

Outrageous Viewpoints: Teachers' Criteria for Rejecting Works of Children's Literature

JULIE E. WOLLMAN-BONILLA

This article discusses pre- and inservice teachers' attitudes and beliefs about children's literature that presents non-mainstream values and experiences. By exploring what teachers explicitly label as inappropriate for classroom use and why they do so, Wollman-Bonilla directly identifies teachers' criteria for rejection of literature and describes how these criteria are consciously applied.

When I was in my third year of teaching, a position opened up in my school that allowed me to move from second to sixth grade. As part of my interview I had to teach a social studies lesson to a sixth-grade class. I chose to teach a lesson focusing on racial discrimination, using Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976). I read aloud a powerful section in which the young, Black, female narrator experienced a brutal, humiliating verbal assault, and followed the reading with an open-ended discussion of the text. I used newspaper articles to make the bridge to current racial discrimination. I judged the lesson successful—students were engaged and many offered thoughtful, sensitive reactions to the book, the articles, and peers' comments.

287

Afterward, the principal told me he was impressed with my courage in reading aloud from Taylor's (1976) powerful and honest book. This surprised me; I hadn't considered my choice courageous. I was simply trying to help the predominantly White sixth-graders recognize and think critically about racism.

Nine years later, I read the same book aloud to a group of students in my graduate class on teaching language arts. When I asked them to respond to what I had read, the first comment was: "Of course, you'd never read this book in a classroom of children." This sort of comment, indicating a desire to avoid addressing sociocultural differences and discrimination has lately become much more common in my classes. As teachers carry out the work of selecting texts for classroom use, many seem to lack the courage to present non-mainstream perspectives and experiences, and they lack faith in children's ability to recognize and handle difficult issues.

TEACHERS' TEXT SELECTION

Every children's book reflects a sociocultural perspective—a set of values and beliefs (Jipson & Paley, 1991; Luke, Cooke & Luke, 1986). Further, most texts used in classrooms express the dominant values in a society; mainstream, middle-class values in the U.S. (Bacon, 1988). It may be difficult for us to recognize the perspective that underlies a text when that perspective is our own—it seems natural, it does not call attention to itself. Consider that educators regularly designate books "multicultural" if they represent other cultures,

whereas books reflecting a Eurocentric perspective are viewed as normative.

If every book reflects a set of values and beliefs, in choosing books for classroom use, teachers inevitably select certain perspectives for presentation (Luke, Cooke & Luke, 1986; Taxel, 1981). Current studies reveal that they tend *not* to select books that focus on women, on racial and ethnic groups other than Whites of European descent, or on those who are socioeconomically marginalized (Jipson & Paley, 1991; Luke, Cooke & Luke, 1986).

288

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Teachers are usually unaware of their own biases in text selection, and not conscious of the values, attitudes, and beliefs texts convey (Jipson & Paley, 1991; Luke, Cooke & Luke, 1986). Textbook selection policies and curriculum requirements may reinforce this tendency not to reflect on the biases inherent in required or suggested books, as teachers are expected to defer to local and state “authority” (Apple, 1983, 1993; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Shor, 1986). Censorship debates also discourage teachers from deciding to use books which counter mainstream bias (Lehr, 1995; Simmons, 1994). On the other hand, some teachers select texts precisely because they include non-mainstream values, beliefs, and experiences, and may promote sensitivity to others and help children deal with reality (Rasinski & Gillespie, 1992; Sullivan, 1987). Different text selection patterns are related to whether teachers (and those who would define teachers’ work) view their role as maintaining the status quo or empowering children to recognize, question, and act against social inequality and injustice (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1988; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1985; McLaren, 1994; Shor, 1986).

Why Another Look at Teacher Bias in Text Selection?

Existing studies of teachers’ values and beliefs related to literature for classroom use describe what teachers feel is *appropriate* (Jipson & Paley, 1991; Luke, Cooke & Luke, 1986), making assumptions about their “biases” based on their text selection. This article explores what teachers explicitly label as inappropriate for classroom use and why, thus *directly* identifying teachers’ criteria for rejection. Their comments,

discussed below, reveal how they envision using literature in their classrooms.

