Examining Images of Family in Commercial Reading Programs

Judith Dunkerly
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Frank Serafini
Arizona State University

ARTICLE

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Judith Dunkerly, M.Ed., Doctoral Student,University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Dr. Frank Serafini, Ph.D.,Arizona State University

In school, as in their daily lives, children are confronted by images, written texts and combinations of these two modes of communication. Fleckenstein (2002) writes, "… a continuous stream of images marks our waking and sleeping lives" (p. 3). The visual images that are presented in the texts we read affect how we understand the world, ourselves, and the experiences of others. However, the images presented are not neutral, objective representations of an external reality; rather, they are politically and culturally constructed representations that often support the hegemony of dominant cultures while, intentionally or not, marginalizing particular disenfranchised ethnicities, genders, social classes and races.

Selections of children's literature included in commercial reading programs or basal anthologies, like other visual and written artifacts, are often used to portray particular aspects of reality and the human condition. Students come to view the images contained in these anthologies as the way things are; an inevitable or unchangeable part of their social reality (Lewis, 1987). Allen (1997) contends, "…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).

Salomon (1997) states:

> Media's symbolic forms of representation are clearly not neutral or indifferent packages that have no effect on the represented information. They influence the meanings one arrives at, the mental capacities called for, and the way one comes to view the world. Perhaps more important, the culture that creates the media and develops the symbolic forms of representation also opens the door for those forms to act on the minds of the young in both more or less desirable ways. (p. 13)

In addition, Luke and Grieshaber (2004) argue that while individual and collective literacy may not be the single most important component of political, social, and economic relationships of power, children's introductions to literacy are defining moments in the shaping of the cultural capital that will in turn shape children's perceptions and relations with and in society at large. The images our students confront affect who they become, how they understand the world, and their understandings of others. In particular, when we teach reading we teach relationships of authority: of what texts can be criticized, where they are fallible, where they can be questioned, when, by whom, and under which auspices (Luke, 1995).

In light of current national educational policy and mandates, the variety of materials that teachers are permitted to use grows ever narrower in scope: Most school districts are limited due to federal funding to choosing texts from their state's pre-approved list of "scientifically researched based" publishers and reading series (Allington, 2002). *Reading First*, the current federally mandated program for funding and supporting underperforming schools and "children-at-risk," supports the adoption of specific reading programs meeting their criteria to be purchased with federal monies. These "sanctioned" programs must meet the requirement of being scientifically-based, and included on a state's list of approved reading programs (Garan, 2002). Currently, *Reading First* impacts over 100,000 teachers and 1.5 million students nationwide (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Shannon and Goodman (1994) call for a continuing analysis of the contents, images, and instructional materials

contained in mandated materials. This study was undertaken to address that on-going need.

The Purpose of the Study

The primary preoccupation of critical pedagogy is social injustice and how to transform inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions and social relations. It is from this position that we argue that the ubiquitous and oft considered innocuous basal anthology is a hegemonic device that perpetuates and indoctrinates students into a particular discourse that privileges the dominant culture while marginalizing and stereotypically portraying others.

Based on a theoretical foundation of critical theory and pedagogy (Comber, 2001; Freire, 1970; Gee, 1996; Morgan, 1997), this study is designed to examine the images of family presented in the basal anthologies of three prominent, extensively adopted commercial publishers. These anthologies were selected because they represent a significant percentage of the commercial reading texts adopted in states across the country, in particular one of the nation's largest school districts located in the southwestern part of the United States. Specifically, this study examined the portrayal of family in forty-six story selections from the three most commonly used basal anthologies for grades first through fourth.

Giroux's (1993, p. 373) question, "Whose history, story, and experience prevail in the school setting?" served as the touchstone question for this inquiry. Content analysis, incorporating both latent and manifest interpretations, was selected as a research methodology due to its highly interactive relationship between the researcher and the data, with the objective of interpreting and verifying the communication of meaning (Sandefur and Moore, 2004). While we acknowledge the debate regarding the limitations and subjectivity of latent interpretations (Berg, 2001), it would seem difficult, if not impossible, to analyze images without a certain degree of viewer subjectivity. Thus, we pay heed to Berg's advice to report the frequency in which a claimed observation occurs in order to bolster the claim.

