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To Read or Not to Read: The Influence of Literature on Behavior Management

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Abstract

Perhaps one of the most discussed issues in American education is that of classroom management. This is not simply an elementary-level problem either, as would be expected due to the younger student's short attention spans, but an issue that affects the middle and high schools as well. More and more, behavioral issues are becoming a problem because they cause disruption in the classroom and restrict the students from reaching their full learning potential. But are these problems only due to the special needs of students, such as ADD or ADHD, or does the issue lie deeper? Perhaps reviewing the literature that adolescents, and even pre-adolescents, are reading will give a little insight into this problem. *Harry Potter*, *Eragon*, and other popular literature portray young people with predominantly good and noble intentions but these characters face adversity as a result of authority figures who are either foolish and careless, or conniving and sometimes even pure evil. Although a story about a power struggle may not cause many issues if encountered in an occasional story, the trend has found its way into all types of media and has established itself firmly in the minds of students, persuading them that authority figures in their lives, whether they be parents, school officials or teachers, do not equal their mental capacity and therefore are not worthy of obedience, much less respect. While this attitude has been the precursor to beneficial change in many instances, students must be given the skills and strategies to approach every aspect of literature with a critical eye and be able to understand when disrespect towards authority is necessary and when it is simply disruptive and rebellious. In this way, students will grow into educated, critical yet controlled individuals.

To Read or Not to Read: The Influence of Literature on Behavior Management

Reading is making a comeback. In the days of the feudal system, when the majority of people were simply laymen working the land of the wealthy, reading was considered a privilege and only the well-educated student was well-read. However, since the onset of television, radio, and especially video games, reading has lost its appeal. That is, until *Harry Potter* (2005) came along and the outlook on reading changed drastically. Books are now being discussed in school hallways, lines are being formed the night before a new release, and Hollywood cannot keep up with the newest book craze. This is a drastic change from the last few decades when reading had become increasingly less popular. Not only had reading begun to be seen as enjoyable for only “nerdy” students, it was considered a chore even for adults. One of the biggest difficulties that students have had with reading for pleasure is the fact that many students are below their academic grade level and therefore frustrated with the effort (Swenor, 2006). Lately, this mindset has been reversed. The publication of the *Harry Potter* series inspired many people, kids and adults alike, to enjoy reading again. Not only was *Harry Potter* being read for pleasure, but teachers were using it in their classrooms as examples of good writing (The Power of Potter, 2007)! Other series such as *Eragon* (2003) and *Twilight* (2005) have subsequently hit the market and have excited many young, and old, readers, causing the hobby of reading to be popular once again.

Each book has its share of good moral themes, but one theme stands out in these works which has affected the student in the home as well as in the classroom. That theme is respect. Except, these books do not encourage the cultivation of respect, especially respect for authority, in the reader’s attitude but rather they promote the lack of respect for peers, authority figures and social structures. While reading is important for students of all ages, and books that encourage

reading should be held in esteem, a community filled with people who have been brought up with no respect for authority is a price which may be too high to pay.

Respect is a very elusive term. Webster (2009) defines it as having “high or special regard” or giving “particular attention” to someone or something. It is used as a character trait, a manner of treating others, and has even been popularized in a song by Aretha Franklin. With so many different understandings of respect, it is hard to pin down or even measure the amount of respect one has for another (Swenor, 2006). Despite its intangibility, there is no doubt that respect towards others, whether peers or authority figures, is an important attribute for any individual to possess. No one enjoys being disrespected and the individual who respects the people in his or her life will succeed in every relationship. And no wonder people enjoy being respected. According to Webster, to be respected is to be esteemed or seen in high regard. Respect is an important part of an individual’s life because social interaction is a constant requirement for humanity and successful social interaction will lead to successful relationships, decisions and ultimately enhance the quality of individual lives.

Respect and Character Education

Respect is one of the primary traits taught in character education, which has become an integral part of today’s curriculum. In fact, respect is one of the main attributes educators believe could prevent another Columbine attack (Delisio, 2000). Not only have character education programs become popular, they have proven themselves beneficial as well. Schools in the state of Washington implemented federally funded character education programs for four years after the Columbine shootings in 1999. After the four years were over, the state tried to pass a bill to continue the programs. After great consideration, the state chose to dismiss the bill and no longer provide funding for the character education programs in the school system. Surprisingly, however, the schools continued to provide the character education because of the

difference they saw in the classroom. The educators and parents could not dismiss the programs as easily because they received such a positive response from the students (Delisio, 2000).

Students were able to learn how to build a strong character and were applying these lessons to their every day lives. These life lessons represented an education just as valuable as academic success because the character values and traits did not simply provide them with information, facts or critical thinking skills, all of which are beneficial in specific locations. These lessons also equipped students to prioritize and put into perspective the issues they face in their daily lives such as arguments with friends or family, decisions regarding career choices, or ways that they chose to treat others.

