications these images would have for reading instruction and the expectations classroom teachers hold for their students.

The final collection of 20 books, 18 of which were published since 1990, was then analyzed across two domains: images of the reader (how readers were portrayed) and images of the act of reading (how reading as a particular ability and process was portrayed). Although these two domains overlap in some respects, I present them here separately to help examine the two types of images in greater detail.

Images of the reader

Images of what it means to be a reader ranged from extremely reluctant readers, who fought with their parents and teachers about having to read, to children who loved to read and couldn't live without books in their possession. In three of the books reviewed, readers were portrayed as stubborn children who defied their parents' requests to read and presumably didn't know what was good for them. These recalcitrant children would rather watch television or play outside than read the books they should be reading.

In *The Girl Who Hated Books*, by Manjusa Pawagi, the main character Meena hates to read and hates books being in her house. Books are piled everywhere by her parents and get in the way of everything she tries to do. When the animal characters come to life and emerge from the fairy tale books piled in her room, Meena has to read all the stories in order to put the characters back where they belong. By the end of the stack, Meena has

overcome her hatred of books and realizes she can revisit these animal characters by reading the stories once again. The book closes with her parents discovering her reading a book, and they are surprised and delighted at Meena's change in attitude.

In *Nicholas at the Library*, by Hazel Hutchins, Nicholas does not want to go to the library; instead, he wants to stay at home and have friends over to play. His mother dresses him in his raincoat and takes him to the library anyway. In the library, Nicholas builds a fort out of books rather than read them until he discovers a chimpanzee behind one shelf section. The librarian explains to Nicholas that the chimpanzee is lost from one of the stories and that together they can help him find his way home by reading through the books. Nicholas doesn't enjoy reading; however, he does enjoy searching for a home for the chimpanzee.

In *Silas, the Bookstore Cat*, by Karen Trella Mather, young Peter is literally dragged to the bookstore and forced to choose a book to read because his teacher has told his mother he needs to read a new book every week. Peter says reading is boring, and he wants to go outside and play soccer with his friends. Peter chooses the first book he sees, without even looking at the title, simply to appease his mother and shorten their time in the store.

In all three of these books, reading was portrayed as a solution to a problem, not as something enjoyed by the readers themselves. The young readers never admit to enjoying reading but use it to solve the problems presented in their stories. At the other end of the spectrum, readers were portrayed as "bookworms." Reading consumes their entire lives. These characters usually wear glasses and choose to spend most of their time in the library or at home reading. Reading is the only, or at least the primary, activity these characters engage in throughout these stories, as they often ignore other aspects of their lives in order to read. In *The Library*, by Sarah Stewart, Elizabeth Brown, the main character, drags a trunk of books behind her to school, reads while vacuuming her house, prefers reading books to dating, and fills her house to the ceiling with stacks of books.

Avid readers were also portrayed as people who go on adventures in their imaginations rather than in the real world. In *Edward and the Pirates*, by David McPhail, Edward never leaves his house except to go to the library. When he returns home,

he dreams of pirates, dinosaurs, and superheroes until they come to life in his bedroom. He spends the entire story imagining adventures while reading, rather than having adventures himself.

In a couple of the books reviewed, as characters evolved into readers they also became more civilized. In *Wolf!*, for example, a wolf wanders into town in search of food and a home. He then learns how to read by attending school, visiting the public library, and buying a book from a bookstore. As he evolves into a reader, the wolf stops jumping over fences, wears glasses, puts on a vest and hat over his natural "furry attire," and addresses the other characters more politely. He eventually becomes a "master" reader and is invited to join the other animals on a picnic. In *The Library Dragon*, by Carmen Agra Deedy, Miss Lotta Scales, the self-appointed guardian of the library, is literally transformed into the lovable Miss Lotty as she reads aloud to her students. The characters in these two books changed dramatically, becoming less "savage" as they were influenced by the power of reading and literature. Reading had a civilizing effect on them both.

