

J. Cynthia McDermott

Antioch University, Los Angeles, CA
cmcdermott@antioch.edu

Using Literature to Define Justice

“We are ... moral actors shaping the character and justice of society.” (Snarr 2003: 28)

Stručni članak / report paper

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This paper is based upon the notions that literature provides many avenues to create powerful discussions with our students, and that stories are excellent vehicles for advancing critical thoughts and eventually creating action. It also relies upon the insight that encouraging our students to speak up and speak out is a significant goal in our new international era of civic interest. Several books are discussed that are excellent examples of stories that can encourage the reader to take a stand and behave like an 'upstander'. Two classroom activities are described; Town Hall Meeting and Constructed Controversy. It is shown how they can be applied with books by Frank Asch, Sam Swope, Paul Fleischman and Martin Waddell.

Keywords: *literature, children's literature, social justice, upstander, classroom activities, democratic classroom, empowerment*

Literature indeed provides many avenues to create powerful discussions with our students. Stories have always given us rich fodder for looking both forward to the future as well as looking back to our past. Bibliotherapy has allowed us to connect readers with stories to help them engage in thoughtful ruminations about incidences and experiences that are both painful and challenging. Reading a story about a child who is coping with the death of a friend, for example, provides the reader with a cathartic opportunity to connect with another. Stories are indeed powerful sources of ideas.

Beyond the personal, however, stories are an excellent vehicle for advancing critical thoughts and eventually creating action. Encouraging our students to speak up and speak out is a significant goal in our new international era of civic interest. Defining acts of injustice is important in a democracy just as defining how a just

society behaves. But justice is an abstract term and can easily be defined in different ways. A place like a democratic classroom provides all the participants with the opportunity to use their voice (McDermott 1999: 1).

One way to begin to explicate this concept is to analyze stories with justice issues clearly framed. One such story is *Mr. Maxwell's Mouse* (2004) written by Frank Asch, author of many books for children, and his son Devin, who was the illustrator. Mr. Maxwell is a successful cat; sophisticated, well-bred and attractive. Every day he arrives at the Paw and Claw Restaurant and orders his usual lunch – baked mouse. The day the story takes place, however, is a special day. Maxwell has received a promotion to Vice Manager of Efficiency Control and has decided to splurge on a live mouse. Assured by the waiter that their mice are the freshest, he welcomes his meal. The mouse, unnamed, assures Maxwell that he will be an excellent lunch. Maxwell, however, begins to waiver as he attempts to kill the mouse who continues to converse with him. Maxwell remembers the wise words of his mother who told him to not fraternize with his food! As it becomes more and more obvious that the cat is losing his courage to kill the mouse, the mouse suggests that Maxwell blind-fold himself so he won't have to witness the kill! As the knife heads toward the plate, the mouse gingerly substitutes the cat's tail for himself. On the count of three, Maxwell aggressively cuts his own tail. Chaos ensues and not only does the mouse escape, but also manages to free the other mice in the kitchen with rumors that he then continued this revolution at other restaurants. Maxwell ends up in the hospital, pride and tail damaged. The post-script is an articulate note from the mouse apologizing for this behavior, wishing him a speedy recovery and expecting that the cat can understand his decision.

So how might this story help with our definition? What behavior could be seen as just or unjust? Was it fair for the mouse to be scheduled to be eaten? Was a death at the hands (paws) of a novice a humane death? Should the kitchen staff perform a more humane death? Who benefits from the eating of the mice? Are there alternatives? Was it fair for the mouse to free the other mice? Who benefited and who suffered from this action? How was this act seen by Maxwell's employers and the staff at the restaurant? Were there other ways for the mice to gain their independence and freedom (negotiating, unionizing)? What harm was dealt to the restaurant owner? Was it warranted? What possessed the mouse to act? What skills did he need? Had this happened before? Was his protest legal? Should he be arrested? Is he a patriot or a terrorist? Is this a story that can be used as an introduction to capitalism, the rule of law, or Marxist economic thinking? Whether the mouse was right in his action is a different question than deciding if this action was the best action to take given all the possible scenarios.

Defining social justice can be aided by looking at the mouse's behavior. He took action which required courage and commitment to change what he saw as an unjust action. He identified a problem (mice being killed against their will), created a solution and acted on it and this is central to what Paulo Freire suggests for all of us (2005). In this sense he was an 'upstander'. Facing History and Ourselves (2012) is an organization that has defined an upstander as the opposite of a bystander. In order to be an upstander a person must find ways to define what is just and what is not and then take action to create change. The upstanders often place themselves at some level of risk and potentially can be singled out for their behavior.

Can a definition of social justice (and action) be as simple as the dilemma posed by Mr Maxwell? Perhaps, although other points of view might disagree. The problem identification will always be political, depending on the power of the individual. Obviously Maxwell's perspective would not describe eating mice as a problem. We would hear quite a disagreement between Maxwell, the owner and the mouse. But consider that social justice is about creating an equitable society.