Sources and Recipients of Respect

Authority Figures

A popular trend in today's society is for students to be left alone or at childcare centers. Character education programs have been successfully implemented into the school system, but students still look to their guardians as primary models for the behaviors they have learned, and without reinforcement, the lessons are not nearly as effective. Students need to be taught and modeled good character or else they will never grow into strong and productive citizens. While some may debate whether or not the practice of childcare centers represents a positive development for social reform, the fact remains that students are learning and modeling character traits based on observation of peers and media such as television, music, and books, with books becoming more influential and popular all the time. Tom Keating decided several years ago that one approach to encourage students to begin to understand citizenship and respect for society is in their high school bathrooms. Keating describes high school bathrooms as "a national disgrace" (Gewertz, 2003, p. 38). He began implementing committees of students to focus on the bathrooms and tasked them with renovating and monitoring the general upkeep of the

facilities. His programs showed a lower dropout rate and an increase of respect in the schools. Not only did he fight for cleaner and more attractive restrooms but by creating student committees and placing them in charge of the upkeep of the restrooms, he gave them ownership of a piece of their community. He was not only a role model but forced the students to continue his work. Character education is an excellent way to supplement lessons of citizenship and community into student's lives. However, in order for the teaching to be completely successful, the students must have a proper role model.

First of all, students need to learn to respect their authority figures. If there is no respect for the teacher, the student simply will not enjoy learning that subject(s) and will therefore lose all interest and motivation. However, if a teacher is someone worthy of the student's respect, the student will be more likely to enjoy the material presented and remember it later. Goethe said, "In all things we learn only from those we love" (Inspiring words for educators, 2000, p. 1). This is not just the responsibility of the student but the teacher as well. Even a student who has been raised in a great home and sheltered from any questionable literature or media will still fail to respect and struggle to learn from a teacher that does not show love and respect to the student (Inspiring words for educators, 2000). A teacher standing in the front of the classroom teaching the importance of respect for one another, while exhibiting disrespect to students or even colleagues, would be ineffective in teaching character education. Students need to be respected just as much as the teachers and school officials in order for effective learning to take place (Minchella, 2007). Every relationship the student enters into throughout the rest of their lives will be challenged or strengthened depending on the amount of respect present.

In today's constructivist mindset, students are seen as young sea turtles that must wake up and simply discover the world for themselves (Braley & White, 2003). This approach lessens the importance of the teacher; both in practice and in mindset. Teachers and parents lose their

roles of educators or guardians and become merely guides on this great adventure called life (Braley & White, 2003). While there is some truth to Piaget's formulations, which emphasize the importance of constructive education, students will not learn everything through self-discovery methods. For students to reach their full potential, they must be provided sufficient resources to discover and be motivated by respected figures in authority. Not only do the attitudes of authority figures in the learning environment affect the level of academic progress the student is able to achieve, but they also affect student attitude toward learning.

Peers

Respect for authority is crucial in order to establish a well-developed learning environment, but respect for peers must also be present. Bullying has become a huge problem in the school system today and some would argue that a lack of respect is the cause (Langdon & Preble, 2008). Despite the difficulty of measuring respect, Susan Langdon and William Preble conducted a study determining the relationship between the amount of respect a student feels he or she received from peers at school and the amount he or she was bullied. They found that students who were not college-bound, those who came from low-income homes, and those who were not athletic did not feel they received a high amount of respect and did feel they were bullied more often as a result (Langdon & Preble, 2008). While respect is an abstract idea and is difficult to measure, this study was able to gain empirical evidence on the level of respect students felt they received. Langdon and Preble used a threefold definition of respect which incorporated how valued the student felt as a student in the school, whether or not the student's ideas were heard, and how the student felt he or she was treated in the school (Langdon & Preble, 2008). It is a common mistake to focus on correcting the symptoms of this problem, especially when the symptoms are so dramatic, but for bullying to really be addressed, it must be attacked at its root – the failure to demonstrate respect for others.

One of the best ways to give respect is to listen. Any individual, old or young, feels respected when someone takes the time to listen to her tell a story or express an opinion (Morrison, 2006). As Morrison (2009) explains, “Feeling respected and connected are intrinsic to one’s self-worth; they are basic needs of all human beings. The reciprocal relationship between these two needs, respect for others and connection with others, empowers individuals to act in the interest of the group, as well as their own” (p. 373). A student will not have a healthy self-image if he or she lacks the ability to respect the other individuals in the classroom or community.

Self

Another important consideration is respect for oneself. A student will never succeed if he or she does not value his or her own education or success. This is key. Self-respect gives “the zest necessary to pursue...life plans” (Kristjansson, 1998, p. 5). It is impossible for any individual to show respect for peers, colleagues or authority figures without having some level of respect for himself first. In today’s society, especially in the field of education, there is an increasing emphasis put on self-confidence and self-respect because so many students struggle with a low self-image (Kristjansson, 1998). So many children, especially those from inner cities and low socio-economic standing, come into the schools full of angry words from their mother or abuse from their father. And it does not come without a price. These students are told they are worthless from their parents, either verbally, physically or emotionally, and the students believe the lies. As a result, they do not apply themselves completely to their schoolwork, they minimize their own abilities in the classroom, and they allow themselves to be disrespected by their peers (Banks & Woolfson, 2008). Eleanor Roosevelt said that every individual decides whether or not she will allow others to treat her in a disrespectful or menial manner (Roosevelt, 1937). However, once a student, or any individual for that matter, allows others’ views to form

their own, especially the view of their own self-worth, it affects their confidence in their own abilities as well as their trust in the people around them.

One of the issues in the classroom for every teacher is the reality that diagnosing low self-esteem is difficult. Some students put on an air of overconfidence and arrogance to disguise their low self-worth (Kristjansson, 2007). The teacher is therefore expected to cultivate a healthy self-esteem in his or her students through allowing each student to realize his or her potential and helping them reach it (Kristjansson, 2007). Unfortunately, many teachers either refuse to accept anything but the very best, or they become complacent or too nice and accept minimum effort. Students will never develop healthy self-esteem through either of these approaches but must be pushed to their personal limits while continuing to be encouraged throughout the process. All too often students are not pushed as hard as they could be in the classroom. Many students could perform much more if only pressured and motivated to do so. This differs with every student, however, because some will break if pushed too far while others are simply like elastic bands that continue to stretch, no matter the pressure. The teacher must discover the preference and personality of each student in the classroom and use their individual learning styles to help them achieve their highest possible goals.