The Teachers

I teach two courses on language arts for elementary teachers at Rhode Island College, in the city of Providence. One course is for pre-service teachers, nearly all of whom are undergraduates. The other is designed for graduate students, most of whom are employed as full-time or substitute teachers. Almost all are from working-class and middle-class backgrounds. The great majority are White females and, usually, all of the students in a class section are of European heritage. Sometimes there is one African American, Latino, or Southeast Asian among the 20 to 25 students per section. In the discussion below, unless otherwise indicated, all comments come from female White students because other groups are so under-represented in my classes. Like most of my students, I am a middle-class, White female of European descent.

Inviting Response to Literature

I open my classes by reading aloud a children’s book and inviting my students to respond to the reading. I read aloud in order to introduce students to notable children’s books, stimulate discussion of how children’s literature might be used in the classroom, encourage teachers to examine their own values and beliefs related to children’s literature, and model techniques for reading aloud and facilitating discussion. Often, I read a picture book—primarily fiction, but sometimes nonfiction. Sometimes I read a selection from a novel or a poetry collection. I select texts that I find powerful, moving, and thought-provoking, texts that made me laugh aloud or cry when I first read them. Some of them deal with human and social issues I feel children need to think and talk about. All of the texts I read were created for children and were critically acclaimed. I only read texts that I consider to be appropriate for classroom use and rich in possibilities for teaching and learning. I have previously read each one to elementary students.

EXPLORING TEACHERS’ RESPONSES

Several years ago, I noted that many of my students were no longer responding positively to the texts I read as materials for classroom use. Fifteen to twenty percent of the students in each class section were regularly voicing objections to their use. Although fifteen to twenty percent may seem small, it becomes a very significant number when one considers how many children these teachers work with, or will work with, each year.

Intrigued and concerned by what was happening, for six consecutive semesters, I systematically wrote down students’

objections to the texts I read, and took notes on the discussions that followed. With permission, I also kept copies of all their written objections to texts, as well as written comments on the discussions and classmates' perspectives, which some chose to include in their reflection journals. I then read all the responses a number of times, looking for patterns in the types of objections being shared by pre-service and in-service teachers alike. These patterns formed criteria for text rejection and I categorized all of the oral and written comments according to the three general criteria which I had culled from reading them.

Criteria for Text Rejection

The texts I read regularly to my classes are listed in Table 1. They are separated into two sections—those which a segment of my teacher education students have asserted are inappropriate for use at any elementary grade level, and those which my students regularly accept for classroom use. For readers unfamiliar with the texts, defining characteristics of each text are listed under “Topic or Theme.” As Table 1 shows, teachers commonly objected to texts that reflect gender, ethnic, race, or class perspectives or experiences that differed from their own (*Bridge to Terabithia*, Paterson, 1977, being the only exception). The reasons they conclude that certain texts are inappropriate for children fall into three major categories:

1. The belief that a text is inappropriate for children because it might frighten or corrupt them by introducing them to things they don't or shouldn't know about;
2. the belief that a text is inappropriate for children because it fails to represent dominant social values or myths;
3. the belief that a text is inappropriate for children because it identifies racism or sexism as a social problem.

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I have selected typical objections as examples of each category.

Texts Which Frighten or Corrupt

The teachers in my classes frequently argue that a text is inappropriate for children if the information or perspective(s) presented might, in their opinion, frighten children or introduce