One classroom technique that can be used for this controversial story is a Town Hall Meeting. One person has the floor and calls on any interested party to make a statement. Participants brainstorm who they want to be at the meeting. In the case of Mr. Maxwell's Mouse the list might include the ministers of the town, Maxwell's wife and children, the family of the mice, the waiters, the exterminators in town, the police captain, any members of a union and, of course, the list could go on. (At one Town Hall Meeting we conducted someone decided to be God.) Once everyone has their say, the Town Hall manager makes a determination of what should happen next (the mouse should be caught and fined, the restaurant cannot sell live mice any longer, or other ideas). This activity is helpful for presenting multiple points of view and allows the participants to see how difficult, but extremely exciting, democratic practices can be. Ultimately we have to decide if it was right to eat a mouse, or, was it right to escape? The problem is clear but the response is not.

This story and activity can help us as we think about social justice. In *Somebodies and Nobodies* (2003), Fuller argues that putting someone down, humiliating and treating them in an inferior way is 'Rankism', the belief that some of us are better than others of us. Certainly Mr. Maxwell is a Rankist by the way he treats the mouse. This attitude is at the heart of the anti-justice efforts that occur in many places, including schools.

A next logical step in this plan is to determine why the mouse, or any other person who stands up and says "no" did what he did. Why did he have the courage? Did he need any particular set of skills? Does social justice require action? Frankie Moore Lappe relates a story in her book, *Democracy's Edge* (2006: 57). Attending

a political debate for a candidate she supported and who had been falsely accused by an opponent of some transgression, the candidate asked her opponent to admit that he had falsely accused her. Refusing, the debate continued. Lappe asks herself why she sat silently by and realized that taking a stand would not have been a costly event. Courage is contagious and if she had stood up, perhaps others would have as well. Our little mouse acted courageously. What would our schools and communities be like if more people stood up? And how might we help our students in particular gain the courage to act against injustice?

Another book that is helpful for this conversation is Sam Swope's *The Araboolies of Liberty Street* (2001). General Pinch and his wife live in a perfect suburban neighborhood. They hate anything that is different, including fun. Using his bullhorn, General Pinch continually surveys that neighborhood for signs of non-conformity, and when he sees any, he threatens to call in the army. Things remain to the satisfaction of the Pinchs until the Araboolies move in right next door. They are all different colors, paint their house wild colors, sleep together in a huge bed outside and their animals sleep in the house. They are noisy and always laughing. Besides, to the chagrin of the Pinchs, the Araboolies do not speak English, so when General Pinch actually calls in the army, they are unaware of what might happen. But the General tells the army to come to his neighborhood and remove the house that is different. Fortunately, little Joy overhears him and plots all night with the other children who proceed to decorate all of their homes with wild colors. By the time the army arrives the following morning, the only house that is different belongs to the General. Since the army only knows how to follow orders, in spite of his protest, they remove his house much to the delight of the neighborhood.

Once again this story is rich with opportunity to discuss justice. One obvious challenge is to question whether the Pinchs had any right to prevent their neighbors from enjoying their lives. But was it acceptable for the Pinchs to lose their home?

A third story is *Farmer Duck* by Martin Waddell (1999). A farmer has a duck who does all of the work on his farm, while the farmer stays in bed all day. The farmer treats the duck like a slave and the duck becomes quite weary. His animal buddies become quite worried as he feeds everyone, bales the hay, runs the tractor and any other task necessary. So the cows, the sheep and the chickens hatch a plan to save their friend. In the wee hours of the morning, they enter the farmer's house, throw him out of bed and chase him off the farm, and he never returns. The story ends with the animals taking over their farm.

Perhaps this can be construed as a child's version of *Animal Farm*, but replete with possibilities to discuss justice. Did the animals have the right to chase the farmer off his farm? Did the farmer have the right to oppress the duck?

The last story is *The Dunderheads* by Paul Fleischman (2009). A group of rather mis-fit students have a very mean teacher who takes all of their belongings. When she takes a small stuffed cat that the smallest and weakest child has bought for his mother for her birthday, the children have finally reached their limit of tolerance. Creating a clever plan to break into her home and retrieve the cat, they use all of their quirky skills to find a way to get the cat back. They succeed! This story is replete with deep controversy about what it means to be an upstander and what kinds of injustices are best served by revolutionary action. Looking at the behaviors of each of the characters, children can provide a more objective position for a conversation about fairness and power.

Once we enter into this conversation, it is important to determine what next steps to take. One way to connect students with this work is to research what others have done as they have stood up for their rights. It might be particularly helpful to look at children and youth for inspiration. What kinds of social justice projects have young people done in order to make the world a kinder and safer place?

Across the world, youth are working to change unjust actions. Using stories that demonstrate how working together can create change is essential. Teaching them the skills they need will enable them to be change agents, activists and upstanders.

Many may say that justice is not worth fighting for, but some individuals believe that children can make a difference and have the ability to create change. With skills and mentoring, our youth can stand up for themselves and others just like our little mouse. It is important to know what justice is, to know how to create justice and then to know how to teach others to recognize it and work toward it.

Another classroom technique that can be used in the classroom to explore controversial issues is the Constructed Controversy. This would work well with any of the books. Imagine a conversation between the owner of the Paw and Claw and the mouse. What would the conversation between the farmer and the duck involve? And what might the teacher and the children say to each other in this process?