One excellent example of a teacher using different learning styles, and creating a classroom filled with respect, is that of Professor Frank Wright of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Professor Wright is a former Navy officer who places a very strong emphasis on respect in the classroom. He addresses each student using his or her last name and encourages other students to do the same in order to promote respect. He also learns each student's name and face from a picture roster before the first day. While he may be the most difficult professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, he has the respect of every student there because he works hard to gain their respect and treat them in the same way. Not only does he emphasize respect,

but he also uses several different learning styles in the classroom to allow each student to reach his or her full potential. He realizes that respect requires consideration and trust, and that is the way he treats his students (Porter, 2007).

Modern Literature's Influence on Students Today

Professor Wright's model is excellent because it demands respect be shown from every individual to every other individual in the classroom. However, the current trend in literature tends to focus exclusively on self-respect instead of including all three sources and recipients of respect. Protagonists in contemporary fiction are often young people who are seen as misunderstood and slighted, yet are able to rise above the prejudices placed on them. This is encouraging for many students, but can also hinder them if the student allows himself to become too cocky. If presented in the correct way, emphasis on self-worth could be an excellent motivation. However, too often this theme is mishandled in a frustratingly careless manner in which the protagonist, usually a child or young adult, is perceived to be wiser than the adults, whether these representations are parents, teachers, or other authority figures. Authors are well-aware of the influence they have and are successfully using it to instill self-respect into students, but they too often leave out the respect for peers and authority figures that is just as crucial as self-respect. The following are several books and series that have become popular in the last decade which represent examples of the ways that an overabundance of self-respect often comes at the expense of respect for peers and authority figures.

Frindle by Andrew Clements and Brian Selznick

One small book that has become popular in the last few years is *Frindle* by Andrew Clements and Brian Selznick (1996). In this book, the main character is Nick Allen, a fifth grader, who is horrified to discover he is in the dreaded Mrs. Granger's language arts class. One day, the class begins to discuss the origin of words. He is surprised to learn that many were just

made up. This gives him an idea. He decides he will create his own word and see if it catches on. On his way home, he begins to call a writing pen a *frindle*. Pretty soon the school, community and nation catch on. At the end of the book, the word *frindle* makes it into the dictionary. This is a cute story that encourages creativity and self-confidence. However, throughout the book, the teacher continually refuses to recognize Nick's new word and often punishes him for using the word in class. At the end of the story, she explains to him that she knew it would be a great word and make for a great story, but believed every story needs an antagonist so she placed herself in that position.

The author intentionally drew the teacher as a wise character throughout the entire story, but the reader is still left with a bad taste for the teacher. Mrs. Granger purposely was unreasonably mean and oppressive to Nick and his idea just to allow the story they found themselves in to be gripping. She announces that anyone who uses Nick's new word, *frindle*, would have to stay after class and write one hundred sentences. But this does not deter the students at all; in fact her announcement "Just made everyone want to use Nick's new word even more. Staying after school with the Lone Granger became a badge of honor" (Clements and Selznick, 1996, p. 43). Though it may seem the teacher is correct by the end of the story, it still does not make up for all of the cruelty she forced him to endure, such as having him stay after school, forcing him to write sentences, and humiliating him in class. The average student reading this book cannot help but walk away wondering what their own teacher's true intentions behind a certain assignment or punishment are and whether or not it is important to actually follow through with them. Not only is direct rebellion against Mrs. Granger encouraged, but the principal even gets involved because of the "general feeling that there was a rebellion at school, with no one respecting the rules anymore" (Clements and Selznick, 1996, p.91). When reading

this book, students should have explained for them the need to both exploring their creativity and to respect authority.

This book has many redeeming qualities. In the first paragraph, the author tries to describe Nick Allen. He explains that he simply cannot be classified in the good, bad, or smart kids but “deserved a list all his own” (Clements and Selznick, 1996, p. 1). Nick works hard in school and enjoys learning, but usually does so in unorthodox ways. He applies his learning to everyday life and the result is his creation of the new word. It is his creativity and originality that cause the reader to treasure the book and want to read it again and again. Nick shows respect for his parents, especially when they stand up for him against his principal in the midst of the word war. His friends are also very supportive of him and his harebrained ideas. They accept his new word with enthusiasm and are excited when the word begins to catch on locally and nationally. They even agree to take an oath to never use the word ‘pen’ again! There is definitely an element of respect for peers in the book. His friends stand behind him throughout the entire story and are willing to be punished for his sake. He also respects his friends and appreciates their willingness to go along with his idea. The idea of respect is not completely lost in the book; it is simply respect for school authorities that is lacking. The author could have used a little more caution when creating the authority characters and their relationships with the students.