Table 1. Texts Read Aloud Regularly

Title	Topic or Theme
<i>Texts Regularly Rejected</i>	
Amazing Grace (Hoffman, 1991)	Overcoming racism and sexism
Bridge to Terabithia (Paterson, 1977)	Friendship, death
Fly Away Home (Bunting, 1991)	Homelessness, hope
Honey, I Love and Other Love Poems (Greenfield, 1978)	Child's experiences in Black community, Black history
Nettie's Trip South (Turner, 1987)	The injustice of slavery, racism
The Paper Bag Princess (Munsch, 1980)	Gender stereotypes challenged
Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (Taylor, 1976)	Racism, Black history
Smoky Night (Bunting, 1994)	Urban violence, racism
Tar Beach (Ringgold, 1991)	Urban life, overcoming poverty and racism
William's Doll (Zolotow, 1972)	Gender stereotypes challenged
<i>Texts Regularly Accepted</i>	
Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs (Barrett, 1978)	Weather and food fantasy
The Frog Prince Continued (Scieszka, 1991)	Fairy tale spoof
The Lorax (Dr. Seuss, 1971)	Environmental responsibility
Love You Forever (Munsch, 1986)	Parent-child bond
Owl Moon (Yolen, 1987)	Appreciation for nature, family rituals
Roxaboxen (McLerran, 1991)	Imaginary play, passage of time
Song and Dance Man (Ackerman, 1988)	Children's relationship with grandfather
The Relatives Came (Rylant, 1985)	Relatives visit
Volcano (Lauber, 1986)	Volcanic eruptions
Wilfred, Gordon, McDonald Partridge (Fox, 1984)	Child's relationship with elderly, memory

them to realities they don't or shouldn't know about. For example, reacting to *Fly Away Home* (Bunting, 1991), one teacher said: "Why do we have to introduce them to homelessness? I want to protect them from topics like that. I'd never read this to children." Another commented: "Maybe for inner-city kids this would be okay, but why should other children have to think about homelessness?" Other common reactions to *Fly Away Home* include: "This book will frighten children. They might be afraid that they will become homeless." And: "It's too scary for children. They'll worry about losing their homes." And a general concern: "This book evokes grief and fear for children."

290

Fear of frightening and saddening children is also frequently stated as a reason not to use *Bridge to Terabithia* (Paterson, 1977). Teachers argue that it is wrong to make children think about death. In the same vein, objecting to *Smoky Night* (Bunting, 1994), several teachers have said: "I don't think they need to think about riots." And: "Riots aren't part of their experience." Teachers also worry: "It's too scary and creepy for children." These objections are questionable in light of considerable evidence that individual readers respond to texts according to their own experience and sociocultural background (Bleich, 1978; Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1978), and that children's reactions may not be what adults expect (Galda, 1982, 1990; Golden, 1987; Hepler & Hickman, 1982; Wollman-Bonilla & Werchadlo, 1995). For example, I have heard several different groups of primary grade children envy the homeless boy in *Fly Away Home* (Bunting, 1991) because his father spends so much time with him, he lives in the exciting environment of an airport, and he eats doughnuts for breakfast.

Teachers' reactions to *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976) suggest that discrimination, too, is foreign to children and, therefore, should be kept from them. As one teacher put it: "I don't like books that describe racism and discrimination. It's a negative message. I don't want children to know that this could happen. It's so cruel." Concerns like this are also sometimes voiced in reaction to *Nettie's Trip South* (Turner, 1987) which is viewed as portraying a world that is too cruel. Further, *Nettie's Trip South* and some of the poems in *Honey, I Love and Other Love Poems* (Greenfield, 1978) have been faulted for "supplying a vague sense of guilt" to White children.

These comments suggest that historical and contemporary social problems are unknown to children, or that, even if children are aware of unpleasant realities, these are not appropriate topics in the classroom. As one teacher wrote:

I believe that morose and frightening topics for children at the elementary level are poor choices. Yes, that's the real world. But I believe that children need much protection from the real world in school, *not* a reflection of it.

Such comments assume that it is more frightening for children to examine and discuss realities they may be aware of and wonder about privately, than it is to avoid mention of these topics. In fact, one teacher argued it was abusive to read

books dealing with such topics even if they are, as she openly recognized, central to children's out-of-school lives. She wrote: "I believe that we are unwisely molesting children when we present moribund, fearsome topics." Perhaps, however, teachers prefer not to raise these topics precisely because they recognize that they *are* a part of many children's lives. Opening up such topics might invite the voices of non-mainstream students into discussions and result in children challenging the status quo.