We begin this article with a brief review of the literature regarding various images in children's literature. A discussion of the basal anthology as a social text, its ubiquitous nature in elementary reading instruction, and the visual images of family contained therein situates the study contextually, as does our citation of census data to demonstrate how images of family presented in the basal anthologies under review do not accurately reflect the family structures of the students in schools today, but rather are more closely aligned with the traditional family structure more than half a century old. Finally, we discuss how students may be positioned by such generalized portrayals and the political, cultural, social, and individual consequences of such positioning.

A Review of Research on Images

Studies have been conducted to investigate various images in children's literature, not necessarily those images contained in the aforementioned basal anthologies. For example, studies have focused on images of the classroom teacher (Barone, Meyerson, & Mallette, 1995; Burnaford, 1994), the negative images of schools and schooling (Greenaway, 1993), images of the principal in school settings (Radencich & Harrison, 1997) and teacher-student relationships (Triplett & Ash, 2000). Another study focused on the characters contained in young adult novels and their relationship to literacy and literacy development (Kuhlman & Lickteig, 1998).

While images of the family in various basal anthologies have not been specifically addressed in the existing literature, several related research studies focusing on images contained in texts for use in schools have been conducted. Sandefur and Moore (2004) examined the representations of teachers in

children's picture story books in an ethnographic analysis. They discovered that representations of teachers, students, literacy events, and schooling shaped the expectations and behaviors of both students and teachers.

Similarly, Serafini (2004) examined images of the reader and the process of reading in contemporary children's picture books. In this study, readers were portrayed in stereotypical ways, as was the act of reading. Serafini (2004) suggests these images have an impact on how children come to see what is expected of them as readers. If we are to consider the portrayals of teachers, students, and schooling from a critical perspective, then we must consider the images presented, the frequency of particular representations, which images and groups are marginalized, and the possible ramifications of such portrayals.

The Impact of Images in Children's Literature

Books are often a primary source for the presentation of societal values to the young child (Arbuthnot, 1984). As the literature of a culture reflects the values of the dominant discourse, children's literature can be used as tools for enculturation and socialization (Gooden & Gooden, 2001). Various studies have been conducted to examine the impact that images have on children's beliefs about race, gender and their own place and value in society. Pardeck & Markward (1995) stated that the illustrations contained within picture books constitute a powerful and pervasive means of communicating whether diverse groups of people are integral and important to the society; destructive and harmful; or invisible and unimportant. Similarly, Derman-Sparks (1989) found that children notice race as early as age two. They further contend that by age three, children show signs of being influenced by societal norms and biases, and may even begin to experience and express prejudice towards others based upon gender, appearance, and disability.

Narahara (1998) examined the manner in which gender stereotypes affect how children perceive themselves and the influence that negative portrayals have on identity and self-esteem. As young children are developing their gender identities, the images contained in children's literature may teach or add to preconceived notions about gender roles. Kortenhaus and Demarest (1993) offer additional support to our argument by affirming that exposure to oversimplified stereotypes affects a child's self-concept, expectations for behavior and interaction with peers and adults. While there appears to be a gap in the research regarding the impact of family images *per se* on children, the research that has been done in areas such as race and gender does indicate that literature plays an important role in the formation of children's perceptions, beliefs and attitudes.

Basal Anthologies as Social Texts

While it would be tempting to lay the entire responsibility or blame for the bias inherent in basal anthologies at the doorstep of the textbook publishers or influential political groups (e.g., the religious right), it would also be overly simplistic and naïve. A hegemonic societal structure is rarely imposed entirely from without; rather it is the parcel and product of accepted belief systems and practices. Thus what counts as the official knowledge contained within commercial reading programs is not the work of specific groups "out to get" others; rather, it is a cultural artifact that is reconstituted on an on-going basis by the actions we take and the decisions we make in our own local areas of life (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991).