In the stories that contained portrayals of struggling readers, children saw themselves as dumb or at risk of failure in school and society. In the ones with a school setting, the children struggling with reading were given remedial help or special attention and were the focus of concerned teachers. Older struggling readers were portrayed as troubled youths in need of parental and teacher guidance and extra remedial assistance in school. In contrast, where readers were learning to read on their own, often outside the school setting, they were celebrated as precocious, intelligent people, learning a valuable life skill through the hard work and perseverance necessary for success in today's society.

For example, in the autobiographical *Thank You, Mr. Falker*, by Patricia Polacco, the young Trisha struggles with reading at school and is often harassed by the other students for being too dumb to read. She tries hard to hide her reading and learning problems from other students, until she meets an extraordinary teacher, Mr. Falker, who helps her learn to read. By studying "letters, letters, letters and words, words, words," Trisha became a reader. In *Today Was a Terrible Day*, by Patricia Reilly Giff, Ronald Morgan is told he might not get

to third grade if he can't do his reading work and start paying attention. When he mispronounces three words during the oral round-robin reading in his leveled reading group, another student questions his membership in their group.

Compared to struggling readers learning to read at school, readers learning to read at home or assuming the responsibility for their own reading instruction were portrayed as courageous characters determined to defeat the odds that life had presented them. In *Richard Wright and the Library Card*, by William Miller, the main character, novelist Richard Wright, is unable to get a library card because of the bigotry and prejudice associated with being an African American. In this story, Richard convinces a white co-worker to let him use his library card under the pretense of checking out books for his friend. He reads everything he is allowed to check out and overcomes the challenges African Americans faced during that period of U.S. history. Reading, in this book, was portrayed as a powerful life skill that could help one overcome obstacles, as a door to knowledge, and as access to social goods and power.

When characters in the books studied were unable to read, they knew their illiteracy was going to affect them negatively and often hid it from other characters in the story. In *Read for Me, Mama*, by Vashanti Rahaman, young Joseph brings home two books every week from the library, one for him to read and one for his mother to read to him. His mother, a great storyteller, eventually admits she cannot read the books that Joseph brings home. She breaks down and asks the preacher at her church for help learning to read, enrolls in a vocational school, and soon after surprises Joseph by picking up his library book and reading it to him. The story closes as they celebrate her victory over illiteracy.

In *The Wednesday Surprise*, by Eve Bunting, a young girl surprises her father by teaching her grandmother to read. The grandmother knows she has to learn to read and tells her grandchildren that it is easier if they learn to read while they are young. Once she has learned to read, she exclaims that she is going to read everything in the world. With the ability to read, the grandmother knew her life would change dramatically.

Characters who became readers outside of the school setting were portrayed as hardworking, independent, resourceful people who overcame the

obstacles life presented them. On the other hand, readers struggling with reading in school were often the object of ridicule by other students and in need of remedial help to learn to read. Both groups of struggling readers knew they had a problem to overcome and were concerned about their illiteracy.

Images of the act of reading

In all of the books that discussed the reading process, reading was portrayed as oral fluency and expression, and the successful reader was one who could read aloud with confidence and passion. Reading was referred to as the ability to pronounce each word without making any mistakes (in *Today Was a Terrible Day*); putting all the sounds together and getting a word right (in *Thank You, Mr. Falker*); trying to figure out what sounds the marks make (in *More Than Anything Else* by Marie Bradby); knowing the words and their meanings (in *Aunt Chip and the Great Triple Creek Dam Affair* by Patricia Polacco); or having your voice step from one word to another, page after page (in *Read for Me, Mama*).

In *Today Was a Terrible Day*, Ronald Morgan was laughed at and ridiculed for misreading a sentence aloud during his reading group. In *More Than Anything Else*, reading was portrayed as a bottom-up process that begins with understanding the "song of the alphabet" and the ability to know the sounds each letter makes. In this story, Booker's mother gives him a book that contains the alphabet and tells him it is a "singy sort of thing." Even before Booker is able to read the alphabet for himself, he knows there are secrets, magic, and wonderful things "hidden" inside books and that you require the ability to read to discover them.