Rejecting texts because they might frighten or corrupt children implies that school should be kept separate from society, rather than be a place where children are taught to act responsibly and equitably within their world. This stance, ostensibly based on protecting children, is part of a growing movement to censor and control teachers' work (Foerstel, 1994; Lehr, 1995; Shor, 1986; Simmons, 1994; Zuckerman, 1986).

Texts Which Fail to Represent Dominant Social Values

Teachers' second criterion for text rejection is failure to represent what they see as dominant social values. Even when they recognize that these values are myths (e.g. anyone who is willing to work hard can get a job), teachers fear that challenging them might threaten the myths' power to contain social resistance and maintain the superiority of mainstream ways. Such objections are related to current debates about the literary canon, which some argue should transmit the superior values of Western Civilization (Bennett, 1984; Bloom, 1987; Hirsch, 1987), despite the fact that many great works of literature upset these values and their power stems from their invitation to question taken-for-granted beliefs (Greene, 1986).

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Reactions to *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman, 1991) reflect teachers' discomfort with non-traditional families and non-mainstream cultures. Commenting on the grandmother's occasional use of a nonstandard dialect, one teacher said: "I wouldn't read this book because it models improper English." Others agree, and have added comments such as: "This book will reinforce stereotypes because it's about a broken family and the grandmother speaks nonstandard English."

The term “broken” has been used by several teachers to describe what the text depicts as a close, warm, supportive family made up of Grace, her mother and grandmother. I find it interesting that, rather than viewing this text as an honest and positive representation of many families’ lives, some of my students label it as stereotyping because it shows that not everyone is like “us,” and actually celebrates a different way of living, as if that were acceptable.

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Similar beliefs are voiced in reaction to *Honey, I Love and Other Love Poems* by Eloise Greenfield (1978). Teachers fear that realistically representing linguistic diversity suggests over-tolerance of differences they would prefer did not exist. As one said:

I worry that the poems written in nonstandard dialect would reinforce bad speaking habits. I know we’re supposed to accept how students talk, but we don’t have to reinforce it or model it. If it’s in a book, that makes it seem okay.

It is important to recognize that these critics do not reject books that make it seem “okay” to believe in food falling from the sky (*Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*, Barrett, 1978), or in the idea that a small character will pop out of a tree to be our environmental conscience, as in *The Lorax* (Dr. Seuss, 1971). Rather, their objections betray teachers’ fear that addressing social differences may upset dominant myths that benefit them.

Reactions to other texts suggest that teachers are disturbed by books which represent families struggling for financial security. As one commented: “I really hated *Tar Beach* (Ringgold, 1991). What an awful book. It is so negative and depressing. I saw nothing valuable in it.” Another said: “I didn’t like the way the child had to worry about money and watch her mother cry.” Teachers have reacted in the same way to *Fly Away Home* (Bunting, 1991), arguing it is inappropriate for a child to worry about what should have been the father’s concern. Further, teachers have argued that *Tar Beach* (Ringgold, 1991) is inappropriate because it challenges the ideal of hard work as a key to success and happiness: “This book makes it seem to children that it’s easy to get what you want. You don’t have to work, you just fly over it. It’s not honest.” This is a curious objection from teachers who themselves seek to present a dishonest picture of our society.

Although my teacher education students do recognize that many children live in what they view as non-traditional and

non-mainstream families and communities, and that financial insecurity is part of many children’s everyday experiences, even though their parents work hard or are eager to do so, this reality challenges the “ideal” some wish to promote in school. These teachers view texts as a way to promote mainstream norms, revealing a notion of reading as soaking up a text’s meaning and values (Bloom, 1987; Hirsch, 1987). Teachers who hold this view may not teach reading as a critical thinking process, view children as thinkers, or recognize that readers construct meaning out of their sociocultural background and experiences (Goodman, 1984; McLaren, 1988; Smith, 1982, 1988). In short, their teaching may contradict a large body of research on reading, cognition, and sociocultural diversity.