Whether we consciously advocate a particular view of what constitutes a family or not, the literature that we choose to share with our students speaks louder than our words in making visible our attitudes and beliefs. Reading is not simply an abstract skill, but a social action which occurs in specific social settings (McKormick, 1995). As such, our classrooms are not merely places to facilitate the learning of

discrete reading skills; they are the forums through which conscious and subliminal societal norms and values are demonstrated, endorsed, and transmitted to our students. With that in mind, the books that we select to read and share, and the materials provided by school districts deserve to be closely scrutinized for the overt and covert messages they convey to our students (Sutherland, 1985).

The Changing Nature of the Family

The definition of what constitutes a family, both statistically and in common parlance has undergone significant change in the United States over the past century. Using information obtained from the Unites States Population Reference Bureau's *Population Bulletin* (2000), in 1900, the average household had 4.8 people and the average dwelling contained 5.7 people, including boarders or live-in help. By the end of the century, the average number of people per household had dwindled to 2.6, with so few households having boarders or live-in help that the related statistic of persons per dwelling is no longer published.

Similarly, the terms *family* and *household* were used interchangeably until the middle of the 20th century, when the population began to shift from largely agricultural, interdependent family units to more urban-based units, where a number of unrelated people may share the same housing, yet lead largely independent lives. Thus, a household became defined as, "consisting of one or more persons sharing living quarters," while a family "consists of two or more persons living together related by birth, marriage, or adoption." In 1950, over 90 percent of households were considered families; now less than 70 percent of households are considered families.

The advent of women moving into the work force, an increase in the divorce rate, as well as the number of households headed by a single parent has also altered the traditional notion of family. In 1950, the most common family arrangement consisted of a married couple with one or more children under the age of eighteen, and more than one half of all families in the United States fit this profile. By 2000, only 23.5 percent of families were so identified. An increase in the proportion of single parents from 9 percent in 1960 to 28 percent in 2003 has also impacted the definition of a family unit. Moreover, *The American Community Survey* (Mather, Rivers, & Jacobsen, 2005) found that in large cities (defined as having populations over 250,000), the percentage of homes headed by a single female parent is as high as 50 percent (p. 16). As a result, the traditionally defined family, consisting of a working father and a stay-at-home mother raising two or more children, now accounts for only 7 percent of all U.S. households (Population Reference Bureau, 2000). For the purposes of this study, there is a growing dichotomy between the statistics on reported family structures and the family structures most commonly portrayed in reading selections contained in mandated basal anthologies.

Data Collection and Analysis

Because the primary concern for this study is the possible influence that images of family in mandated texts have on children, we want to examine the images in the anthologies required for use in the state under study, as well as the ones in wide national use. The state in which this study took place utilizes the following commercial series: *Harcourt Trophies*, *MacMillan-MacGraw Hill Reading*, and *Scott Foresman Reading*. Correspondence with a representative from the school district's administration indicated that the Harcourt Trophies series is used in 80 percent of the elementary schools, with the other two publishers making up the remaining 20 percent. Nationwide, these three commercial series comprise a similar market force. Specifically, we wanted to compare the following components of the reading selections contained in the selected anthologies, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and marital status to the most recent census data for the district and state in order to determine to what degree family statistics such as marital status, multigenerational care, and socio-economic status were reflected in mandated texts. These categories were selected from the state statistical census data

available for comparison. U.S. census data were also examined to look at the same data sets from a national perspective. U.S. Census data for the states from 2005 were obtained through the U.S. Census Bureau. Information regarding the school district's demographics was obtained from the district website.

After an initial review of the basal anthologies, we decided to limit the review to portrayals of family life in non-fiction, realistic fiction, and biographical selections within the selected anthologies. Genres such as science fiction and fantasy blur the distinction between the real and the fantastical, and therefore could not accurately portray a conventional definition of family. Given that we were interested in the illustrations as well as the text in these stories, we also limited the examination to those anthologies for grades first through fifth, where picture book selections and illustrated chapter book excerpts were included most regularly.

