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Frederick A. Rodgers, Chairman

# Can Children's Books Change Children's Values?

ERIC A. KIMMEL

**A**RE a child's attitudes and values affected by his reading? In the same manner, one might ask, can a child's character be shaped by careful selection of the books he reads?

Educators have been concerned with these questions since the end of the First World War, when the need for interracial, international, and interreligious understanding became apparent if future wars were to be prevented. Needless to say, the questions are just as challenging in our own time, and probably more so.

Recently it has begun to seem as if the belief that a child's attitudes can be affected by his reading is considered almost as an act of faith among teachers, librarians, parents, and publishers, who have certainly acted on their hopes. Never before have there been so many books of high quality for children dealing with varied races, nationalities, and religions, having as their theme the importance of sympathy, kindness, and understanding between people all over the world. Black, Spanish, and Oriental faces peep from the pages of the once staidly all-white basal readers.

A quick glance through the professional journals reveals article after article

proclaiming the need for overcoming prejudices through an appropriate program of reading and discussion. The *Reading Ladders for Human Relations* program, under the editorship of Muriel Crosby, is a noteworthy example, providing many useful bibliographies for teachers and librarians.

Like Euclid's parallel lines which never meet, the assumption that books can be a positive force for sound character development seems to be axiomatic. Unfortunately it is too axiomatic, for by definition an "axiom" is a statement believed to be true, but which cannot be positively proven beyond a doubt to be so.

Most ideas about the affective potential of children's books are based on assumptions which have not yet been proven. Ironically, it appears to be a common pattern that the amount of objective evidence cited in an article seems to be in inverse proportion to the degree of certitude expressed by the author that children's books can or do mold a child's character. In light of the amount of concern with the problem, it comes as quite a surprise to the reviewer to find that objective studies of the affective qualities of children's literature are few, open to question, and sometimes contradictory.

### Three Forms of Research

This research falls into three basic forms: content analysis, general effects, and overcoming prejudices.

The content analysis is the most common type of study dealing with children's literature, possibly because it is the easiest to conduct. Two of the most significant studies in this area were performed by David Gast (1967) and Alma Homze (1966).

Gast, investigating minority stereotypes in recent children's books, came to the conclusion that although the more objectionable minority stereotypes have disappeared, stereotypes (meaning an oversimplified, often inaccurate view) still predominate. For example, a book may deal with Negro children, but there may be nothing especially Negro about them or the problems they face to distinguish them from the average suburban white child. Gast also noted that while Negro and Japanese children are usually depicted as living within the mainstream of American life, Chinese, Mexican, and Indian children are depicted as set apart, either in Chinatown, in the sleepy adobe pueblo, or on the reservation.<sup>1</sup>

Homze, in a much more extensive survey, examines children's literature from 1920-60 and notes many of the same factors as does Gast, particularly that the "middle class white" child dominates the field. She also finds evidence for considering children's books a mirror for changes in American family trends over the 40-year period. The more recent books, she points out, stress reliance on self-sufficiency and good relations with the peer group in contrast to older books, which emphasize the importance of family and the need to depend on adults for guidance.<sup>2</sup>

The problem with content analyses of children's books is that they represent an attempt to build the house by working from

the roof down. It is impossible to gauge, for example, the significance of a large or small percentage of Negro characters in recent books until we know what effect the presence or absence of Negro characters will have on children. Until we know that, mere content analysis can provide little more than knowledge of the books themselves and trends within them. A researcher might just as well study the number of fat characters, or children who wear red shirts. Yet the content analyses remain the best studies in the field, and certainly the ones least open to question. Norine Odland, in *Teaching Literature in the Elementary School*, states the problem perfectly:

It is also possible that, with the sophisticated and refined statistical treatments currently available, work with affective responses and content analyses has not been encouraged or approved. It is difficult to assign a mathematical score to a six-year-old's response to the story of Mike Milligan.<sup>3</sup>

The content of books, at least, can be measured and recorded statistically. The response of children to books cannot.

Fehl L. Shirley (1969) attempted to get around this dilemma in a study of the general effects of reading on concepts, attitudes, and behavior. Although the books to which the subjects responded were not children's books (e.g., *Black Like Me*, *Peyton Place*, *None Dare Call It Treason*), the methods of the study and its findings are worth noting.

Shirley asked 420 Arizona high school students to "report any changes in concepts, attitudes, and behavior that they had experienced as a result of reading."<sup>4</sup>

Reactions to reading ranged from "The Indifferent," who admitted to never having been influenced by any sort of reading, to the "Decision Maker," who was influenced to make a specific change in his behavior through something he had read. The example given is that of a student who decided to give

<sup>1</sup> David K. Gast. "Minority Americans in Children's Literature." *Elementary English* 44: 12-23; January 1967.

