What will my teacher be like? Picture storybooks about starting school

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CHILDREN LEARN A GREAT DEAL about school, what happens at school, and the people they will meet at school as they engage with popular culture, such as television, games and books. One of the issues raised by many children as they contemplate starting school concerns what their teacher will be like. Children’s expectations about teachers are important contributors to the relationships that develop between teachers and children. Such relationships are themselves a critical factor in children’s school engagement. Examining some of the information that contributes to children’s expectations about teachers supports a focus on children’s experiences as they start school.

This article reports a study of the images of teachers within children’s picture storybooks—an accessible form of popular culture about school. A collection of 164 English language picture storybooks spanning 1967–2007 was analysed to explore the representations of teachers in schools. Three areas of analysis were undertaken: how teachers are represented; the dominant images of teachers; and the images that are omitted. The analysis demonstrates the generally benign images of teachers and questions the understandings the books promote about teachers and the roles of teachers in schools.

Introduction

One of the sources of children’s knowledge about school is popular culture, which can provide a resource for children to learn about specific communities (such as school) and their roles and relationships within these communities (Haas Dyson, 1997). Weber and Mitchell (1995, p. 2) note the pervasiveness of popular culture images of school: ‘Even before children begin school, they have already been exposed to a myriad of images of teachers, classrooms and schools which have made strong and lasting impressions on them’. Once they start school, children’s own experiences of education, along with those encountered through popular culture (Hickey & Austin, 2006) contribute to the public text of ‘teacher’ (Mockler, 2004).

Young children encounter popular culture in many contexts, such as conversations, play, television, movies, computer games, advertising and children’s literature. One of the most common strategies used by educators and families to help children become familiar with school has engaged popular culture in the form of children’s books about school. Part of the rationale for this approach draws from the view that children’s literature can serve as a catalyst, promoting conversations that both encourage children to share what they know and to voice concerns they may have about school (Triplett & Ash, 2000).

We are wary of assuming that specific forms of social discourse—such as those associated with teachers and teaching—derive solely from the reading of a specific text or texts. Rather, we recognise that social discourse is complex and there is not a simple, causal connection between discourse and social attitudes (Mockler, 2004). When children are engaged in multiple readings and ongoing conversations with others about schools and teachers, they are likely to build up specific expectations that incorporate some of these readings and conversations. Weber and Mitchell (1995; 1999) refer to this as a process of constructing cumulative cultural texts, where images from the past (such as those of parents, siblings, friends) are combined with those of the present (including those in popular culture) to ‘give members of a society a common frame of reference and a shared pool of expressive images to..."
use’ that ‘blend seamlessly and often undetected into our familiar, unquestioned everyday knowledge’ (Weber & Mitchell, 1999, p. 168). Children starting school encounter and engage with a variety of popular culture images of teachers. These images can help shape how children think about teachers at school and their own identity as school students, influencing ‘relations and representations of self with and within the wider community’ (Beavis, 2000, p. 1).

The importance of the teacher

Children starting school are eager to know who their teacher will be and what they will be like (Potter & Briggs, 2003). Some children have concerns that their teacher will be mean and that, consequently, school will not be a pleasant place. For example, Clarke and Sharp (2003, p. 20) report Singaporean children’s concerns that the teacher ‘might be very fierce’ and Brostrom (1998) reports the concerns of Swedish children that their teacher will be authoritarian; constantly issuing commands and directions. In Australian studies, knowing who the teacher will be and what the teacher will be like remain important issues for children as they start school (Dockett & Perry, 2005).

The nature of relationships between children and their teacher is a critical factor in children’s successful school trajectories. Teachers who are warm, caring and responsive to individual children—described by Hamre and Pianta (2007) as sensitive teachers—have the potential to create learning environments where children feel valued, safe and encouraged to learn. In studies investigating images of teachers, this description constitutes a ‘relational’ (Triplett & Ash, 2000) or ‘positive’ teacher (Sandefur & Moore, 2004). Pianta (1998, p. 17) emphasised the importance of positive teacher–child relationships, noting that ‘child competence is often embedded in and a property of relationships with adults’ and that such relationships can shape children’s engagement with, and therefore future success at, school. One of the bases for establishing positive relationships is the expectation—from children as well as teachers—that such relationships are a part of school life.