Forty-six selections from the three commercial reading programs under review met our criteria for inclusion. While not a large number of stories, they are inclusive of the selections meeting our criteria and depicting images of family. The selections were reviewed utilizing the following codes, based on content analysis of the texts as correlated with representative U.S. Census categories and figures regarding family units, gender and ethnicity.

Family Structures

While it would be almost impossible to define every feasible family structure, we felt that the following categories offered a working range of scenarios that were also represented in state and U.S. Census data. These scenarios were also subdivided by ethnicity, as described previously. If a given story depicted a married couple with children, we identified that structure as a *Traditional Family*. If a story showed a child or children with only a mother or father with no other caregiver, we identified that as a *Single-Parent Household*. Grandparents or extended family raising children stated explicitly in the text or determined by lack of a mother or father depicted in the text or illustrations, were identified as *Grandparent as Care-Giver*. Remarriage with step parents of either sex, stated explicitly or inferred by reference to separate homes for each parent, were identified as a *Blended Family*. Portrayals of parents of the same sex, either male or female were denoted as *Same-Sex Parents*. Other factors were also considered:

- Ethnicity: Stated in the text or portrayed in illustrations to be Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, or Asian. While we acknowledge these to be broad categories that do not necessarily describe multiracial individuals, they have direct counterparts in census statistics, so we adopt them here for purposes of descriptive clarity. As in life, ethnicity is often difficult to determine even through direct questioning. Thus, illustrated characteristics, such as characters' skin tones, facial features, and names were taken into consideration when attempting to determine a character's ethnicity. It is readily apparent that these determinations were made in a necessarily subjective manner by the researchers, realizing that certain facial features and skin tones may appear across racial groups, thus obscuring a definitive determination of ethnicity.
- Socio-Economic Status: Perhaps even more subjective than attempting to define ethnicity, deciding the socio-economic status (SES) of the characters portrayed was based on assumptions made given components in the illustrations such as type of clothing and the size/location of housing. Thus a portrayal of an African American family living in a tenement apartment-type setting was ascribed as low SES, while the character's in *Henry and Mudge* (Rylant, 1996) were evaluated as being a portrayal of a comfortable, middle-class status. Socio-economic status was then subdivided by ethnicity in order to facilitate comparisons with census statistics.

After an initial reading of the forty-six selections, both authors re-read each one and noted their

observations focusing on the above categories. The author, genre, publisher, and the intended grade level for each selection were also noted. While there was no formal inter-coder reliability check conducted, when a discrepancy in coding occurred, we discussed the text and illustrations to resolve any differences in coding. Once the data were organized into categories, percentages were computed based on portrayals in all of the forty-six selections. In some cases it was necessary to round percentages to the nearest tenth, given that we were reviewing individual and complete texts and comparing them to statistical data. After analyzing the data garnered from the basal selections, we compared this information to statistics on the traditional family found in *The United States Census 2000 Profile* (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002) and the *Population Bulletin* (Population Reference Bureau, 2000), and to the district and state's demographics. The comparison of the portrayals in the basal anthologies against the information presented through the U.S. Census Bureau and the Population Reference Bureau was an important aspect of the study.

Results

In this study, we compared representations of the families and family structure included in district-wide adopted commercial basal anthologies to the demographic information found in census statistics across the following three categories: 1) family structures, 2) ethnicity, and 3) socio-economic status. Our findings indicate that in the categories of family structure and socio-economic status, the families portrayed in commercial reading series do not accurately reflect current U.S. demographics. Ethnic diversity, however, was more closely related to the data provided in the U. S. Census statistics.

Family Structures

Rather than reflecting a variety of family constructs, nearly 90 percent (41 selections) of the basal anthology selections examined depicted families living in what could be considered traditional nuclear family households: middle-class, married couples raising their own children. Only one selection, *Charlie Anderson* (Abercrombie, 1990) portrayed children of divorced parents traveling between two homes. Remarriage and stepparents received equally scant representation, with only one selection, *No One is Going to Nashville* (Jukes, 1983), briefly mentioning a stepmother. Stories included in the basal anthologies portraying or suggestive of single parent households were found in three selections equating to approximately 6 percent of the total number reviewed. None of the reviewed selections portrayed or were suggestive of same-sex parents, either male or female.