<sup>2</sup> Alma Homze. "Interpersonal Relations in Children's Literature." *Elementary English* 43: 26-28, 52; January 1966.

<sup>3</sup> Norine Odland. *Teaching Literature in the Elementary School*. Champaign, Illinois: Educational Resources Information Center, 1969. p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Fehl L. Shirley. "Influence of Reading on Concepts, Attitudes, and Behavior." *Journal of Reading* 12: 369-72, 407-13; February 1969.

up smoking as a result of reading a magazine article linking smoking to cancer.

Of the 420 students, only 16 reported no personal influence traceable to reading. Of 1,184 different influences reported, 45 percent were new concepts, 40 percent new attitudes, and 15 percent behavioral responses. Also significant were the following findings:

1. No difference in influence between fiction and nonfiction
2. A positive relation (significant at .01 level) existing between the number of total influences and the intelligence, vocabulary, and comprehension levels of the subject. The better readers were more apt to be influenced by books.
3. Students were more influenced by voluntary reading than by assigned readings.<sup>5</sup>

Shirley's findings are significant for teachers and researchers. Only 15 percent of the reading influences resulted in a behavioral change, the type most easily measured by our present methods. The overwhelming number of changes occurred in the cognitive areas of concepts and attitudes. Certainly these will result in changes eventually, but changes much more subtle, and probably much more important, than one individual's decision to give up smoking.

The slower readers seem to be least influenced by books; most likely because they enjoy reading less and read fewer books. It would be interesting to find out whether they would read more if their reading skills were improved, or if their reading skills would improve if interesting, mature, yet easy-to-read books were more available than they are at present.

The finding that voluntary readings seemed to be more influential than assigned readings ought to be a warning to teachers and librarians. No matter how good a book is, a child is unlikely to benefit from it if he feels himself pressured into reading it.

In spite of the value of these findings, there are some reservations about the study. Faced with the problem of recording and measuring cognitive effects, Shirley took the "bull by the horns" and took the most direct course of action: asking subjects to record

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 411.

their personal responses. This raises the old problem of whether or not the best way to learn something about somebody is to ask him about himself. The main problem with Shirley's method is that it bears too much resemblance to overworked composition themes inflicted upon students by harried English teachers: "How a Book Changed My Life," "My Favorite Story," "The Best Book I Ever Read." By the time he reaches high school, even a minimally able student can grind out an acceptable theme whether or not the book really influenced him. In some cases he might not have read the book he writes about. Many of the responses suggest students writing what the teacher wants to hear. A great number are rather trite. Some are peculiar, such as the girl who notes that *Peyton Place* influenced her negatively because "... it made me want sex."<sup>6</sup> One of the most original responses came from a boy who was classified as an "Indifferent Reader," who, after admitting that he did not read much and preferred to spend his time hunting in the desert, noted that "... if people read all the time, they'd dry up and blow away."<sup>7</sup> I am sure most of our finest authors would agree!

The problem is that there is no way to determine the accuracy of the subjects' self-assessments; yet without these assessments, 85 percent of the influence of their reading would have gone unrecorded.

The third major research area deals with the effect of children's readings on influencing and overcoming their prejudices. The greater number of general writings on the effect of children's literature on children's thinking concern themselves with this subject, but only a small portion of the research studies do.

The most recent, and certainly one of the most thoughtful reviews of research in this field is J. W. Schneyer's "Effects of Reading on Children's Attitudes." In this report, he calls attention to three studies dealing spe-

<sup>6</sup> Fehl L. Shirley. "Influence of Reading on Adolescents." *Wilson Library Bulletin* 43: 256-60; November 1968.

<sup>7</sup> Fehl L. Shirley. "Influence of Reading on Concepts, Attitudes, and Behavior," *op. cit.*, p. 409.

cifically with the problem of children's prejudices and reading. They are: R. H. Tauran's "The Influences of Reading on the Attitudes of Third Graders Toward Eskimos" (1967), F. L. Fisher's "Influence of Reading and Discussion on Attitudes of Fifth Graders Toward American Indians" (1965), and Evalene P. Jackson's "Effect of Reading Upon Attitudes Toward the Negro Race" (1944). Of the three, so far as the reviewer can determine, only Jackson's study has appeared in a journal. The other two are unpublished doctoral dissertations.

