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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the subversion of teacher authority in children's literature. It notes that picture books present various forms of "subversion" of teacher authority that range from the overt to the implicit. Examples from children's books that were presented to elementary education majors in a children's literature class are presented. The discussion in the paper includes class comments on perceived responses of the intended child audience and also how they as future educators felt about the representation of authority. The paper considers what word or words teachers, future teachers, and preschool-aged children might associate with the concept of "teacher authority," based on these books. It also considers the various kinds of teachers represented in them, and whether even "nice" students undermine their teachers. Examples include "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," "Tom Sawyer," "Pippi Longstocking," "Harry Potter," and others. Seven books are cited; six more are listed which are not discussed in the paper; and an illustrated bibliography of five picture books is included. (SR)

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FROM MARK TWAIN TO TONI MORRISON:
SUBVERTING TEACHER AUTHORITY IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Subverting Teacher Authority: Everything From Defiance to Clever Manipulation

Consider these literary examples. The following list does not imply the student's control; in fact, the actions of the characters often raise questions about their knowledge of the social and institutional expectations that engulf them. Some of the most poignant subversion of teacher (and administrative) authority arises from ignorance.

Scenarios:

Opponents dislike the teacher and try to destroy him/her.

A teacher tries to please his/her students and relinquishes authority.

A defiant and dishonest student attacks the teacher.

A defiant but honorable student stands up to a teacher.

A meek student, mostly unknown to the teacher and classmates, exposes the teacher as a bully or as a fool.

A popular student uses her/his good standing with a teacher for self-promotion.

An accused student turns blame on a teacher.

A weak administrator shifts blame onto a teacher.

A strong administrator shifts blame onto a teacher.

Students who are enamored with a teacher fabricate stories (fantasies) that undermine the teacher's reputation.

Students who despise a teacher fabricate stories that undermine the teacher's reputation.

An envious or disrespectful colleague "leaks" damaging gossip to the teacher's students or other teachers.

A teacher clearly shows favoritism.

A teacher clearly shows bias.

A teacher clearly favors his/her own opinion over the opinions of everyone else.

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FROM MARK TWAIN TO TONI MORRISON:
SUBVERTING TEACHER AUTHORITY IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE
PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

As educators, we are especially alert—even sensitive—to portrayals of teachers in the media, from popular films to contemporary newspaper stories. But what about the representation of teachers in the materials we present to our own students—especially to our young and impressionable students in elementary and middle school? Often unwittingly, we are agents of our own "deconstruction" as we present texts to our students that validate—even celebrate--the subversion of teacher authority.

Alison Lurie suggests that "most of the great works of juvenile literature are subversive in one way or another." In *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups: The Subversive Power of Children's Literature*, she observes that the authority figure most often undermined is the parent: "More or less openly, the author takes the side of the child against his or her parents, who are portrayed as at best silly and needlessly anxious, at worst selfish and stupid."

In this two-part presentation, we will extend the scope of Lurie's observation and examine the subversion of *teacher* authority in a range of literature presented to students from kindergarten to college.

PART ONE: PICTURE BOOKS

QUESTION: What word or words do you associate with the concept of "teacher authority"?
(Jot down your answers on the worksheet attached to the back of your handout packet.)

Children form impressions of teachers—and their “authority”—before they have even entered a classroom for the first time. Picture books present various forms of the “subversion” of teacher authority that range from the overt to the implicit. Let’s examine a few examples of picture books I presented to Elementary Education majors in my Children’s Literature class at Indiana State University. In class, we discussed not only what we perceived to be the responses of the intended child audience—but also how we, as educators (and future educators), feel about the representation of our authority.

Was “fear” one of the words you associated with “authority”? *THE PRINCIPAL FROM THE BLACK LAGOON* presents a student’s perspective on the ultimate authority: the principal. “The authority figure should give a sense of intimidation,” said one of my students, “but shouldn’t strike fear in the students.” After imagining the worst from a visit to the principal’s office—as this page illustrates [SHOW PAGE]—Hubie discovers that Mrs. Green is not a monster but just a sweet young woman [SHOW PAGE]. Most of my students felt that even a ridiculously exaggerated negative representation of authority could have a negative effect on young children, and they were pleased to see that it was shown to be inaccurate. But others also observed that presenting the authority figure as ultimately benign is equally troublesome: The end of the book “tells a child that getting in trouble is not bad.” Indeed, on the last page, Hubie is seen plotting his active subversion of the principal’s authority—by doing precisely the same thing that got him in trouble in the first place!