Comparatively, statistical data present another picture of family life in which only 23.5 percent of households can be described as traditional families (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Nationwide, statistics show that single-parent households, headed mostly by women, accounted for 29 percent of the total population in 2003 (Brammlett & Mosher, 2001; Krieder & Fields, 2001). In the state under study, married couples with their own children comprise 31 percent of total family structures, while households headed by single parents of either sex equal nearly 12 percent. While census statistics regarding the number of parents who are gay or lesbian are impossible to accurately obtain, other researchers suggest a broad estimate of between one and nine million children in the United States have at least one parent who is lesbian or gay (Laumann, 1995; Perrin, 2002).

Grandparents as Primary Caregivers

This household arrangement was only suggested, not specifically stated, in just one of the selections analyzed. Therefore, we could not make the assertion that the grandfather in the story was in fact the only caregiver. A more common occurrence in the basal selections examined portrayed grandparents as occasional babysitters or as living with the family, but playing a secondary role. However, The United States Census Bureau *(2000)* reports that in 2000, 42 percent of grandparents living in households with

one or more grandchildren under the age of eighteen serve as the primary caregiver, with 16 percent of them caring for the children for five or more years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Statistics in the state under study are very similar: Forty-six percent of grandparents living in households with one or more grandchild serve as the primary care-givers for children 18 years and younger.

Ethnicity

Ethnic diversity within the basal anthologies more closely mirrored the face of American society statistically. Nineteen (40 percent) of the basal anthology selections depicted Caucasians. Characters of Hispanic and African American descent were portrayed in eleven selections (24 percent) and nine selections (20 percent), respectively. There were seven stories featuring Asian or Pacific Islanders, which made up the other 16 percent. Comparatively, the student population of the school district under study is .9 percent American Indian, 6.6 percent Asian, 28.8 percent Hispanic, 13.8 percent African American, and 49.9 percent Caucasian, figures that are closely aligned with state and national statistics (Population Reference Bureau, 2000).

While the percentages of race representations in the basal anthologies do favor Caucasians, they are at least comparable to the statistical composition of both national and local populations. However, it is worth noting that while overall portrayals of different ethnicities are fairly representative, 45 percent of children under the age of five are minorities. Coupled with data showing that Hispanics continue to be the largest and fastest growing minority group at 42.7 million people followed closely by African Americans at 39.7 million (U.S. Population, 2006), the comparatively representative portrayal of minorities in basal anthologies will not be so in the near future, if both publishing and population trends continue along the current pattern.

Socio-Economic Status

While ethnic population representation in the basal anthologies more closely aligned with the available census data, socio-economic status across ethnicities did not. Caucasians living in lower SES occurred in only two stories (13 percent)--one of which was *The Relatives Came* (Rylant, 1993), an idyllic portrayal of a large extended family gathering for a reunion. Most commonly, Caucasians were portrayed as either middle class (69 percent) or of a relatively upper-middle-class SES (18 percent). None of the other ethnic groups was portrayed as enjoying a similar lifestyle to the same percentage or degree. For example, none of the stories in the basal anthologies depicted Asians as anything other than middle class, usually employed as stereotypical shop owner/workers residing in "Chinatown" type settings. African Americans were generally portrayed as arguably middle class, however, they were portrayed in low socio-economic settings in 25 percent of the selections, nearly double that of Caucasians, and never in upper-middle-class settings. The stories portraying Hispanic families depicted a lower socio-economic status 45 percent of the time – a rate nearly triple than that of Caucasian portrayals.