Texts that Identify Racism and Sexism as Social Problems

The teachers in my classes also object to texts for classroom use if they call attention to racism and sexism as social problems. For example, reacting to *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1980), a male teacher said: “A terrible story. The young lady in the story was so aggressive and rude and tricky. I don’t want girls to think this is acceptable behavior.” Others (all males) have also been disturbed by the reversal of traditional gender roles, as the heroine princess cleverly outwits a dragon and saves the prince (whom she then rejects as too shallow to marry).

William’s Doll (Zolotow, 1972) evokes similar reactions against challenging gender stereotypes from both males and females. Many teachers have made comments similar to this assertion: “I would never let my son play with a doll.” And one male, Southeast Asian student said: “I wouldn’t read that book because it could create controversy and misunderstanding about appropriate ways for boys and girls to act.” Books that celebrate the reversal of traditional gender roles and portray sexists as losers, imply that sexism is a systemic social problem which needs to be overcome (Luke & Gore, 1992). Naturally, this implication disturbs male and female readers who believe that traditional gender roles are natural and appropriate.

Books like *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976) introduce racism as an abhorrent social problem. Typical comments about this book include: “I would never use a book in my classroom that talked about race like this. We’re all the same. We shouldn’t be pointing out racial differences.” And: “Reading it would make children think I feel like the White people in the book. I don’t want them to think I use the word ‘nigger.’” Another teacher commented: “I would never use this book if I had Black students in my class. We should treat everyone the same.” And one said: “If I had to use this book I would change some of the words to make it less racist.” Commenting on *Nettie’s Trip South* (Turner, 1987), some teachers have said that Nettie’s wondering about what Black

people are missing (since they are three-fifths of a person in the Constitution) inappropriately suggests that Blacks are viewed as deficient by society.

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292

Books that call attention to race often depict the reality of racism as an ongoing socio-political practice, not simply a problem rooted in a few bad individuals (Freire & Macedo, 1995). Unless we identify racism as a systemic problem, it is easily ignored by teachers who seem to believe that if they don't manifest or discuss racism it will go away. In fact, many of my students argue that it is gone—"we're not like that anymore." They often assert that openly recognizing a person's race is "labeling." When naming of differences is viewed not as a foundation for appreciating them and for making discriminatory social practices visible, but as an example of individuals stereotyping others, teachers participate in maintaining the status quo in which systemic racism and sexism are embedded.

TEACHERS' AWARENESS OF THEIR OWN CRITERIA

The research literature indicates that teachers' biases in text selection are largely unconscious and unexamined (Jipson & Paley, 1991; Luke, Cooke & Luke, 1986). However, my experience suggests that teachers are quite conscious of their criteria for text rejection, at least when class discussion brings their own beliefs to the fore. Further, researchers suggest that if teachers are encouraged to think critically about their selection criteria they may be surprised at their own biases and overcome them (Jipson & Paley, 1991). The teachers described in this article are well aware of their criteria, are aware that many disagree, and regularly hear contrasting perspectives articulately argued by their classmates, but this does not seem to weaken their beliefs. As one teacher wrote: "I'm not surprised that many others in class thought these very topics were beneficial. I just disagree and feel that we adults need to take responsibility for children." In fact, I suspect that such conscious objections are not as recent a phenomenon as I first thought. They may always have been lurking beneath the surface of class discussions, but are more safely voiced in our neo-conservative political climate.

It seems that encouraging teachers to use texts that represent non-mainstream perspectives is a significantly more complex process than mere consciousness-raising. Under-

standing how changes in beliefs might occur would involve exploring not only teachers' statements after reading, but also how their thought processes evolve over time and through their experience as students, teachers, and people living in a particular sociopolitical context. A first step might be to demonstrate for teachers how groups of children *actually* respond to rejected texts, revealing that criteria for rejection may lack grounding in classroom reality. For example, I have seen children find it liberating, not distressing, to talk about their experiences with gender, racial, and religious discrimination in response to a book. I have also seen them laugh at the absurdity of the three-fifths provision mentioned in *Nettie's Trip South* (Turner, 1987), rather than accepting this premise as fact. Such evidence may be necessary to successfully challenge teachers' criteria for rejection.

Who Decides What Is Best for Children?