Reading was also portrayed as something that takes a long time to learn and requires a great deal of practice. In *Joseph Wants to Read*, by Fabienne Teyssèdre, Joseph is told by his teacher that learning to read takes time and practice and that he needs to continue working on his letters and sounds at home over the summer. For Joseph, a beginning reader, the ability to read begins with reading pictures, learning the alphabet and letter sounds, and memorizing sight words. In *When Will I Read?* by Miriam Cohen, learning to read is something that just happens. Learning to read begins with remembering how words look and reading the signs posted

in the classroom. Reading is something the little boy in the story says he was waiting his whole life to be able to do.

Reading environmental print was also included in many of the stories that featured beginning readers as the main characters. In *Carlos Likes Reading*, by Jessica Spanyol, everything in Carlos's house and neighboring environment has a label on it. In *Look! I Can Read*, by Susan Hood, a little girl goes around her house and neighborhood reading words, signs, and labels. Dr. Seuss's *I Can Read With My Eyes Shut* discusses young readers' ability to read everything they encounter.

Reading was portrayed as something you could do to escape reality, learn new things, or meet people you couldn't meet in real life. As mentioned earlier, in *Edward and the Pirates* Edward regularly retreated into books and his imagination to meet exciting characters and go on new adventures. P.K. Hallinan's *Just Open a Book* describes a series of adventures you can go on and people you can meet through reading. In *Sophie and Sammy's Library Sleepover*, by Judith Casely, a group of children listens to the librarian read stories during a library sleepover and then acts them out. The stories help the children imagine new worlds and transform their playtime experiences.

Reading was depicted as a gift or as a symbol of love, comfort, and affection in some of the picture books reviewed. In *Tomás and the Library Lady*, by Pat Mora, a young Hispanic migrant worker is befriended by a librarian and allowed to check out books on her card until he has to leave town. In several of the books, reading was something that took place before bedtime, in a comfortable chair, between parents and their children. The act of reading was also presented as a requirement for participating in society and as an important aspect of becoming a prominent citizen. In *Aunt Chip and the Great Triple Creek Dam Affair*, the townspeople have stopped reading and focus all their attention on television. When a television tower is built, Aunt Chip the librarian goes to bed (where she stays for well over 50 years), proclaiming that "there will be consequences" for not reading. In that book, reading was considered an important part of life that the foolish townsfolk had neglected, and television was identified as one of the major causes of their problems.

Reading was also portrayed as a transformative event, a route to salvation, an event or process that could heal and change people in dramatic, life-altering ways. For Richard Wright, for Joseph's mother in *Read to Me, Mama*, and for Anna's grandmother in *The Wednesday Surprise*, the ability to read was seen as power, a form of cultural capital that was necessary to change their futures and their social standing. Learning to read became an epiphany, an opportunity to remove oneself from the chains of illiteracy and to start life anew. In *More Than Anything Else*, a young Booker T. Washington's powerful desire to learn to read dominates his life. When he learns to read through the help of another freed slave, he reaches for the sky and proclaims salvation. The ability to read was presented in these stories as an important skill that everyone needs, desires, and is willing to work toward if they know what is good for their future.

What was missing

The most significant insight that arose during my analysis was that the idea of making sense while reading—in particular, the construction of meaning by readers transacting with texts—was not conveyed in any of the picture books reviewed. The reading process was portrayed as a progression from reading letters to reading words and to correct pronunciation of longer texts and fluent oral reading. This overemphasis on oral fluency and accurate decoding gives young readers a distorted, if not insufficient, view of the reading process. It is not simply the ability to "perform" a text orally, to become masters at reading aloud, but the ability to understand what is being read that makes for successful readers in today's society.