National statistics on socio-economic status present different economic patterns. While there remain many social issues that stratify average income across racial and ethnic groups, *The Population Bulletin* (Population Reference Bureau, 2000) reported that Asian/Pacific Islanders earned more and had attained a greater amount of higher education than did White Non-Hispanics. Although poverty does continue to characterize Hispanic and African-American population groups more than their Caucasian and Asian counterparts, *The Population Bulletin* (Population Reference Bureau, 2000) cites causes such as demographics, discrimination in the workplace, and differences in property ownership, assets and inheritance prospects as partial explanation of socio-economic status.

Discussion

As American society has become more diversified in family structure, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, the portrayal of these conditions in basal anthologies does not mirror that diversification. If the use of basal anthologies was simply a matter of individual or school choice, then our argument of hegemonic domination would perhaps be less relevant. However, the use of basal anthologies with non-representative depictions of family does merit the label of hegemonic when the crucial aspect of choice is taken away. In other words, students are being required to read and view images of family that do not align with their life experiences.

As we have stated earlier, *Reading First* impacts over 1.5 million students with funding allocated to states according to the proportion of children who are from families with incomes below the poverty line. Only the basal anthologies under review here that are in alignment with the government's definition of scientifically based reading research are eligible for federal funding (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Since state education agencies must ensure that only "acceptable" programs are purchased and that teachers use them in a prescribed manner in the classroom, the probability that a child will be exposed to a particular depiction of family in these basal anthologies is practically guaranteed.

Giroux (1993) argues that, "The discourse of literacy cannot be abstracted from the language of difference and power…it cannot be viewed as merely an epistemological or procedural issue, but must be defined primarily in political and ethical terms" (p. 368). Thus, it is in viewing the texts children are most likely required to read through a political and ethical lens that the hegemonic contours become apparent. Basal anthologies play a significant and socially normative role in education. Prior to the passing of No Child Left Behind and the enactment of *Reading First*, it was reported that basal anthologies were used as the primary source of reading instruction in eighty-five to ninety percent of classrooms (Goodman, Shannon, Freeman & Murphy, 1988; Shannon & Crawford, 1997). Given the mandated use of commercial reading programs, particularly in *Reading First* schools, there is no reason to believe that the use of basal anthologies has decreased. Moreover, as federal mandates regulate not only the materials to be used, but also the students required to use them, it is our argument that basal anthologies are one factor in settting cultural parameters and establishing values of what teachers and learners ought to be. Such enculturation is of even greater concern when the students who are exposed to these materials the most are those at the greatest risk of marginalization (Shannon & Crawford, 1997).

The depiction of the traditional family unit in required classroom reading material holds the potential to either create a sense of societal acceptance in children if their personal situations are reflected in the text, or anxiety and fear of societal rejection if they are not. As hooks (1991) argues, the imagination should not be viewed as "pure uncorrupted terrain" but as colonized by dominant discourses (p. 55). There is no terrain more vulnerable to colonization than the germinating social views and constructs of children.

Even the most cursory of inquiries would find that mandated reading depicting family structures as married, heterosexual, middle-class, and for the majority, white, holds the potential to create a very powerful image in the minds of young readers of what it means to be a family. We contend that these images, so disparate from actual societal conditions, may also marginalize children whose lives may not reflect what is being represented in the stories contained in the most commonly used basal anthologies. As these anthologies are most often a curriculum requirement in schools serving students of color and poverty, then the risk of marginalization is even more pronounced. Simply stated, the more likely it is that children must use a required basal, the less likely they are to see their families accurately reflected in it.

In reviewing the stories selected, it is clear that the image of family portrayed in these anthologies does

not accurately reflect the diversity found in the homes of the students required to use them. Socio-cultural reading researchers have argued that even to understand literacy inevitably involves social analysis, because one needs to explore the functions the society in question has invented for literacy and their distribution throughout the populace (Scribner, 1988). Literacy is a complex of actions that take place within a web of social relationships, assumptions and discourses. What assumptions, then, should children reading a mandated collection of stories draw when a portrayal of family life as they know it is found only rarely, if at all?