Some teachers, I think we would agree, *should* be subverted. Did you associate "authority" figures with "mean" teachers? In JOHN PATRICK NORMAN MC HENNESSEY, THE BOY WHO WAS ALWAYS LATE TO SCHOOL, the message of subversion is overtly stated in the child's cooption of the very words that the teacher used to unfairly discipline the child. "There is no such thing as —" says Sir, in response to each of John Patrick's excuses . . . until the day John Patrick finds Sir in the arms of a big, hairy gorilla: "There is no such thing. . . ." replies John Patrick as he walks out of the classroom. [SHOW PAGE.]

Do you think that only "mean" teachers are undermined by their students? MRS. NELSON is a nice teacher who can't control her class; they are openly challenging her authority [SHOW PAGE]. By forcing her into deceitful strategies to regain control--[SHOW PAGE]--her class is, in fact, subverting her authority. At the same time, she was attacked by my students for resorting to devious methods and "tricking" the children.

Can a "nice " student be guilty of subversion--even inadvertently? In response to LILLY'S PURPLE PLASTIC PURSE, my students condemned Mr. Slinger for the very qualities they admired: "He makes learning fun . . . tries to relate to kids on their level," they said--but he "may be having too much fun." [SHOW PAGE.] One student commented: "I'm not sure how much authority he really has over the children." And when Lilly--arguably, the teacher's "pet"--misbehaves, Mr. Slinger follows his disciplinary action with an "apology" that my students observed sends a counterproductive message.

THE BIG BOX is a different kind of picture book—and it sends a different kind of subversive message. [SHOW PAGE.] Created collaboratively by Toni Morrison and her son, Slade, it presents a *child's* view of authority. Not surprisingly, it is a dim view—and it is such a dark picture book that my students found it disturbing. In a repeated pattern, the book introduces children who "can't control [their] freedom." Patty "talked in the library and sang in class" . . . and "made the grownups nervous."

"So the teachers who loved her had a meeting one day

To try to find a cure.

They thought and talked and thought some more

Till finally they were sure

They gave Patty an understanding hug

And put her in a big brown box."

In the midterm exam, my students were asked to identify the subversive elements they saw in the picture books we studied this semester. The results were interestingly mixed on this book: Those who responded to the book on a superficial level observed that there was "no" evident subversion: the kids do what they're told in each case and dutifully enter the Big Box as instructed. Others, however, read into the text an implicit subversion in the author's tone that indicated a sympathy with the "boxed" children--effectively condemning each of the authority figures for their actions. Returning to Alison Lurie's words, *The Big Box* does indeed show teachers--and other authority figures--as "at best silly and needlessly anxious, at worst selfish and stupid."

QUESTION: On the basis of these picture books, what word or words do you think pre-school-aged children might associate with the concept of "teacher authority"?

I will start with a bit of literary history: “ ‘Spare the rod and spoil the child.’ Ichabod Crane’s students certainly were not spoiled.” Washington Irving, writing in 1820 about Sleepy Hollow, made it clear that the subversion of teacher authority **does not always come from the student**. In this case not a student, but a rival named Brom Bones, vows to “double the schoolmaster up and lay him on a shelf in his own schoolroom.” Brom and his flunkies prey upon Ichabod’s superstitions—stopping up the school chimney, upending the desks and chairs, and even training a dog to whine when the schoolmaster leads the girls in singing. *Brom Bones had the teacher figured out*. Oh, yes, there was that headless horseman thing, too.

Figuring out the teacher also leads to subversion *by students*. Tom Sawyer (1876) clearly knew the habits of his schoolmaster. After Tom’s classic talk with Huck Finn—about warts, and cats, and other cures—Tom must go to school tardy. Nonetheless, Tom enters the schoolhouse to find the master “throned on high in his great splint-bottomed chair, dozing, lulled by the drowsy hum of study.” When Tom Sawyer knows how to select “his punishment,” he knows exactly what to say: “I stopped to talk with Huckleberry Finn,” which lands him conveniently in the company of Becky Thatcher.

Mark Twain called *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) “the sweetest creation of child life yet written.” Anne Shirley may well have been the model for a “teacher pleaser,” and she used her advantage well: “I was deceiving my teacher in trying to make it appear I was reading a history when it was a storybook instead.” Chastised for reading *Ben Hur*, Anne escapes; Miss Stacy, she tells Marilla, “forgave me freely.” Although Anne confesses this, her rambling confession reveals that she continued to disobey her teacher; because later the teacher catches Anne reading *The Lurid Mystery of the Haunted Hill*.

Even though Anne is apologetic, she concludes (well, she never concludes anything) with “It’s really wonderful, Marilla, what you can do when you’re truly anxious to please a certain person.”

Truly anxious to please a certain person.

Truly anxious to please a certain person.

[Is there anyone here who studied a subject, even one course, who was truly anxious to please one person? Tell about it. What were the results? Were your actions subversive?]