Images of teachers in picture storybooks

It has been argued that narrative texts serve as ‘mirrors and windows’ (Cullinan & Galda, 1998) and that ‘children’s perceptions of the teaching profession are subtly shaped’ by what they encounter in books about school (Trousdale, 1994, p. 213). Several studies have investigated the representation of teachers and schools in children’s literature. Notable among these are Greenway’s (1993) focus on negative images of school; Barone, Meyerson and Mallette’s (1995) identification of positive and negative images of teachers; Radencich and Harrison’s (1997) images of principals; and Trousdale’s (1994) analysis of teachers in picture books.

Picture books are one form of children’s literature used regularly by parents and educators in their interactions with young children. Temple, Martinez, Yokoto and Naylor (1998) define three types of picture books: wordless picture books, where the illustrations tell the story; picture storybooks, where the illustrations and text together tell the story; and illustrated books, which rely mainly on the text to tell the story. This discussion focuses on picture storybooks, recognising the importance of illustrations to young children (Evans & Sainty-Aubin, 2005).

While a wide range of images of teachers in picture storybooks is noted by Sandefur and Moore (2004, p. 42), not many of these are noted as positive, with teachers represented as ‘at best, kind but uninspiring and at worst, roadblocks to be torn down in order that children may move forward successfully’. Reflecting the notion of cumulative cultural texts (Weber & Mitchell, 1995; Weber & Mitchell, 1999), Sandefur and Moore (2004, p. 43) recognise that ‘these representations become subsumed into the collective consciousness of a society and shape expectations and behaviours of both students and teachers’.

Sandefur and Moore’s (2004) analysis focused on picture storybooks generally, rather than only those about starting school. Overwhelmingly, teachers were portrayed as white, female, and generally not particularly competent in managing the classroom. A minority of teachers was portrayed as sensitive and competent. Most teachers were described as one-dimensional and static. Very few teachers were considered to inspire children’s learning, and several teachers were portrayed as unwilling to intervene in situations such as teasing. In a similar vein, Barone et al. (1995) described the polarisation of teacher representations—teachers were represented as either valued members of society, or as inept fools. Triplett and Ash (2000) also identified representations of teachers along two dimensions: relational (concerned with developing positive relationships with children) as opposed to non-relational (seeking no personal connection with children); and ethical rebels (challenging rules for the benefit of children) as opposed to non-ethical rebels (challenging rules for their own benefit). The transitional teacher—moving from one to the other of these positions in either dimension—was reported to be rare, particularly in literature for young children.

Given the prevalence of these images across the genre of picture storybooks, we were interested in the nature of images in books that seek to introduce children to school and to teachers and the possible contributions of these to children’s expectations of the teachers they
would meet at school. This paper reports a project investigating the images of teachers in children’s picture storybooks about starting school. It has its origins in our ongoing investigation of the transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2007) and the recognition that most transition-to-school programs include activities where children read, or are read, books about starting school. In considering the books used in transition programs, we sought answers to the following questions:

1. How are teachers represented in the books?
2. What are the dominant images of teachers in these books?
3. What images are missing from the books?

Methodology

This study involved the analysis of a wide range of picture storybooks. One hundred and sixty-four books about starting school provided the data sample. These books were located through bookshops, recommendations from parents or teachers, and through library searches. The picture storybooks studied were sourced from Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America (USA), Canada, the United Kingdom (UK) and Singapore. Their publication spans a period of 40 years: 1967–2007. They encompass those regarded as ‘classics’—such as Cohen’s (1967) Will I have a friend?—as well as others that are contemporary—such as Whybrow and Reynolds’ (2006) Harry and the dinosaurs go to school. The availability of the books, rather than their literary merit, was the initial criterion for inclusion in the study.