Readers sharing ideas about books with other readers were not included in any of the stories reviewed. There were no literature study groups, no class discussions, no writing in response logs, and no explorations of literature. Reading was not shown as a process of bringing one's understandings and experiences to bear on the story being read. Transactional, reader-response, and sociocultural perspectives suggest that readers should be able to talk about stories; relate stories being read to their own experiences; interrogate texts from multiple perspectives; evaluate the versions of reality being

represented through words and images in the picture book; and understand that literature is a socio-cultural artifact created in a particular time and place, for a particular purpose. It became obvious that the idea of the act of reading as a meaning-making process that we are trying to instill in our students is blatantly absent from the books reviewed.

Most of these books were published in the 1990s; however, many of the stories took place in the 1970s and 1980s. Although many changes have taken place in our understandings of the reading process and theories of comprehension, these changes were not reflected in the way that reading and readers were presented in the books investigated. This being said, many of the structures and approaches often associated with traditional reading instruction that have been shown to be ineffective—if not detrimental to children's development as lifelong readers—went unchallenged in the stories I examined. The use of round-robin reading and homogeneous leveled reading groups were portrayed as essential components of elementary reading instruction. These comfortable reminders of “the way things used to be” need to be challenged, and images of more effective reading instructional practices need to replace them in future publications.

In the books that used school as the setting, reading experiences and instruction included round-robin reading, reading groups, and doing workbook pages. Students in school expressed their fear of making oral mistakes in front of other students or the teacher, and they were expected to practice hard and not give up if they wanted to be able to read. Students were taught to strive for independence, where independence was portrayed as the ability to sound out words correctly on one's own.

Another significant insight to emerge from this review concerns the tension between being a reader and being a “normal” person. In many of the stories, it was implied that you couldn't play sports, watch television, or live what most would consider a normal life, *and* be a reader. I don't believe that we want students to conclude that only bookworms who wear thick glasses are successful readers. All sorts of people read. If the images of successful readers in these picture books are vastly different from the images children construct about them-

selves, it may become more difficult to help children see themselves as readers.

We want students to include reading in their lives. It should not become a choice between enjoying sports or playing with one's friends and being a reader. Children should be able to play soccer, go to parties, spend time watching television with their friends, *and* read. I don't expect reading to dominate my students' lives, just to become an important part of it.

In all of the picture books reviewed, fictional literature was the primary material being read. Environmental print was included in those books intended for emergent readers; however, no newspapers, brochures, maps, encyclopedias, or other informational texts were included. This omission of other reading materials, especially informational texts, reveals the dominance of fiction throughout the reading curriculum (Pappas, 1991).

Regardless of the challenges presented to characters in these stories, reading was continually portrayed in a positive light and as an important ability to develop, while the inability to read was portrayed as a problem to be overcome as soon as possible or as a possible deterrent to full participation in society and life. Society privileges specific groups by emphasizing particular linguistic styles, curricula, and authority patterns (Gee, 1996). In much the same way, the images in the children's literature I reviewed privilege particular images of the reader and the reading process. Throughout these picture books, reading was portrayed as oral performance and correct decoding of individual words, not as readers' ability to make meaning. Teachers need to disrupt this commonplace, modernist image (Serafini, 2003) of reading as “oral performance” often associated with elementary reading curricula. We need to question the images of the reader and the act of reading presented in our schools—particularly in the literature we share with children—in order to reconstruct the concept of what it means to be a reader in today's society.

Education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The identities that our students construct are influenced by the images presented to them and the ones included in the stories to which they are exposed. If we begin to use literature to open up spaces to discuss what it means to be a reader and to portray readers in multiple roles, not

simply as the closeted bookworms suggested in some of the stories included here, we may be able to expand students' concept of being a reader and help more students find room within these new definitions of reading.

Serafini teaches in the College of Education at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. He may be contacted at 9599 W. Charleston Blvd., #1074, Las Vegas, NV 89117, USA. E-mail serafini@unlv.nevada.edu.

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