A Constructed Controversy is designed to help the participants see that there are always multiple sides to any situation. The steps follow.

The teacher assigns two teams oppositional arguments. Ask them to develop the three strongest reasons for their point of view and to be prepared to share that. Bring both sides together and lay the ground rules for step one; each side may present their three points and the other side can only ask clarifying questions (e.g.: "So when you said that mice should be eaten did you mean that it is their destiny?"; Answer: "No, we just meant that they are on the bottom of the food chain.")

Step two then sends each team back to find the three best arguments for the other side. This change of perspective is very important and shapes the process. When

a team takes a stand, it is very difficult to get them to change their mind because they are planning to defeat their opponent. In this exercise they now become the opponent. Once again the team must come up with their three top reasons for the point of view, and they can be either the same or completely different.

The teams report to each other, but a new rule is introduced. Once the team has presented their three ideas, the other team may now ask any kind of question (of course, as long as it is not personal). The battle ensues and, as in any debate, each side tackles their arguments with great gusto and ownership. At this point it may seem like the sides have forgotten that they just argued the opposite point of view.

The third and final step, once everyone has calmed down, asked all the questions they wanted, and once they feel that they have won, the group is now asked to agree on the two strongest arguments for each side. It is not unusual for these final ideas to be somewhat new, or clear variations from the previous ideas. At the end of this consensus building process, the four ideas are written down and everyone is asked to sign their name that they agree. The class can decide which two perspectives to explore, but a logical choice would be the mouse and the cat.

Using this technique along with the Town Hall process are very powerful ways to help the participants understand their gut reaction to taking a side. These techniques encourage the participants to be actively engaged in the topics and to take a risk by standing for what they believe. Being able to engage in thinking about multiple perspectives can counter the anti-just efforts that occur in many places, including schools, and that fuel the bullying that has become such a challenge, and prevent individuals from standing up for what is right and just. Using literature in a bibliotherapeutic way to change behavior can be very successful.

Resources for Teachers

Each of these sites has lessons, recommendations and ideas for creating classrooms that encourage upstanding behavior:

Foxfire. <www.foxfire.org>

Teaching Tolerance. <<http://www.tolerance.org>>

Rethinking Schools. <www.rethinkingschools.org>

Horace Mann Upstanders Book Award. <<http://upstandersaward.org>>

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J. Cynthia McDermott

Sveučilište Antiohija, Los Angeles, CA
 Universität Antioch, Los Angeles, Kalifornien

Poimanje pravednosti uz pomoć književnosti

Članak se zasniva na stajalištu da književnost pruža mnoge načine uspostavljanja sadržajnih diskusija s učenicima. Priče su izvrsno sredstvo za poticanje kritičkoga mišljenja, a potom i djelovanja. Potaknuti učenike na jasno izražavanje svojega mišljenja značajan je nastavni cilj u današnjem vremenu međunarodnoga zanimanja za javno djelovanje. U radu se prikazuje nekoliko iznimno prikladnih primjera dječjih knjiga čije priče mogu ohrabriti čitatelje da zauzmu stajalište i ponašaju se kao 'borci za pravdu'. Opisuju se dvije razredne aktivnosti, Sastanak u gradskoj vijećnici i Uspostavljeno proturječje, te se prikazuje njihova primjena u nastavi na primjerima obrade dječjih knjiga i slikovnica Franka Ascha, Sama Swopea, Paula Fleischmana i Martina Waddella.

Ključne riječi: književnost, dječja književnost, društvena pravednost, borac za pravdu, razredne aktivnosti, odgoj za demokraciju, osnaživanje

Literatur als Mittel der Auseinandersetzung mit dem Begriff der Gerechtigkeit

In diesem Beitrag wird davon ausgegangen, dass Literatur zahlreiche Möglichkeiten zur intensiven Diskussion mit Schülern anbietet. Gerade Geschichten stellen ein geeignetes Mittel dar, um die Entwicklung kritischen Denkens zu fördern und eventuell zum eigenen Handeln anzuspornen. Im Zeitalter des globalen Interesses am öffentlichen Leben scheint ein wichtiges Unterrichtsziel darin zu bestehen, Schüler zur klaren und deutlichen Äußerung der eigenen Meinung zu bewegen. In diesem Beitrag werden einige kinderliterarischen Werke vorgestellt, die Schüler dazu ermutigen sollen, Stellung zu beziehen und sich für Gerechtigkeit

einzusetzen. Es wird gezeigt, dass sich insbesondere die beiden Unterrichtsmodelle „Town Hall Meeting“ und „Constructed Controversy“ dazu eignen, Schüler mithilfe ausgewählter Bilder- und Kinderbücher (u.a. von Frank Asch, Sam Swope, Paul Fleischmann und Martin Waddell) an das komplexe Phänomen ‚Gerechtigkeit‘ heranzuführen.

Schlüsselwörter: *Literatur, Kinderliteratur, soziale Gerechtigkeit, Gerechtigkeitskämpfer, Bilderbuch, Unterrichtsaktivitäten, Erziehung zur Demokratie*