From the initial sample, 22 books were identified that did not include school or a substantial role relating to an adult educator. These books included My friend Harry (Lewis, 1995) and The kissing hand (Penn, 1993) which focus on issues such as parent–child separation or separation from a comfort object when starting school, rather than school life itself. These books were not included in further analysis.

Content analysis (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) of the remaining 142 books involved multiple readings by the authors, focus on the ways in which different elements of the book contributed to the meanings constructed, and the awareness that the data itself was a co-construction, with our interpretations impacting on what we identified and this, in turn, impacting on the data generated. Throughout the multiple readings, we noted the representations of teachers—including names, gender, diversity, language, appearance, location, mode of interaction—as well as the absence of such data; for example, the lack of names for teachers and modes of interaction that were not included. In keeping with Triplett and Ash (2000), our definition of teacher included adult educators within school contexts. This meant that principals, librarians, aides, counsellors and other adult educators were included in the analysis.

The unit of analysis across the books was the teacher as depicted by visual images and/or accompanying text. Where multiple teachers were evident in books, each different teacher was analysed. Where a teacher appeared on more than one occasion, the illustrations and text related to that one teacher across the contexts were coded as one instance. Coding was undertaken by two independent researchers, utilising both pre-existing categories identified from previous studies (Sandefur & Moore, 2004; Triplett & Ash, 2000), and identifying other emergent themes from the data. Inter-rater reliability for coding was 98%.

In order to address the overall research questions, the following questions were used to generate categories within the content analysis:

1. How are teachers represented in the books?
   ■ What is the teacher’s name?
   ■ What is the teacher’s gender?
   ■ What is the cultural background of the teacher? Can this be determined?
   ■ What is the physical representation of the teacher?
   ■ What is the appearance of the teacher?

2. What are the dominant images of teachers in these books?
   ■ What are the roles of the teacher?
   ■ Does the teacher work to build positive relationships with the children?
   ■ Does the teacher challenge the rules or parameters of school? If so, who benefits from this?
   ■ Is there evidence of change in the teacher within the book?
   ■ What evidence is there of power relationships? With whom?

3. What images are missing from the books?
   ■ What representations are missing?
   ■ Are teachers presented as learners?
   ■ Do teachers critically engage their students?
Results and discussion

How are teachers represented in the texts?

One hundred and eighty-seven teachers were represented in the 142 books analysed. In presenting results and discussion we refer to the total number of teachers (187), rather than the number of books. The majority of the teachers were female (n = 144; 77%), of white, Anglo-Celtic appearance (n = 140; 75%) (Table 1). Most of the teachers had a name (n = 107; 57%), though a substantial proportion (n = 80; 43%) remained nameless. As reported by Trippett and Ash (2000), the teacher’s name was often a clue to their personality or style of interaction. Examples include Miss Twinkle (Chrysanthemum, Henkes, 1991), Mr Chase (I am not going to school today, Harris, 2003) and Ms Sugarman (Kindergarten rocks!, Davis, 2005). The most striking example of the nameless (and faceless) teacher appears in David goes to school (Shannon, 1999), where David is consistently chastised for breaking the rules of school. Some books reflected the fears of children that the teacher would be a monster; for example, Kate’s concern in I don’t want to go to school (Harris & Smith, 2001, pp. 5–6) ‘about what the teacher would be like’ is accompanied by a teacher portrayed as a dragon.

The majority of teachers represented were female. While this does reflect the gender of primary teachers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005), several of these images were similar to those described by Weber and Mitchell (1995, pp. 44–45), reflecting a certain “kind” of female … long skirts, with their hair pinned back in severe buns, evoking the stereotype of an “old maid”’. Despite the presence of these images, there was no clear physical stereotype of female teacher in the sample for this study. Images of female teachers covered a range of ages, appearances and modes of dress.

One feature of teacher representations consistent with previous analyses (Trousdale, 1994) was that teachers, particularly female teachers, smiled a lot. For example, the following text from My first day of school (Hallinan, 1987, p. 10) is matched with an image of a smiling teacher:

And our teacher just smiles
And talked with such care
That all of our fears
Disappeared into air.

