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Beyond teachers as researchers: Teachers as advocates

Publishers of children's books need to hear more frequently and more forcefully from teachers. Because teachers are on the front lines in daily contact with children, we know how children respond to different books. And these days, many teachers indicate that reactions to most new chapter books are grim. But sharing with other teachers what happened with a particular book makes for a limited audience since such sharing is often preaching to the choir. Particularly when change is needed, teachers need to speak for children. The case in point involves the publishers of children's chapter books and the kinds of chapter books they are presently selecting for publication.

A decade ago, **The New York Times** (Lawson, 1990, C1) commented on the growing numbers of children's fiction books that deal with divorce, remarriage, AIDS, drugs, and homosexuality. Real-life issues were not then new to children's literature. Subjects such as death, divorce, and homosexuality had appeared in a few available children's books more than two decades earlier. Today, however, children may receive a steady diet of books on different issues every time in their lives that something happens, such as the first day of school, the birth of a new sibling, or the death of a pet. Name any family problem, social issue, stressful experience or disease and you can find a book about it. Julie Cummins, Coordinator of Children's Services for the New York Public Library says, "Almost anything you see in newspapers shows up in

children's books in a very short time" (Lawson, 1990, C1).

For the past two years, I have served as a member of the International Reading Association's Book Award Committee. This Committee selects and awards a writer's first book. This past year the Chair sent the Committee members a list of disqualified books entitled "Children's Books That Didn't Make It". Here is a sampling of titles from the list.

- ✦ **The magic world inside the abandoned refrigerator**
- ✦ **Grandpa gets a casket**
- ✦ **The pop-up book of human anatomy**
- ✦ **You were an accident**
- ✦ **Why can't Mr. Fork, and Ms. Electrical Outlet be friends?**
- ✦ **That's it. I'm putting you up for adoption**
- ✦ **Dad's new wife Robert**
- ✦ **Strangers have the best candy**
- ✦ **The kids' guide to hitchhiking**
- ✦ **Your nightmares are real**

The Committee members were so overwhelmed by the heaviness of the themes in the submitted books they were reading that not one member realized that the Chair's list was supposed to be a joke. Clearly the Committee was losing its sense of reality!

And the Committee had reason to forget their sense of humor. Only one book, **Burger Wuss** by Matthew Anderson, presented a funny teen reality. In nearly three hundred other submissions, the stories presented were so depressingly focused that the books became overwhelming to the reader. For example, in **A Door Near Here** (1998), which won the Delacorte Prize for Best First Young Adult Novel, author Heather Quarles gives a nail-biting picture of life when the divorced mother of four children takes to bed and bottle after she loses her job. Their father has moved out and remarried, so it is up to Katherine, the eldest child at 15 years, to keep her brothers and sisters in clean clothes, in food, and in school. The four siblings cling to their secrets, terrified that an adult will see beneath the appearances they are trying desperately to uphold and alert Social Services. Katherine struggles valiantly but finally everything slips out of control when her 8-year-old sister runs away to find the door to the Kingdom of Narnia. Readers breathe a sigh of relief when finally the children are found out and helped. As a reader, I could feel my blood pressure

lower as the children's reality became manageable.

In addition to the plots of these books, the realistic descriptions in the prose add to the sharp focus of a grave reality. In **Dove Song** by Kristine Franklin (1999), the children's mother has always been delicate and moody. When Bobbie Lynn and Mason's father is shipped off to Vietnam and becomes MIA, their mother retreats to the bedroom and sinks into a deep depression. The sister and brother not only have to keep themselves clean, find food, and attend school, but they have to clean, feed, and babysit their mother. Ten-year-old Bobbie Lynn describes the extent of her mother's care.

When I peeked in on Mama ... the smell almost knocked me flat.

I held my breath and crept into the dark room. I fought the urge to retch. When I got to Mama's bedside I saw what had happened. Mama had thrown up in bed and no one had cleaned it up. I was already mad at Mason for not being home. Now my anger boiled inside me like a teakettle on the stove. Where was he? Mama seemed peaceful enough now. It was probably just a touch of the flu. Had she called for help? Where was Mason, anyway?

I was mad at myself too, not just Mason. How could I have thought Mama was doing better? and then, to be truthful, there was a tiny bit of mad I felt at Mama too. She was a grownup. How could she expect a couple of kids like me and Mason to take care of her every minute of the day? And why hadn't she gotten up to be sick? So far she'd been able to get up to go to the bathroom. She been able to smoke and rock for hours in her chair. Then I felt furious at myself for even thinking these things, and got busy cleaning things up. I was supposed to feel sorry for Mama, but the fact is, the sorry was mixed with too many other things to be pure sorry.

Cleaning up the mess was a real chore. Mama woke up when I started to pull the blankets off her, but she only stared off into space and didn't say a word. I had to change the sheets like I'd seen a nurse do on General Hospital, with Mama in the bed.

Luckily, Mama had missed her nightgown when she threw up, but then I thought about how she'd had that same nightgown on for days, how she hadn't had a bath or anything, and I realized she wasn't clean at all and she wasn't about to help herself.

“Mama?” I said right next to her head. She opened her eyes and looked at me but she didn’t know it was me. I could tell. “Do you want to put on a new nightgown?” I asked. She closed her eyes. All of a sudden, my legs felt too tired to hold me up. I knelt at the bedside and put my face on the clean sheets I’d just put on the mattress. They felt cool and smelled good, like laundry soap.

“Where have you gone, Mama?” I whispered. Didn’t she know she was breaking my heart? (pp. 141-142).