It is important to recognize that all of the teachers in my classes express a desire to do what is best for children, although they differ on what that means. Criteria for rejection, discussed above, are all based on *protecting* children from fear and from exposure to the "wrong" values. A common sentiment, from one teacher's journal, is that good children's books are not always good for children: "I personally enjoyed this book but I believe it's wrong to present this topic to children." This, of course, raises the question: Who decides what is best for whose children?

The majority of my teacher education students believes that denial creates fear and social irresponsibility. One teacher said: "Frightening things happen to children all of the time. Reading a book like this lets them see that it's okay to talk or write about them." Similarly, teachers have argued: "These things are there. We can't ignore them and the more we do ignore them we do a disservice to children. They need to talk about these things with adults."

Others argue that books dealing with contemporary issues like violence and discrimination are needed because "children are becoming immune to [these topics] and need to be forced to face and think about them lest they accept them." Further, some teachers argue that if the next generation is going to improve society, future adults must be aware of its problems. One wrote:

Students today are in a rough world. They also will have the opportunity to change it or deal with it better if we create situations for them to reflect on topics and think critically. Ignorance is not healthy for either individuals or human beings as a whole.

These teachers, like many others, see their work as helping children appreciate and actively support diversity, understand and deal with the reality they face outside of school, and act to challenge social inequity (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1988; Giroux, 1997; McLaren, 1988).

Others, however, say that the expectation that they will change social problems is an unfair burden to place upon children. As one teacher wrote:

[We must not] force responsibility on them that is neither truly theirs (but ours) nor within their ability to handle well. We're contributing to suicide, depression, young pregnancy, truancy, etc . . . among our young this way.

Even those who have argued that literature addressing social problems and sociocultural diversity should be used by elementary teachers have labeled these “adult issues” not appropriate for children in an ideal world. As one teacher wrote: “Children in the 90s are bombarded with so many dilemmas that many people may think are on an adult level. This may be true, but the 90s is not the age of innocence.” Another strong proponent of the controversial texts agreed: “While we would like to *protect* children, I believe the best way to do that in *today's* world is to make them aware and discuss their feelings in a “safe” environment [the classroom].”

Although the majority of teachers approve of literature representing non-mainstream experiences and values, a vocal minority may have a major impact on teachers' work through standardized curricula, censorship efforts, and threatening attacks on individual teachers (Foerstel, 1994; Hansen, 1987; Simmons, 1994; Shor, 1986). Many teachers I work with say they are afraid to use potentially controversial texts.

Diverse Reactions and Classroom Discussion

I view my college classroom discussions not only as an opportunity to hear diverse viewpoints and learn from each other, but also as a time for me to model how a teacher can facilitate discussion of personal responses. As discussion leader, I try to welcome all reactions and to invite counterreactions (e.g. “Does anyone feel differently?” or “I suspect there are other perspectives on this,”) so that all voices are heard and the diversity of responses to a single text is grappled with in class. I also discuss with my students the importance of recognizing and appreciating children's diverse (sometimes unexpected) reactions to books. We talk, in particular, about response as a personal and a sociocultural phenomenon (Bleich, 1978; Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1978). I want teachers to understand that *their* reactions are not the only ones, but I find that they often become annoyed with each other's perspectives. Their comments range from: “I found it *interesting* that others in the class felt strongly about certain books. It is not our responsibility to hide scary topics from our students,” to the more vehement: “I do, on occasion, have a hard time with classmates' outrageous viewpoints.” While I do not seek consensus, I do value willingness to listen to others' reactions, and fear that teachers' difficulty with this indicates that they may not accept many of *their* students' responses to books. Further, it is important to recognize that refusal to try to understand others' perspectives is characteristic not only of ob-

jectors, but also by those who support the use of controversial texts. Yet without taking others' objections seriously and seeking to understand their sociopolitical roots, teachers may fail to ward off censorship.