What are the dominant images of teachers in these books?

Teacher roles

Four major roles were identified in the analysis. These and relevant frequencies are listed in Table 2.

Teacher as classroom manager. The most common role identified for teachers was that of classroom manager. This included greeting children and families, setting up resources, making equipment available and cleaning up. Examples include Miss Posy, the teacher in Off to school, Baby Duck (Hest, 1999), who greets families at the classroom door and offers some words of encouragement for both parents and children and Miss Bindergarten in Miss Bindergarten gets ready for kindergarten (Slate, 1996), who sets up the classroom, tidies up and decorates the room before the children arrive for their first day at school. As classroom manager, the teacher supervises play, gives directions to children—often about where to put their belongings—and, on rare occasions, helps to solve conflict.

Teacher as disciplinarian. Fourteen per cent (n = 27) of the teachers in these books focus on the rules of school and the consequences of breaking these. For example, Miss Ping (Tom’s first day at school, Robbins, 2001) explains the rule that ‘You must not play with balls indoors’ and when this rule is broken, she tells Lionel, ‘I’ll hold on to this … you can have it back after school’. There are clear messages that rules are important, teachers have the power to impose rules and consequences, and children have no power to respond. Mrs Sarmiento (Sam and Gram and the first day of school, Blomberg, 1999) also reminds children of the rules when she ‘walked down the line and showed each child how to stand side-by-side with a partner’.

Teacher as pedagogue. Forty-nine per cent (n = 91) of teacher images reflected their engagement in teaching and learning activities. The most frequent activity involved the teacher reading to children (n = 40; 21%).

Table 1. Teacher characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Number (n = 187)</th>
<th>Percentage (of 187)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, Anglo-Celtic appearance</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers with a name</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Teacher roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher role</th>
<th>Number (n=187)</th>
<th>Percentage (of 187)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher as classroom manager</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher as disciplinarian</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher as pedagogue</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher as nurturer</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational teachers</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers exercising power</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Multiple roles are possible
Reading was portrayed as a positive and powerful process. However, it was noticeable that teachers were generally the ones to read, while children listened. Some teachers (n = 16; 9%) were also portrayed singing, or playing the piano or guitar. Once again, teachers led this interaction.

Teachers were rarely portrayed as playing with children. An exception is Ms Manoli in First day (Wild, 1998), who is depicted leading a dance and playing with children both indoors and out. Supervising play (part of the role of teacher as classroom manager) was more common than teachers actually playing with children.

While teachers were engaged in teaching and learning activities, the nature of the pedagogy underpinning this engagement was not often clear. For example, some teachers were standing at the front of the classroom, directing children’s attention to a board. Others were depicted sitting with or near children as the children engaged in art, reading, construction or play activities. Only in a small number of instances were teachers portrayed as supporting children as they engaged in challenging intellectual pursuits. One example was the teacher in Quetzal and the cool school (Anderson, 2000) who encouraged children to build on what they could already do.

Mrs Candy (Our class, Impey & Porter, 2001) was one of the few examples where there was an explicit focus on learning in a play-based classroom.

Teacher as nurturer. Twenty-five per cent (n = 47) of teachers were depicted as providing some form of support or comfort. Typically, the teacher in these instances was shown comforting upset children, reassuring them as they entered school for the first time, helping children dress themselves or providing food. An example is Here we go round the mulberry bush (Hillenbrand, 2003), where the teacher serves biscuits that she has made for a snack.

Relational teachers

Some teachers demonstrated concern for children in both academic and personal spheres. Tripplett and Ash (2000) have labelled these as ‘relational’ teachers. In contrast, non-relational teachers are described as seeking ‘no personal relationship with students, are either passive or active in their lack of relating’ (Tripplett & Ash, 2000, pp. 245–246). The majority (n = 123; 66%) of teachers in the current analysis were coded as non-relational. These teachers went about the business of teaching without connecting on a personal level with the children. Examples include Mrs Chud in Chrysanthemum (Henkes, 1991), who recognised Chrysanthemum’s distress at being teased, but did not act to resolve it.