Eragon by Christopher Paolini

Another popular reading selection in the school system today is *Eragon* (Paolini, 2003) and its two sequels, *Eldest* (2005) and *Brisingr* (2008). This is a fantasy series about a young boy, Eragon, who has been raised by his kind uncle and older cousin. He lives on a farm just outside of a small town in the middle of the Spine, a forest that is seen as haunted and evil by many of the locals. The Spine is shrouded with mystery and fear, but he enters it frequently to

hunt for his family, and it is in this haunted forest that he happens upon a dragon egg. It hatches and he is launched into a world of Shades, dwarves, and elves. He emerges as the new Rider, an ancient order of young men for whom a dragon egg hatched and who were trained to protect the kingdom together with their dragon. As the new Rider, Eragon represents his country's only hope of overthrowing the evil king, Galbatorix. He sets out on his adventures with the town's old storyteller, Brom, who turns out to be much more than a simple bard but also has a history as old as the kingdom. He begins to train young Eragon how to be a Rider, how to relate to his dragon, and how to fight.

However, *Eragon* portrays disrespect for authority as a result of the protagonist's inflated self-image. When Eragon first becomes a Rider and flees his hometown with Brom, he shows a frustratingly arrogant side. Despite the fact that the reader progressively learns the true significance of the old storyteller, it is clear Eragon does not care to learn and refuses to see Brom as the man he is: a man who should be respected due to his sacrifices for the kingdom. Brom even becomes frustrated with Eragon at one point, stating "Boy!...You demand answers with an insolence rarely seen" (Paolini, 2003, p. 139). While Brom admonishes Eragon, the story is written from Eragon's point of view so it does not encourage Brom's demand for respect but rather focuses on Eragon's increasing irritation. However, Brom later dies and Eragon increasingly wishes for a chance to see his first mentor again, while wondering at the amount of information that Brom could have taught him if they had been able to spend more time together. Eragon's second mentor, an elf Rider, saves his life and begins to teach the new Rider the complexities of magic and the details of being a Rider. Unfortunately, while Oromis, the old Rider, is a man to be respected, Eragon again often becomes frustrated with the instructions and allows his own self-importance to hold him back from learning all of the skills and practices Oromis attempts to teach the arrogant young man. After he leaves Du Weldenvarden, the elf

country, he begins to appreciate Oromis' lessons, but not until Eragon is faced with danger himself. Again, Eragon must be humbled in order to appreciate the instruction his teachers were attempting to give him.

Despite Eragon's overabundance of self-regard, this book and its sequels are an excellent read for people of all ages. It has all the excitement and creativity of *Lord of the Rings* or the *Chronicles of Narnia*. The authority discussion is resolved somewhat because of the rebukes Eragon often receives from his mentors as well as the continual mistakes he makes as a result of his pride. It also includes an excellent presentation of the struggle to discern between good and evil. Eragon and Murtagh, Eragon's friend turned evil step-brother, struggle to define the ethical line and the benefits and drawbacks of a good moral position are seen as well as those that are incurred by an evil, self-consumed stance. The reader is clearly able to understand why Murtagh would choose to serve the evil king and carry out his cruel orders despite his own moral hesitations. Murtagh's dilemma helps the reader, especially the younger generation, to understand how the lines between right and wrong are often blurred. This series would require student to think critically about every situation because good and evil, right and wrong are not presented as clearly as in other series such as *Harry Potter* or the *Chronicles of Narnia*. This is difficult because some students may easily become confused as to which character traits should be imitated, but it is also beneficial because it allows students to understand that reality often is not as black and white as it seems within some stories.

Harry Potter by J.K. Rowling

One of the most popular series that has hit the market in the last decade is the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling (2005). This series is about a young boy, Harry, who lives with his cruel uncle, aunt, and cousin. He discovers he has supernatural powers and is sent to a secret school for wizards and witches. Here, he discovers a whole new world of magic in which he is

something of a celebrity. He also forges ties with his two best friends, Ron and Hermione, who help him begin to fit into the magical world and also manage to get him out of trouble. The three of them cause quite a bit of problems at school as a result of their curiosity and confidence in their own abilities. Harry learns that when he was a baby, his father, a wizard, and his mother, a witch, were attacked by the evil Lord Voldemort, and were killed. However, when Lord Voldemort attacked young Harry, it destroyed the evil lord and left Harry with nothing but a lightning shaped scar on his forehead. The seven-book series unfolds the mystery of Harry's defeat of Lord Voldemort and the outcome of the evil lord's return.

One of the most recurring motifs in these books is Harry's lack of respect for authority of any kind. He maintains a horrible relationship with his uncle and aunt, and when he watches them leave for the last time, noting the awkwardness of the farewell, wonders what to say "at the end of sixteen years' solid dislike?" (Rowling, 2007, p. 36). Harry also distrusts the majority of his professors at his school, and even undermines the headmaster's authority by proceeding with plans that had been prohibited and going places he had been strictly forbidden to visit. However, despite his direct disobedience, his shenanigans are seen as wise. He ends up saving lives as a direct result of his disobedience and in the end, tracks and defeats Lord Voldemort in spite of his authority figures' direct plea to return to school instead (Rowling, 2007).

From the first book, Harry and his friends do not trust Professor Snape, the professor of Dark Arts at Hogwarts, though Dumbledore places his full confidence in the professor. In the sixth book, Professor Snape kills Dumbledore right in front of Harry. Harry repeatedly vents his frustration that if Dumbledore had simply listened to his suspicions about Professor Snape, the headmaster would still be alive. In the end, Dumbledore is slightly justified through a twist in the plot proving Snape's dedication to the good side, but Harry is still seen as the wiser character in the situation. Also, many of the professors Dumbledore trusts completely turn out to be evil,

exactly as Harry had predicted. This only justifies Harry's authority complex, which, in turn, suggests to young readers their authority figures are much like Harry's and cannot be trusted, much less respected.