Children’s literature has presented single mothers and their children in positive ways. Recently, however, through emotional absence and neglect, the mothers that appear in chapter books are now presenting burdensome problems to their children. Granted there are mothers that cannot help their circumstances. For example, in **My Louisiana Sky** (Holt, 1998), the mother is mentally challenged. In **Saying It Out Loud** (Abelove, 1999), the mother is dying of a brain tumor. But then there are other mothers who make conscious choices. In **The Year of the Sawdust Man** (LaFaye, 1998) the mother leaves her daughter because she can not endure the confinement of marriage. In **The Shadow Spinner** (Fletcher, 1998), the mother cripples her daughter’s feet before she dies and orphans her daughter. With fathers already absent, and mothers now leaving their families emotionally, we must ask, “Who is raising the children?”. It appears that the children are trying to raise themselves and sacrificing their childhoods in the process.

The principal architect of our modern notion of childhood is the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It is he who first criticizes education for presenting materials to children from a uniquely adult perspective that reflects adult values and interests. He advocates a learning process that takes the child’s perceptions and stage of development into account. This idea of childhood as a distinct phase preceding adult life becomes intertwined with modern concepts of universal education and the small nuclear family during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The new society created by the Industrial Revolution requires smaller, more mobile families to go to cities where there may be work. While industrialization proceeds quickly, the cultural recognition of childhood as a discrete life phase is given strong social reinforcement with the establishment of child psychol-

ogy as a scientific discipline (Elkind, 1981, p. 4).

However, as early as 1981, David Elkind notes that the concept of childhood, which became so vital to the traditional way of life in America, is threatened with extinction. In 1999, Hymowitz argues in **Ready or Not: Why Treating Children as Small Adults Endangers Their Future-and Ours** that over the last 30 years adults have been undermining the traditional notion of childhood as a period of protection and apprenticeship when adults provide guidance to the young. From the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century, Americans embrace what she calls the doctrine of republican childhood which includes the encouragement of free play and the rejection of corporal punishment. This ideology gives way to the notion of the child as a naturally moral, rational, independent, self-motivated miniature adult whom adults teach only what the child wants to know. At the same time, adults define themselves as children’s allies, partners, and friends, whose duty is to empower children. We have moved from seeing children as miniature adults, to seeing them as children, to seeing them once again as miniature adults.

Elkind argues that parents under stress want to see their children as miniature adults because then the children are easier to deal with or because the adults do not want to deal with the children at all. He says, “Parents who go to work ... are under more stress today than at any time since the Great Depression” (1981, p. 29), and adults under stress are self-centered. They put their own needs ahead of their children’s needs, and lack the energy to deal with issues apart from themselves. They have trouble seeing others as individuals and see their own children as stereotypes. To see children as miniature adults may be easier on the parents but this vision is definitely not easier on the children. When the expectations for children become unreasonable at any stage of development, emotional abuse can occur (Elkind, 1981, p. 185).

So does literature help children handle the problems and stress evident in parts of contemporary American society? Yes, we know bibliotherapy can help. However, if literature mirrors life, then many recent books present to children frightening realities full face. Dan Hade in an NCTE address talks about four paths that explore in literature the richness, mysteriousness and sacredness of all life. His second or negative path, “... is the path of pain and suffering, of silence and of emptying. This path is about letting go and letting be. It is about daring

the dark and going into the shadow side of life” (Hade, 1999, pp. 6-7). Instead of the grim realities that Katherine and Bobbie Lynn face, he recommends dealing with loss through death in the relationship between Wilbur and Charlotte or dealing with separation from parents with Sylvester. Agreeing with Hade, Betsy Hearne, Professor of Children’s Literature at the University of Chicago says, “It is not always helpful to hit a child in the face with a problem. Sometimes fantasy is the best way of dealing with reality” (Lawson, 1990, C1).

If bookstores these days are out of the what they call “the titanic of book publishing” or the Harry Potter books, they comfort their readers with Dorothy in **The Wonderful Wizard of Oz**, **The Book of Three**, and **The Chronicles of Narnia**, and Brian Jacques’ Redwall fantasy series (Carvajal, 2000, A1). Interestingly, since the three published Harry Potter books appeared on the **New York Times** Bestseller List, more adults have been buying Harry Potter books as well as the other fantasy series. When publishers interview adult readers about these books, they respond that in addition to detail and scenery in the books, there is a lot of spectacular imagination. Does their reaction mean that a spark has been missing in the reading lives of both children AND adults?

Reality-based stories may give readers their own reality back to them, but the stories are too close to what is real. The characters are too often victims. They must wait for adults to save them. Such contexts unnerve readers of any age with their dreariness and despair. In fantasy, readers are empowered and assured that they can overcome obstacles. While the obstacles faced may resemble their own, the obstacles appear in contexts different from their own. This distance makes readers feel safe while dealing with the obstacles. In **The Uses of Enchantment**, Bettelheim (1977) proposes that children live with greater terrors than most adults can understand and fairy tales provide uncanny outlets for that terror. Struggles against severe difficulties in life are unavoidable. Such struggles are intrinsic parts of human existence. If one does not shy away but steadfastly meets the unexpected and unjust hardships, one can emerge victorious.

Teachers do not need to shy away from books that deal with problems. The tough tales that readers remember are often survivor literature where outsiders play a central role (Lipson, 2000, p. B7).

However, we do need to think about how the books present the problems. Fantasy-based stories give readers hope ... hope to keep on living and hope to keep on reading. If we want readers for life, that is, not only lifelong readers of books but also readers who learn to cope with their lives through books, then let us remember to provide hope in the books that we provide for children.

Clearly, teachers need to be giving publishers feedback that more hope ... and more humor ... are sorely needed in the newest books they are publishing. We can be a strong lobby. Shouldn’t we be more demanding consumers? Our students are an open market.

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