The remaining 64 teachers (34%) did show some personal connection with children, including holding hands with children in the playground, having children sit on their knee, hugging children (First day, Wild, 1998) and demonstrating empathy (Painted words, Brandenberg, 1998). Some books have addressed issues associated with children starting life in a new country as well as starting school. Several of these provide images of teachers committed to building positive relationships with these children and between the children and their classmates. The name jar (Choi, 2001) is one example.

Teachers challenging the rules

Throughout the books, there were no clear examples of teachers who overtly challenged the rules, either to benefit themselves or others. There were, however, examples of teachers who engaged in behaviour such as singing and dancing with the children, (Ms Manoli in First day, Wild, 1998) and playing with children (Mrs Hippo in Time for school, Steer, 1997). While not necessarily challenging the rules, this behaviour is in marked contrast to the majority of teachers in these books, who remain very much in a position of control (usually at the front of the class).

Transitions in teacher images

In their analysis of images of teachers, Tripplett and Ash (2000) noted limited instances where teachers appeared to make a transition, usually from a non-relational to a relational teacher. While this trend was rare, it was possible to identify a few instances where the initial representation of the teacher was one of disconnection with children, but where this changed during the course of the book. For example, the teacher in My name is Yoon (Recorvits, 2003) seems initially distant from Yoon. However, as child and teacher get to know each other, a strong relationship builds. More common is the transition in children’s expectations, moving from anxiety that their teacher will be a monster, to the pleasant reality that the teacher is friendly after all. Examples include I don’t want to go to school (Harris & Smith, 2001) and Spider school, (Simon, 1996).

Teacher effectiveness

In the majority of the books, teachers were seen to be effective in helping children to feel at ease at school. In Tom goes to kindergarten (Wild & Legge, 1999), school turns out to be such good fun that the whole family stays. Teacher effectiveness in terms of engaging children in meaningful curriculum was not evident in many books, though it is noted that these books focus on starting school, where social and emotional connections are particularly important (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Mrs Candy (Our class, Impey & Porter, 2001), remains a strong example of a teacher who connected socially with the children in her class and promoted engagement in a wide range of learning experiences.
In some instances, teacher ineffectiveness was illustrated. The unnamed teacher in *We share everything* (Munsch, 1999) appeared angel-like (with wings) as she tried to resolve conflict between Amanda and Jeremiah by reciting her kindergarten mantra, ‘In kindergarten, we share. We share everything’. Her efforts to resolve conflict were superficial and it is clear at the end of the book that the power relations between teacher and children had shifted when the two protagonists are seen to have taken her rule to heart, swapped clothes and explained that ‘In kindergarten, we share. We share everything’. This representation of the teacher is the nearest example to Trousdale’s (1994) teacher as buffoon found across the books. It represents a teacher unable to effectively resolve conflict while the children resolve the situation themselves.

Teachers and power

Situations that reflected teachers’ power and use of power with children were identified for 67 (36%) teachers. Power relationships are represented in several ways in this selection of books. Power is implied in the positioning of teachers—whether the teacher is located at the front of the classroom or sitting at a desk, or as the active participant in reading experiences. Children, sitting and listening to the teacher, tend to be represented as passive.

The power of the teacher to praise and reward is central to several books, including *Meet the Barkers: Morgan and Moffat go to school* (de Paola, 2001) and *Little Miss Spider at Sunny Patch School* (Kirk, 2000), where after one day at school Little Miss Spider laments:

> The school day was over.
> They sounded the bell.
>
> She sobbed, ‘Is there anything I can do well?’

Few books suggest that children are in a position to challenge the power of the teacher. One example is Munsch’s *We share everything* (1999), where the children use the teacher’s mantra to shift assumed power. Another is *The twelve days of kindergarten* (Rose, 2003) which shows the teacher becoming progressively frazzled as the children take on tasks and activities in unexpected ways. By the final pages, the teacher is shown pulling her hair out, and then being comforted by children who declare, ‘We love school’.