There are some good qualities in the *Harry Potter* series. Harry and his friends encourage and model bravery at every turn. Also, Harry's friend Hermione is very studious and is rewarded often for her effort. In addition, there is a surprisingly definite line between right and wrong in the series, despite the uproar it caused upon publication. Though the majority of characters in the book use magic, they do not appeal to a higher power for the magic but rather it is part of them; there is also a difference between the witches and wizards who use magic for evil and those who use it for good. There is even a certain respect demonstrated for Muggles (those who cannot use magic and are typically unaware of its existence). Though they are looked down upon by the evil witches and wizards, the good magic users protect the Muggles; in fact, some of the main characters have Muggles for parents. This teaches students to respect diversity and honor those who may not have the same talents because they deserve respect as human beings, no matter their abilities or appearances. Surprisingly, many teachers have taken the *Harry Potter* books and have begun to use them in the classroom. Some use them as examples for good writing, some for creative ideas (Gibb, 2007) and still others to motivate personal reading skills (The power of Potter, 2007). Teachers know that students will recognize references to *Harry Potter* because even the students who have not read the books have seen the movies. And references made in class to the books help encourage students to read them, which only whets their appetite for future reading. Many students who begin reading the *Harry Potter* series go on to read other books for pleasure (The power of Potter, 2007).

Twilight by Stephanie Meyer

Twilight by Stephanie Meyer (2003) is a series that has hit the market very recently and appeals mostly to middle and high school students. In the series of four books, Bella is a young girl who decides to move in with her father, who lives in a small town in Washington, after her mother remarries. In Washington she meets a young man and his siblings at her school. The young man, Edward, holds particular interest for her and she soon discovers he is a vampire. They end up falling in love despite his nature. Edward and his coven have chosen to practice self-control and reserve their overwhelming blood thirst for animals, but others of their kind have not done the same, and therefore Bella is in almost constant danger. Her best friend, Jacob, who has been a family friend for her entire life, becomes a werewolf as a result of the vampires' presence in the small town of Forks, Washington. The animosity that builds between them as a result is difficult and emotional for Bella. The series follows the different adventures and frustrations Bella faces as she pursues her relationship with a vampire. She is often torn between her love for Edward and her companionship with Jacob. However, the love both Edward and Jacob hold for her eases the difficulty for her, as well as allows them to reconcile their own differences.

One of the more constant conflicts in these books is the struggle between Bella and the authority figures in her life, especially her parents. She refers to her parents by their first names unless directly addressing them, as she explains "I wasn't allowed to call him Charlie to his face" (Meyer, 2005, p. 6). She describes her mother as flighty and spacy and feels she served more as her mother's guardian than the other way around, stating that when she left, "I felt a spasm of panic as I stared at her wide, childlike eyes. How could I leave my loving, erratic, harebrained mother to fend for herself?" (Meyer, 2005, p. 4). Bella's father is seen as distant and uncaring until Bella begins to become serious with Edward; at this point her father begins to voice his

frustration concerning their relationship and his desire that she would spend more time with his lifelong friend's son, Jacob.

Bella is aware of the secret world of vampires and werewolves but is forbidden to tell anyone else, including her father. This makes the explanation of certain occurrences very difficult to explain, such as trips to the emergency room after being attacked by a vampire or surviving a cliff jump only because Jacob the werewolf saved her. Bella constantly has to figure out ways to protect her father from the evil vampires without his knowledge. Another disturbing feature is that Edward is able to come into Bella's window without her father knowing so he ends up spending long hours and even occasional nights in her bedroom (Meyer, 2005). It is clear that they are not acting inappropriately but they are still going directly against her father's wishes. It is also clear that her father is unaware of the majority of happenings and is therefore misinformed when he makes his judgments on Edward, but again this gives the impression that the parent is not worthy of full understanding. Bella even throws a fit at one point in which she delivers cruel words, the same cruel words to her father that her mother used when she left years before. She does it on purpose because she knows a vampire hunter is after her and will attack Charlie to get to her, but she deceives Charlie and ends up cutting him deeply (Meyer, 2005). This behavior, on Bella's part, causes the reader to feel Bella's father to be slightly naïve and foolish. Though Bella harbors correct intentions behind her actions, she still does not present a good role model for students; especially students who struggle with the idea of respecting those in authority anyway.

There are some qualities in these books that make them worth reading. Bella and Edward's relationship is refreshingly innocent. Because of Edward's vampire nature, he is incredibly tempted by Bella's smell and taste. As a result, he is very strict concerning their physical relationship. Bella is continually trying to press the limits, but Edward holds his

ground. Another positive element in these books is the fact that Bella does not stand for any type of prejudice, whether against her vampire boyfriend and his family, her werewolf friend and his pack, or any of her other human friends. The books are very well-written, revealing excellent writing style and vocabulary. And again, the relationship between good and evil is presented very clearly. It is interesting to see how differently right and wrong are viewed from the perspective of the vampires as compared to that of the werewolves, but Meyer does a wonderful job of allowing the reader to see the mindset from both sides and to understand the nature of true evil.