Past studies have already indicated the effect of literature as a vehicle for socialization on children's perception of race, gender, and societal norms and biases. Moreover, Wortham (2003) argued that the ways in which curricular materials are utilized "help construct social identities for students and teacher in more subtle and context specific ways" (p. 244). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that required literature that portrays a limited definition of family might have a similar impact on a child's perception of self and of what is "acceptable" in the dominant society. Those students who represent a statistically significant population, who are yet marginally represented, may begin to internalize the stereotypes portrayed with negative consequences. Even children whose family life most closely resembles the majority of the images found within these texts may experience equivalent, *albeit* different negative consequences when they internalize the reified portrayal of their family structure as the norm. Certainly, students can and do resist particular readings of texts. Various audience studies have demonstrated that people do resist the meanings intended by authors, illustrators and media producers, and the images portrayed in a variety of media do not present only one viewpoint (Brooker & Jermyn, 2002; Stack & Kelly, 2006). Yet, as children's author Mem Fox (1993) contends,

> …books are active shapers of a child's reality. They construct us by presenting to us an image of ourselves. They mold us into who we think we are, like plasticine being shaped this way and that. It affects in particular the equilibrium of children who do not belong to so-called normal families. It tells them they are odd and different (p. 656).

Children's literature has always been intended to instruct as well as to delight (Sipe, 1999). If, as Lewis (1987) believes, students become socialized to see the portrayal of characters in children's fiction and its social construct as the way things are, can we make the leap of logic to surmise that if children do not see their lives represented in literature, then they could possibly draw the conclusion that their lives are not as they should be? Or as perhaps, even worse, as something they should be ashamed of? Close to one out of every five children is living in a single parent or divorced-parent situation. Between one and nine million children have at least one parent who is gay or lesbian (Perrin, 2002). Yet if the literature those students see most often reflects a heterosexual married couple raising their own children, then the children's literature selected for incorporation into the basal is at best, behind the times, and at worst, marginalizing a large percentage of students who have little choice but to read the assigned text and experience the potentially negative consequences of both the literary transaction and the social indoctrination that result.

What also of children of a non-Caucasian background whose experiences with mandated literature depict people of their race living in reduced circumstances more frequently than other groups? Aside from not being statistically accurate, we return to Lewis' point of the power of literature to create reality or at least the perception of it. Sipe (1999) wrote that children's response to literature can either reinscribe or challenge their own ideology and world view. While there are certainly limitations in proposing effects of images in the perceptions and social identities of children, we believe that given past related research, our examination of the images of family contained in basal anthologies is a topic deserving of further inquiry.

Recommendations

How then can the classroom teacher at once use the literature that is required, while ensuring that students have access to literature that both honors and enhances their own diversity? A careful review of the basal anthologies would be a good place to start. Although we don't always get to choose the material from which we teach, we do have power over the way in which we teach it. The use of critical literacy questions may help students learn to recognize the ideologies and possible agendas that act as catalysts for the literature they read. As Simpson (1996) contends, fostering critical understanding by using such approaches as disrupting the text, setting questions, juxtaposing text, role playing/role reversal and examining the social context, may help students to realize that their reality does not have to, nor should it, align with the "reality" of the story.

Moreover, by questioning what they read, students begin to see literature study as part of a broader movement to foster constructive social transformation (Pradl, 1996) rather than as simply an academic exercise. As Bishop (1997) cautions, social change will not be easy, nor can literature, even with all its potential artistic power, be expected to carry the major responsibility for transforming the world. Yet by questioning, and teaching our students to question, the contents of something as seemingly innocuous as the elementary school basal anthology, we are taking the responsibility for enacting the kind of social change that fosters the academic, social and emotional well-being, and growth of our students and the society in which they will inherit. Luke and Grieshaber (2004) remind us as educators that the challenge facing politically committed literacy educators has always been to translate the critique of the state and corporation, curriculum and classroom into practicable approaches that remodel and refashion the distribution of capital. Thus, perhaps, the goal for the critical teacher, student, and citizen is not to condemn existing literature, but to "hold the mirror up" to new realities and act on the diversity of images reflected therein.

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