With variations, the method used by each of the three investigators was basically the same. The subjects were divided into experimental and control groups and their attitudes toward the particular ethnic group in question were recorded by means of a questionnaire. A story or stories dealing with the ethnic group were then read to one or more of the groups and their subsequent attitudes were measured with another questionnaire.

Significant variations in methodology are as follows:

1. Working with two matched groups of Southern white children of junior high age, Jackson read a story favorable to Negroes to the experimental groups. She did not read to the control group.
2. Tauran did not make use of a control group. Favorable and unfavorable stories dealing with Eskimos were read to two groups of third grade classes.
3. Fisher worked with three groups of fifth graders. To the first group, six stories favorable to Indians were read. In the second group these stories were read and discussed. The third group acted as a control and stories were not read to them.

Children's stories appear to have a positive effect, at least for a while. Tauran, Schneyer reports, found that children's attitudes toward Eskimos were definitely shaped by the stories they heard. Positive initial attitudes were reinforced by the positive stories.

This is in line with Fisher's finding. Favorable stories about Indians resulted in favorable attitudes toward Indians. Discus-

sion of the stories seemed to make the children's attitudes even more favorable.

Jackson noted the same positive reaction to the favorable stories. However, unlike Tauran and Fisher, Jackson administered the same attitude test again two weeks later. Whatever favorable attitudes toward Negroes the children had gained through the story were lost over that period. After two weeks there were no significant attitudinal differences between the experimental and control groups.

Schneyer's evaluation makes note of leading questions in all three questionnaires which may have biased the responses, and raises certain doubts of how effective an instrument the attitude test is, particularly when used as both a pre- and post-test. He makes a third general point which is especially significant for this and for future research:

One important element which needs further explanation is the influence of the home, community, and peer group in reinforcing or opposing the original attitude.<sup>8</sup>

The three studies might well be examined in this light, and also in light of certain investigations of the effect of mass media (TV and movies) on children's attitudes, as noted by Martin and Lois Hoffman:

Himmelweit and associates offer the generalization that children are more likely to be influenced by the media the less complete their knowledge is from other sources. This view would be consistent with the Peterson and Thurstone experience. . . . While the point has not been fully demonstrated, it is reasonable to suppose that in value areas where the parents have strong, explicitly stated views, and where the parents serve as models for their children's actions, the media would have little effect. The values and attitudes which should be most vulnerable to media influence should be those concerning which the significant people in the child's life have not taken a stand. Furthermore, children in homes where the parents do not interact frequently with their children should be more susceptible to media influence than

<sup>8</sup> J. W. Schneyer. "Effects of Reading on Children's Attitudes." *The Reading Teacher* 23: 49; October 1969.

children whose relationship with their parents is more intense.<sup>9</sup>

With these ideas in mind, it is regrettable that the Tauran and Fisher studies did not make use of an evaluation after a period of time. One might, however, make certain hypotheses in the hope that they will be tested in the future.

Considering Tauran's study, one might expect the effect of the stories to be quite long-lasting, since Eskimos are a group with which few children have any firsthand contact, and one about which, outside of Alaska, there would not be strong parental, peer, or community knowledge or feeling.

In the same light, Jackson's study is extremely encouraging in that she was able to elicit a positive response toward Negroes at all. In this case one would expect peer, parental, and community attitudes toward Negroes to be well-defined and fairly rigid, effectively discouraging deviation. Under these circumstances, one would hardly expect a single story to have a lasting effect.

Fisher's study raises an interesting question. Some homes and communities, especially in the Far West, foster negative attitudes toward Indians, but considering the nation as a whole, most are probably indif-

ferent, as not many people have direct contact with Indians or know very much about them. A great many unfavorable attitudes toward Indians are generated by television and movies. Fischer's study seems to show that initial attitudes can be overcome through the use of selected readings and a well-planned discussion program. As in the case of Tauran's study, the question remains how long children retain these new attitudes. One might well explore the problem of whether or not a reading-discussion program can overcome and correct attitudes derived from TV and movies.

Looking over the total field of research into how children's readings affect children's values, one can conclude that books *may* play a significant part in shaping and reshaping an individual's thinking; yet the means by which they do this and the total significance of their role are matters still determined largely by the observer's intuition. In many cases children's readings might momentarily affect their responses, but how lasting these effects are remains to be determined.

<sup>9</sup> Martin L. Hoffman and Lois Wladis Hoffman. *Review of Child Development Research*, volume 1. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1964. p. 342.

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- ERIC A. KIMMEL, *Teaching Assistant, Elementary Education Department, University of Illinois, Urbana.*



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