These are just a few examples of popular literature that reveal a disturbing trend toward disrespect for authority figures. It is obvious that these books cannot be discarded simply because of this quality, however marked it may be, but the importance of respect for authority must be addressed at the very least. Students must not see such direct disobedience as the norm because they will imitate their heroes. And students will perceive Harry Potter and Eragon as heroes. The action and the romance in the books appeal to girls and boys alike, and with Hollywood keeping up with the popular literature, even those who are disinterested in reading know the basic storyline. Every child knows the name Harry Potter and almost every child wishes he or she could have a magic wand and Harry's courage to fight and defeat the evil Lord Voldemort. These are the costumes most regularly seen at Halloween and these are the names most frequently mentioned in the *When I grow up I want to be...* essays in English class. Not only do readers look up to the main characters of these books, but the students can find comfort and encouragement from seeing their heroes face the same circumstances they have been through. Most of the works discussed have a small love story intertwined, some include sibling rivalry, others address parental frustrations and still others demonstrate the pain caused by broken homes.

Methods of Countering the Lack of Respect

Parental Responsibility

There are several practical ways modern literature can still be used to encourage character education and the need of respect for authority can be revived. The most important factor in establishing respect through the reading of literature is parental involvement. Studies show that parents are the ones who most affect the student's reading choices and abilities. Students will follow their parent's lead (Satisfy young children's innate hunger to learn, 2009). If a parent is actively involved in what the student is reading, the parent can address issues that could otherwise be detrimental to the student's attitude and worldview. For example, if a student is reading Harry Potter, a parent should be aware of the plot points addressed and the implicit messages so that during the reading process, the parent can continually ask the student questions such as "Why did Harry choose to disobey in this situation?", "Was his disobedience worthwhile?", and "Would this situation pan out in real life the same way?" Questions such as these help the student approach the literature critically (Satisfy young children's innate hunger to learn, 2009). Questions such as these will cause the child to consider the story on a deeper level. This not only discourages chronic disrespect but also encourages critical thinking. Children will likely apply these methods to the next story they read and will discover new messages that they never would have realized before. With a parent's involvement in reading, students could become more excited about reading as well (Satisfy young children's innate hunger to learn, 2009).

The Teacher's Role

The next step would be for teachers to create a book list that not only includes books but provides activities which cause the students to consider the book on a deeper level. This way, students can begin to think for themselves as they read – even if the reading is merely for

enjoyment. An old Chinese proverb states that giving a poor man a fish will help him for the moment, but teaching a poor man to fish will give him skills he needs to become independent and thrive for the rest of his life. Too often in today's education system, students are given fish. They are taught the basics of how to read, such as how to sound out words, how to spell the exceptions, and how to read fluently. However, they must learn to dig deeper into a text and find the themes and underlying messages that so often impact readers of all ages on a subconscious level. Students from a young age should learn how to pick out themes and messages seen in books and be able to choose between those which could and should be applied to real life and the behaviors or situations that should be avoided. This type of instruction in which students are taught to think critically to discover and apply underlying messages in a story is important for every age, from elementary education through high school, and even beyond. Not only will this instruction help students with their current reading choices, but it will open up a whole new list of books they are able to comprehend and enjoy. So many students in today's school face difficulties and tough circumstances. Some of the primary dilemmas are parents divorcing or the loss of a loved one. Often they feel alone and confused and a book with a main character that is facing the same issues is a huge encouragement to them (Hunt, 2006).

Most of the disrespectful attitudes exhibited by the characters in these books are a direct result of their upbringing. No child has a right to treat elders and authority figures with disrespect, but children coming from homes such as Harry Potter's should be given slightly more grace. Oftentimes a student struggling with home issues disrupts the management of the classroom, therefore hindering that particular student, as well as his or her peers', learning. If parents choose to allow their children to behave in a manner that displays disrespect then that is the business of the parent. However, when a student's behavior begins to disrupt a classroom, that is the point when an intervention is necessary.

If students are taught in the classroom how to think critically about their academic as well as pleasure reading, they will know what character traits to avoid and which ones to apply in their own lives. This is not a simple formula that students can memorize, but rather a pattern of critical thinking that they must allow to become a habit. Once students are able to recognize the ideas and behaviors in a book worthy of imitation, their reading will become much more productive and the character education programs included in many schools will be that much more productive. Students need to understand that no one is perfect, least of all the hero of their favorite book. Once that is established, they are able to pick out and apply the good aspects and leave the rest.

History of Respect in Literature

Peace Movement Effect

All of the aforementioned books that include this lack of respect for authority by key characters have been published in the last decade. This is important to note. The idea of rebellion has always been intriguing, especially to students in the middle grades, and there are plenty of good, historical examples to encourage that theme, such as the American Revolution and women's suffrage. However, the sixties and seventies encouraged rebellious attitudes even more, especially in the younger generation. The free love movement still affects the nation in many ways. During that time, everyone was angry against the government for choosing to go to war, and they exercised their right to demonstrate their disapproval. As it turned out, troops were pulled out of Vietnam and the war was considered a failure because America did not succeed in stopping the Vietcong but merely left the hostile environment. The peace movement worked hard to demonstrate its frustration with the failure and their belief that the war should have been avoided in the first place.

While the brightly colored vans may not be as common any more, and hippie communes even rarer, the idea of peace through rebellion has continued. It is still a popular belief that the younger generation is much wiser than their elders. Some believe that the teacher must act more as a friend than a teacher (Stewart, 1979), representing an overthrow of the social constructs that had been previously established. Stewart even asks the traditional models of education “Do you have a political blue print for society and seek to incorporate politicized schools within it? Do you accept that schools cannot and should not be seen as chief agencies of political change?” (Stewart, 1979, p. 104). This mindset is not just aimed at the greater authority such as the government or dominant ideologies. Most students have translated this understanding into their relationship with their parents and teachers because those are the authorities they must submit to everyday. However, questioning authority is not a completely negative approach, of course. As the Vietnam War and the American Revolution illustrated, harmful or simply offensive social constructs should be interrogated, and if necessary, overthrown. And no individual is perfect, no matter the level of authority they represent. Students should never be taught to simply obey authority because it is the right thing to do, but must be able to analyze what situations are worth the fight.