An even more basic concern is whether or not teachers allow discussion of books. The majority of my teacher education students assume that books read aloud in an elementary classroom are simply read and put down as children move on to other activities. Literature can be a powerful force in stimulating discussion about important issues and feelings (see Rasinski & Gillespie, 1992), and many books can frighten children if there is no opportunity for discussion (including non-controversial books about such common childhood fears as monsters under the bed). But it seems teachers often do not include discussion in their plans. One of my students, who noticed this phenomenon, wrote: “People actually thought that these books might be read and not discussed!” Not only do many teachers seem unaware or unconvinced of the value of discussion, but they may also resist discussion of certain books because they see topics such as racism, gender discrimination, and class inequality as unsafe topics to talk about with children. They feel unprepared to lead such discussions and fear the repercussions.

CONCLUSION

Teachers' criteria for rejecting texts that present non-mainstream perspectives, experiences, and values raise some important questions. A first question is: How are children actually affected by the controversial texts? A recent *New York Times Magazine* issue focusing on “Childhood in America” states:

Many adults champion the cause of children for their own reasons, sometimes in sharply conflicting ways even though all profess the same noble motives . . . In short, adults of every interest claim to speak for children, even when they fail to grasp what it's like to be a child. (“For the Sake,” 1995, p. 51)

All of the claims made by the teachers in my classes either in support of the controversial texts or against them assume a knowledge of what is best for children. Further, reasons for selecting or rejecting texts are nearly always expressed in language indicating certainty, such as, “Children will . . .” or “This book would . . .,” rather than “I wonder if children . . .” or “This book *might* . . .” This is true despite the fact that these teachers have no evidence to support their claims.

It seems to me that we are assuming too much. If we are to know how books actually affect children we need to hear *children's* voices and understand *their* experiences before, during, and after reading. Studies of the actual impact on children in real classrooms might begin to answer some of the following questions: Does reading about different perspectives or experiences help to make children more tolerant

or sensitive towards others? Does it help them envision and think about how to create a more equitable world? Does it worry or frighten them to read about social problems or inequities? How are these texts actually used and discussed in classrooms? And how does the teacher's approach to controversial literature (and willingness to discuss difficult or unpleasant realities) affect what children take from texts?

Another question is: What should a teacher's role be in selecting and using texts in the classroom? I view that role as teaching appreciation for diversity, as well as working for freedom and equity by challenging discriminatory and restrictive social practices. We must try to understand diverse reactions, but also to give careful consideration to their sociopolitical implications. If we appreciate how others' perspectives might affect society, we can make informed, thoughtful decisions about text selection. Indeed, some teachers' views seem to support inequity, but we cannot promote ethical, socially-conscious classroom practice by ignoring them. The fundamental issue is not creating consensus or changing individual minds (Fine, 1993). Rather, it is who will shape our schools?

A final question is: What can teacher educators do to help teachers appreciate diversity, recognize ongoing social problems, reflect on their criteria for text rejection (and question the basis for their claims), and hear, understand and work with students' diverse perspectives in their own classrooms to promote learning and social responsibility? I think we have to begin by questioning our own practice, both text and subtext. I, for example, have failed to look systematically at how I react to my students' rejection of books. We have to ask ourselves: What exactly do we want to model when we encounter our students' "outrageous viewpoints" and are we doing it? I hope we have the courage to ask difficult questions and to search for answers. ●

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Julie Wollman-Bonilla is an Associate Professor at Rhode Island College, where she teaches courses on language and literacy learning and teaching.

NCTE ANNOUNCES SCHOLARSHIP

The NCTE Executive Director's Office invites high school seniors throughout the United States and U.S. territories abroad to apply for the Executive Director's Challenge, a one-year scholarship for students who plan careers in teaching elementary or secondary English. Two scholarship recipients will receive \$1,000 to support their studies in the first year of college.

Each applicant must submit an essay, no more than 500 words in length, that addresses the following questions: What are the qualities of good teaching that you hope to develop in your own classroom? In what ways do good teachers influence young learners and why do you want to have that influence?

Essays should be typed and double-spaced, and should include at the top of the page the applicant's name, home address and telephone number, school name, and school address. Each application must be accompanied by a letter of recommendation from a current NCTE member. Deadline for application is May 15, 1998. Send applications to Faith Schullstrom, Executive Director, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL, 61801-1096.