Realistic books published after 1970 feature the student as a champion against an oppressive teacher. In *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976) both the first-grader Little Man and his fourth-grade sister Cassie Logan defy their teacher and refuse to take damaged textbooks dumped on their segregated school. Their teacher is African-American as they are, but she welcomes the books as an opportunity. When Little Man and Cassie refuse the books, the teacher paddles them both.

One of the most impressive challenges to teacher authority in adolescent novels occurs in *Dacey’s Song* (1982). Dacey Tillerman, the oldest of four siblings, leads her brothers and sister to their new home and must deal with her ^{paternal} grandmother and a new setting. Dacey’s new English teacher in her new school, Mr Chappelle requires students to write an essay about “someone they know.” Troubled about her mother, who is in a

mental hospital, Dicey writes about her—keeping her mother and their relationship anonymous. When Mr. Chappelle reads example papers, he first reads from another paper, which describes the mysterious Dicey without naming her. The writer is Mina, a perceptive and popular student, but when the teacher reads Dicey’s paper—so poignant and poetic—he accuses her of plagiarism. She is made to stand at her desk and endure his questions.

[Do any of you know how this scenario ends? Want to suggest a classroom conclusion? Remember our title: “Subversion of Teacher Authority.”]

For more recent realistic books, see the bibliography.

Fantasy books foster schoolroom scenes that should worry any educator. How about *Pippi Longstocking* for starters? In her one day of school, Pippi dumbfounds her teacher by answering the question “can you tell me what seven and five are?” with “if you don’t know that yourself, you needn’t think I’m going to tell you.” When Pippi’s answers to questions further befuddle the teacher, “The teacher decided to act as if nothing unusual were happening and went on with her examination.” Pippi dominates the class and she undermines the teacher who is glad to see her go.

Let us leap forward (or backward?) to *Harry Potter*, the popular series by J. K. Rowling. Some of the teachers at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry embody evil and contention to the hero; Ron tells Hermione, “You think all teachers are saints or something. I wouldn’t put anything past Snape.” In contrast, other teachers spend their hours courting students who possess more talents than they. One of those teachers is Professor McGonagall, who clearly has favorites. Her “favorite” Lee Jordan does play-by-play commentary of Quidditch matches and he spins them for his team and against the opponent: “that obvious and disgusting bit of cheating” and an “open and revolting foul.” While McGonagall subtly scolds the announcer, she will not silence him because he is *bright and clever*. Clearly, she treasures his gifts.

I should return to my introduction. Imagine a story in which “books were flung aside without being put away on the shelves, inkstands were overturned, benches thrown down, and the whole school turned loose an hour early before the usual time, bursting forth like a legion of young imps, yelping and racketing about the green, in joy at their early emancipation.” What subversion might that be? A bright student or a difficult one? None of the above: Ichabod Crane read the invitation to the Van Tassels’ party and his vanity succumbed to visions of Katrina.

We are our worst enemy. Teachers beware.

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See also: Books I would include
if I had more time (handout)*

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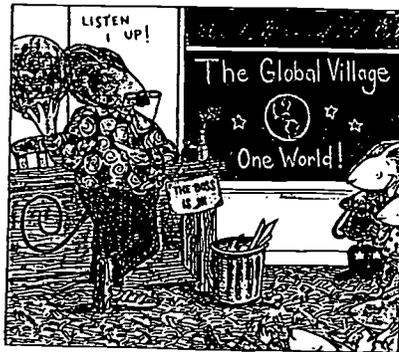
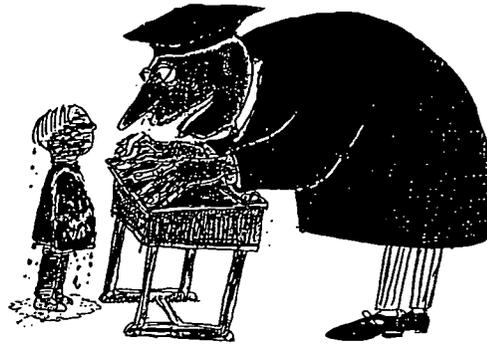
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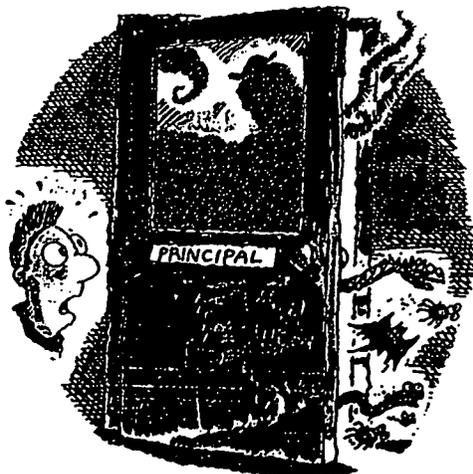
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