There were 10 teachers shown in power relationships with parents. One example is *The night before kindergarten* (Wing, 2001), where parents are represented waiting at the classroom door, unable to enter until the teacher gives permission. At the end of the day, the teacher, Miss Sunrise, finally invited the parents into the classroom, as she ‘gathered the grown-ups on the magical rug, then sent them away after one final hug’. Another example comes from *Bye, bye* (Kaufman, 2003), where the teacher stands and points to the door, with the text explaining, ‘Oh, no! Teacher says you really have to go, Daddy!’

The majority of teachers were women who undertook a number of functions related to managing the classroom, acting as disciplinarians, pedagogues and nurturers. The description seems remarkably similar to the ‘nice ladies who love children’ image described by Stonehouse (1994). Despite the identification of the role of teacher as nurturer, a minority of teachers were represented as relational, or regarded as building social and emotional, as well as academic, connections with children.

**What images are missing?**

**Gender**

Forty-three (23%) of the teachers depicted were male (Table 1). This included several who were identified as principals and specialist teachers. The male classroom teachers in these books were represented as caring and fun to be with. For example, Mr Chase, in *I am not going to school today* (Harris, 2003), tells children that they will play and sing at lot at school. While male teachers were represented as promoting fun at school, they were not depicted as smiling nearly as often as female teachers. Trousdale (1994, p. 207) notes that the smiling face of the teacher ‘indicates good will … [and it] also signifies a lack of threat that may be interpreted as a submissive attitude, a desire to please. Why do the male teachers not need to smile so continuously?’

**Diversity**

As in other analyses of children’s books, there is a general lack of cultural and linguistic diversity represented across these teachers (Gemma, 2001; Smith-D’Arezzo, 2003). Seventy-five per cent (n = 140) of teachers reflected a white, Anglo-Celtic background. The names attributed to teachers confirm this predominance. Of major concern here is the representation of teachers as largely monocultural, where mainstream culture prevails and tensions do not arise. Gemma (2001) reports a similar finding in her analysis of North American books, noting that few ‘address many important linguistic, religious, and cultural issues and questions faced by children and teachers’ (p. 75). The omission of specific groups of people from picture storybooks, particularly in the powerful role of teacher, generates messages about who belongs at school and who is likely to succeed at school (Mendoza & Reese, 2002). One of the books that reflects and celebrates diversity among both teachers and children is *Cleversticks* (Ashley, 1992).

**Teachers as learners**

In the majority of books, teachers were represented as the keepers of knowledge. This was conveyed through images of teachers leading reading activities, providing
directions and assisting children as they undertake tasks. Only on rare occasions was the teacher represented as a learner. These included Mrs Dhanjal and Ms Smith (Cleversticks, Ashley, 1992), who learnt about the special attributes of the children in their class, and Mr Owl (Franklin goes to school, Bourgeois & Clark, 1995), who responded positively to Franklin’s interests and indicated that Franklin had taught him something as well.

**Teachers engaging children in critical thinking**

The role of teacher as pedagogue does not often extend to engaging children in critical thinking or deep learning. Overall, a minority of teachers (n = 5; 3%) were depicted asking pedagogical questions. This may be because the focus of these books is the first day, and the sense of comforting and reassuring new children predominates. One of the few teachers who asked a lot of questions was Ms Shephard in Meet the Barkers: Morgan and Moffat go to school (de Paola, 2001).

**Teachers resolving conflict**

Only two teachers were shown resolving conflict, or potential conflict, at school. One of these was Miss Twinkle, the music teacher in Chrysanthemum (Henkes, 1991), who acted to stop teasing. Chrysanthemum’s classroom teacher, Mrs Chud, acknowledged the difficulties Chrysanthemum was having when other children teased her about her name, yet did little to resolve this:

…Victoria raised her hand and said,

‘A chrysanthemum is a flower. It lives in a garden with worms and other dirty things’.