Bridging the Generational Gap

The idea that parents are *not cool* is an old idea. Every generation has its new style of music, clothes, hairdos and even language, and no parent, despite the fact that many try, can succeed in fitting in to that culture. Parents are either out of the “cool loop” with their old-fashioned music and values, or they try too hard to fit in and are therefore simply annoying to the child. Like the teacher, the parent must become someone the child can respect. No matter what the media or literature may say, a child will respect a parent who deserves her respect, whether from just decisions made in the home regarding siblings, living out the moral code impressed on

the children or showing genuine concern for their children (Porter, 2007). Students need to be able to differentiate between when their parents are protecting the child and when a decision or instruction could bring about harm to the child, parent, or anyone else. A student cannot ignore the counsel of teachers or parents simply because the child feels he or she knows and understands better than the grown-up ever could. Students do not realize that every adult has been through the same situations and feelings children face. One of the ways teachers have started to bridge this generation gap is to use intergenerational book clubs where students invite someone from a different generation to read a book and come to the discussion meetings. Surprisingly, while some difficulty was seen when they first began, the intergenerational book clubs have become extremely popular (Powers, 2009).

Perhaps one of the greatest ways a student can develop a proper level of respect for parents and teachers is to read the classic books that those authority figures read as a child. While this suggestion may seem traditional, there are many incredible pieces of literature that are considered classics simply because of their age. Some educators seem determined to keep up with the current moment and only read the newest bestseller, but this method should not be the only one used (Stewart, 1979). Reading classic literature will show students the quality of writing that existed before the student's time and the child will begin to understand his or her elders because of the value of the book or books. Not only will the student begin to understand where the authority figure is coming from, but he or she will be afforded the chance to read the classics and, if the books are chosen wisely, develop a correct sense of when to submit to authority and when to stand one's ground on a particular issue. In no way should one suggest the older books are always the better ones, because many excellent books have been written in the last decade. And, this is not to say that all the classic books are completely devoid of questionable authority figures. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (1884) is an

excellent example of a young protagonist who faced difficulties and openly rebelled against the authority of his guardian as well as the government!

Many of the protagonists in these modern works have either grown up in dysfunctional homes or exhibit a certain rebellious personality that encourages them not to respect the authority placed in their lives, whether it be in the form of parents, teachers, or government officials. One work includes a boy being raised by an uncle who is kind and caring but cannot provide a mother's care; another is raised by an aunt and uncle who are ashamed to include their nephew in their family; the last was raised by an impractical and indecisive mother, while visiting her distant father very rarely. Any child raised in these situations would have difficulties with authority. Many students are going through some of these same situations and therefore find comfort in these books (Hunt, 2006). They are able to relate to the main characters because they have faced the same situations. However, the students must be taught that others still deserve respect, no matter how their own upbringing may have taught them differently. One way of encouraging a respectful attitude towards others is to introduce strong role models.

Classic Literature Encouraging Respect

Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett

One good example of a character that suffered from a difficult family relationship but overcame the lack of respect she felt for them was Mary Lennox from the *Secret Garden* (Burnett & Tudor, 1962). Her parents paid her little attention and usually simply left her with a nanny. After their death, she was forced to live with an isolated uncle who was himself struggling with the pain of losing his beautiful young wife. Mary soon discovers some of her uncle's staff is to be respected due to their selfless natures and encouraging personalities. Martha is Mary's chambermaid who treats Mary with respect – a behavior that Mary is completely unfamiliar with. Mary also discovers her cousin, Colin, who has undergone the same

neglect from his father that Mary had to endure from her parents. Mary finds the key to a secret garden that has been locked up for years. Dickon, Martha's younger brother, helps her revive the garden. The two are able to convince Colin he is not dying due to his humpback condition and coax him to walk in the secret garden after it has bloomed. In the end, the uncle leaves his seclusion and decides to be the father his son deserves. Mary and Colin come to respect him, as well as the other people who have helped them, such as Martha and the housekeeper, Mrs. Medlock.

Mary and Colin are wonderful role models because they reveal their pain and fears, but they also work through them. They do not take that frustration out on every authority figure but rather learn to isolate their painful situations. It is not an easy process, which the author reveals very clearly, but Mary in particular shows a determination to overcome the injustice that has been shown her. The author details many of Mary's tantrums and ill moods, but these are not encouraged by any of the people in Mary's life and Mary not only learns that she must adopt a positive outlook despite what she has been forced to live through, but convinces her cousin of the same. It is interesting the way that Mary learns the ineffectiveness of her tantrums by watching Colin's fits. Not only do Mary and Colin decide to move past their pain, but they have an excellent role model in Dickon, who is laid back and always encouraging both of them.

The Wheel on the School by Meindert DeJong

Another example of an excellent book that is older but portrays a very well-developed sense of respect for authorities, as well as encouraging the formation of role models, is *The Wheel on the School* by Meindert DeJong (1954). This book is about a class in Holland which realizes there are no storks in their village. They decide it is because all of the roofs come to a point and therefore the storks have no place to create a nest. As a result, the students go out into the village to find a wheel that they can place on the top of the school building so that the stork

can roost there. The students are all well-behaved but lovable characters who respect their teacher, their parents, and the other elders in the story. They face many tribulations in their attempt to find a wheel, but they do not give up and in the end have a stork build a nest on their wheel on the top of the school.

