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The uses and abuses of power: A Foucauldian reading of representations of headteachers in children's literature.

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Background

Farber, Provenza and Holm (1994) suggest that popular culture can affect the ways in which people make sense of schooling, showing "the wider patterns of social interaction constituting the purposes, impact and future prospects of schooling" and "conditioning the possibilities of pedagogical relationships" (p. 13). This paper asks in particular what readers might learn about the role of headteachers from modern children's stories.

The modern children's story is set in an age which is seen as uncertain and risky (c.f. Beck, 1992; Jameson, 1991). Themes such as racism, divorce, death, mental illness, politics, and sexuality are common, whether in comedy, horror, fantasy or social realist genres. Child and adult readers alike are expected to not only know what these themes are about, but also to use the resources in the stories to help make sense of and manage these things in their own intergenerational interactions and lives.

Research Questions

What affordances for making meaning about school leaders and their practices/purposes are offered in modern children's stories and how might these be theorised?

Methods

The paper works with a corpus of 31 books, written post 1970, classified as young adult fiction. They are in English, mostly from the US and Britain, and were immediately available from the top 40 of an www.amazon.co.uk search conducted for 'school story' in January 2008. I asked what kind of headteacher was in these texts, how their role could be interpreted, and what theorisation might be made across the texts.

The approach taken here is neither a reading on behalf of children, an imaginary of how children might react when they read the text for themselves, a study of authorial intentions nor an act of literary criticism. It is a political reading from an adult perspective of the social and political inferences and workings of specific narrative representations of the world, in this case headteachers/schooling (c.f. Gupta, 2003; Keroes, 1999).

Frame

I use Foucault's (1977) exegesis of discipline, which argues that societies depend on various modes of discipline and punishment to instill norms of behaviour. While these began as, and still ultimately depend on, the exercise of brute force, they have evolved over time into a variety of institutional forms (prisons, asylums, hospitals, schools), been transmogrified into pastoral as well as coercive modes, and now rely extensively on acts of surveillance, responsabilisation and individualisation to ensure compliance through instilling norms - particular ways of thinking/acting. The purpose of these 'technologies' is to ensure that the government of the population, and citizenship and freedom, are the products of self-, rather than externally imposed - discipline, although that always remains an option for those who do not 'learn' to make the right self-governing choices. While power is exercised top-down, it also circulates throughout society/institutions in order to create order rather than chaos, and to allow for checks and balances on social norms.

Research findings

The school story typically relies on the creation of school as a fictional 'little world'. Mavis Reimer (2009) notes that "the metaphor of the school as a world implies a correspondence of the school to world systems on other scales and levels" (p 211). Readers are expected to see and understand that lessons from one apply to the other.

Following this argument, it is notable that the children's stories under scrutiny critically take up contemporary educational references and themes: school-business partnerships, pedagogies, and the work-home life of students and headteachers. Many also address themes related to power and morality - the clash of tradition and modernity, the struggle for democracy and freedom against authority, and for kindness over brutality. In these themes, teachers and particularly headteachers are often represented as the 'bad' part of the binary at stake.

Here I argue that the fictional school as 'little world' operates as a representation of a highly normative Foucauldian institution. Headteachers are often distant and remote, and engaged in continued surveillance of and acts of punishment on the student population. Students recognize the headteacher's authoritative gaze and its intent; it governs their actions. They know that authority might be resisted but also incur sanctions from afar.

My analysis shows that the stories strongly advocate a liberal governmentality in which individuals are expected to be responsible and free, as long as their choices of behaviour conform to acceptable norms. Plots also 'teach' that unreasonable norms, those which curtail responsible freedoms, must and can be overcome, and that children who make the wrong choices must learn to conform. In each of these two options, it is the headteacher who is the ultimate authority with the power to sanction and reward, to discipline and punish. However, the need for children to acquire self discipline is not because adult citizens must serve God and Empire as in the traditional school story, but rather because the reflexive modern citizen needs to serve and save themselves in a world where adults are often fallible, self serving and myopic, and sometimes venal, corrupt and brutal, and where social institutions are fragile, unstable, callous and unscrupulous.

The implied reader in the corpus I examined is a child and/or adult who: recognizes that power can be used wisely and to ethical ends - or not; who understands that pupils can use their individual and collective power to challenge school/headteacher authority if that course of action is morally required; and who sees that the judicious use of pastoral power is preferable to symbolic and actual violence. I contrast this to the implied reader of educational administration texts, arguably one who prefers to avoid questions about power in favour of what can be seen as partial and/or euphemistic conversations about leadership and management.

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