‘Thank you for sharing that with us, Victoria’, said Mrs Chud.

‘Now put your hand down’.

Avoidance of conflict, or the implication that it can be easily overcome, was evident in several books. For example, Mrs Jenkins, the teacher in Timothy’s tales from Hilltop School (Wells, 2002), acknowledged potential conflict and responded on each occasion with a song. When children were not sharing, there was the Take Turns song, and when children were teasing others, there was the Friendly song.

**Conclusion**

The images depicted in the books analysed reflected predominantly female teachers from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds. While one of the major roles for teachers was that of classroom manager, there was relatively little evidence of teachers effectively engaging with children in critical or deep thinking, or of resolving conflict effectively. Relational teachers who made personal connections with children were identified in less than 50% of the images. Sandefur and Moore (2004) noted in their analyses that teachers were represented as ‘static, unchanging and flat … never shown as learners themselves’ (p. 48). They, along with Barone et al. (1995), reported polarised images of teachers as inherently ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘positive’ or ‘negative’. The results of this study concur with the first point, in that teachers were generally presented as static, one-dimensional characters. However, there was no consistent evidence of the second finding. Rather, the overall image of teachers from the current study was of a relatively bland, caring person, who made sure that the environment was set up and ready for children, greeted children and parents, provided directions, encouraged children to play without necessarily engaging in play themselves, and who generally ensured that children were happy and comfortable. In short, many teachers seemed to be ‘nice ladies who loved children’ (Stonehouse, 1994). Gemma (2001, p. 75) came to a similar conclusion, that teachers were depicted as ‘nice and smart [but] boring’. The main exceptions to this model were encountered as children wondered what their teacher would be like and imagined a monster or mean teacher, only to be reassured by the end of the book that the teacher really was not scary.

It is possible to argue that children’s knowledge of school derives from many sources and that picture storybooks are but one of those many sources. However, given that many of these books about starting school are featured in transition programs and used with the purpose of familiarising children with school, it is important to consider the nature of the images and the interactions that occur around these. Sandefur and Moore (2004, p. 42) note that these books have ‘power not just in teaching children and their parents about the culture of schooling, but in shaping it as well’. For many children, the monocultural characters in books and the stereotypical representation of teachers and teachers’ work may make identification with either characters or place problematic.

One possible reaction to these images of teachers and teaching is to discount them as irrelevant. However, Gamman and Marshment (1989, p. 2) caution against ‘dismiss[ing] the popular by always positioning ourselves outside it’. Further, Mitchell and Weber (1995, p. 324) suggest that examinations of ‘contemporary images of teaching in children’s popular culture serve as entry points for interrogating the meaning of power and pedagogy in teaching and learning’. This argument supports examination of, and reflection on, the often contradictory images of teachers in popular culture, and links this to exploration of the ways in which understandings related to teachers and teaching are socially constructed. In this vein, it is not merely important to consider the implications for children about
to start school and the ways in which these images influence children's expectations of school. It is also important to consider teachers' own understandings of how the broader culture interprets and perceives their work.

Many educators, parents and children themselves draw on picture storybooks as a means of promoting familiarity with school, what happens at school and the people who will be encountered at school. The images within such books help shape the experiences and expectations of transition to school. Greater interrogation of the nature of these representations, and the ways in which they contribute to expectations about school, are important elements in understanding what is important for different groups involved in the transition to school.

References


The Early Years Learning Framework Professional Learning Program

The Early Years Learning Framework Professional Learning Program (EYLF PLP) provides ongoing professional support to services as they engage in the EYLF implementation process. The program is a national initiative and will take place in 2010–11.

The EYLF PLP has the following separate but interrelated elements:

- A national program of 65 EYLF workshops
- An online EYLF interactive forum
- An online EYLF e-newsletter
- EYLF online master classes
- A series of short EYLF professional learning video vignettes.

To find out more information and to keep up to date with venues please visit: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eylfplp