The teacher and the older people in the village help the students along the way. They are a great example of how important older people in the community are to the younger generations. Many of the older people remember the storks and help the students discover what will bring the birds back again. The children all hold their elders in very high esteem. There are places in the book in which the students disagree with their authority figures but they do so graciously and with respect. Also, many times, when the students need help, it is their elders that aid them. At one point, two of the students find a wheel, but it is sadly broken. The Tin Man comes along, sees the boys working so hard to bring the wheel back despite its broken appearance, and decides he wants to help. He fixes the wheel for them, so that all they have to do is roll it back to the school! Two of the other students find another wheel and work hard to bring it back to the school all on their own and succeed. All of the students somehow contribute and soon are delighted to find a stork roosting on the schoolhouse roof. This book provides excellent role models for students today and all of the students in the book are well-behaved and respectful without losing their fun, childish personalities.

Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis

A series that is beneficial to any child or adult who chooses to read would be the *Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis (1949-1954). These books reveal the secret world of Narnia and how people from the real world arrive there, eventually playing an important part in that magical world. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1950) is the most well-known book in the series and features an excellent model of respect for authority. The four children are

forced to leave their home and live with a professor out in the country. They discover they are able to access the secret world of Narnia by stepping through a wardrobe. There, they meet many strange characters and discover they are part of a prophecy which will change the history of Narnia. To accomplish this, they must fight the evil White Witch with Aslan the Great to regain rightful power over Narnia.

Despite the professor's limited appearances in the novel, the children respect his wishes for peace and quiet in his home. Even when Susan and Peter decide to speak to him about their concerns for Lucy, they are careful to show him the utmost respect and gratitude. Students can see firsthand how important and beneficial showing respect can be. Another positive feature of this book is the way the children treat one another. Edmund treats Lucy badly in the beginning but his behavior is betrayed as being naughty and he is completely apologetic once he returns from the White Witch. Not only is he repentant later in the book, but his behavior is part of the salvation allegory. The children treat the older characters, such as Mr. Tumnus and Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, with total respect, referring to them by their social titles.

The children in the story also value these older character's opinions. They are careful not to make unwise decisions or believe blindly, but to distinguish the good from the evil. Edmund respects the evil White Witch and it is seen as foolish because of her cruel nature. The characters therefore are careful to make sound judgments as to who should be respected and who should not. This is an important lesson for students in today's culture to learn because so many people on television, radio and in print will claim authority when they have no right. Once a student can distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil (a theme which *Harry Potter*, *Eragon*, and the others clearly develop) how he or she will be able to make better judgments concerning which authorities to respect. Not only will this affect reading strategies but it will help that student the rest of her life. She will be able to determine the justice and evil behind

every situation and better understand why authority demands so much respect, especially in constructs such as the government and educational systems.

The real goal of teachers and parents should therefore be the hope that students will not simply be sheltered from books that contain negative themes such as the lack of respect for authority, but that students will be able to discover that theme on their own and have the wisdom to avoid imitating that pattern of behavior in their own lives. Once a student can think critically about what he or she is reading and is able to decide whether or not that is an aspect worth imitating, then the student can become a fluent reader who will benefit the most from his or her reading. The student can then read any type of material, questionable or wholesome, and be able to pick out the redemptive qualities and understand how to treat the negative messages. Building readers like this takes time and energy, however. It is the responsibility of the parent as well as the teacher to help students arrive at this reading level. In the meantime, quality reading materials must be provided and adequate instruction is crucial for the students to understand the value of the text. Students must also be provided with positive role models in their academic and pleasure reading literature so that they will imitate decent character traits.

Teaching Students to Read Critically

No book is going to be perfect. There is not a human being that has ever been infallible, therefore no fictional character will be. Aside from the characters, every author has some sort of natural bias that will alter a reading of their story. Some are blatant and others are subtle, but a well-trained eye can find a hidden message behind any written text. Parents and teachers cannot become too picky with the literature they allow children to read because the child will miss out on many valuable texts. Despite their lack of respect for authority, *Harry Potter* (2005), *Eragon* (2003), and the other works described hold many worthy qualities. One of the primary qualities is that these books encourage and motivate students to read for pleasure, an excellent goal for

anyone to pursue. Reading for pleasure not only increases a student's knowledge, but it also aids their spelling, vocabulary, and writing skills. A student who can read critically and wisely will become successful.

Therefore, students must be encouraged to read, especially for pleasure, and books such as the ones included above are excellent means for getting the student excited about reading. However, the authority figure in the child's life must realize the messages that the child will be confronted with, whether the child recognizes them or not. That guardian or teacher has to be prepared to address the difficult issues presented in the book. One of the best criteria a teacher can look for is to determine whether or not the main character would be a decent role model for the student or not. If the main character is fun and outgoing yet constantly lies, a student struggling with lying must see how the lies have a negative effect on the protagonist's life. Teachers and parents should be able to work together to create a list of books in which the protagonist deals with similar conflicts to the student, or at least books in which the student's negative behavior is not encouraged. A teacher taking the time to invest in a child's life in just a small way like this will make all the difference in the world. Oftentimes, it's not that the student necessarily has an issue at all but is simply asking for attention, which teachers must also consider when selecting literature for the students. The truth is, as long as the teacher cares and is involved, even if a horrible book is chosen for the student, a loving and respectful teacher will cause the student to flourish.

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