

## CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE TEACHERS AND EVALUATION OF TEACHER IMAGES IN PATRICIA POLACCO'S STORY BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

Ayşenur Altan<sup>1</sup>

Institute of Graduate Studies, Department of Foreign Language Education  
Ondokuz Mayıs University, Samsun, Turkey  
aysenuraltan.doga@gmail.com

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zerrin Eren<sup>2</sup>

Department of Foreign Language Education, English Language Teaching,  
Ondokuz Mayıs University Samsun, Turkey  
erenz@omu.edu.tr

### Abstract

As literature has an important role in human's life, the use of literary works in educational settings may offer great help to parents and teachers. Especially young learners discover many new concepts and values through story books. Therefore, story books which include stories related to teacher-student relationship could be quite useful to motivate young learners for academic life. This paper aims to analyze eight teacher characters in four popular story books for ages 5-8 by Patricia Polacco in the light of the studies about effective teachers. The images of teachers have been studied in close-reading as a qualitative research method. These books tell readers the experiences of a student named Trisha in her primary and high-school years. The selected books are as follows: Thank You Mr. Falker (2012), The art of Miss Chew (2012), Mr. Wayne's Masterpiece (2014), An A From Miss Keller (2015). As a result of the study, it has been concluded that six of the teachers in these books have some important qualities of effective teachers and these books might be useful tools to create positive feelings about school and teachers for young learners.

**Keywords:** effective teacher; teacher images; children literature.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Adults and children read literary works for pleasure. While reading, children in particular are unaware of the impacts of literary works on their perceptions of the world, society, societal relations, and on their attitudes towards the others. Recent studies reveal the effect of literature on individuals; for instance, the study carried out by Tatlıoğlu in 2017 indicated that "...literature has meaningful effect on social relationship of people and it has been found that, [sic] people who are interested in literature have more social relationship than people who are not interested in literature" (p.298). It can be inferred that thanks to various literary works, people may change their perspectives about life and social relationships; therefore, change their attitudes towards people to have better social interactions.

In addition to benefits of improving social skills, literary works help readers, especially young readers, learn such new concepts and values as friendship, morals, social values. Van Kleeck (2003) states "Any time children share a book about an experience that they have not personally had, or about a place they have not been, they are undoubtedly learning something new about the world" (p.293).

Therefore, the contents of the books for children are of utmost importance as they offer a few glimpses of life outside home and may shape the child-reader's perception, ideas, and attitudes towards some professions.

Some literary works for children are set in school environment. Pictures books prepared for pre-schoolers or early graders set in school environment may introduce school life and teachers to young readers as well. Such books may influence the perception of the child-reader concerning teachers, and thus may affect children's expectations from teachers. According to Koopman and Hakemulder (2015), "Some literary works for children, particularly picture books set in school environments, have the potential to shape children's perception of teachers and impact their expectations" (p. 23). Therefore, this paper aims at studying the images of teachers in four popular picture books for ages 5-8 by Patricia Polacco using close reading techniques. Each teacher character in the books will be analysed in terms of teacher images and these teachers' relationship to the students in the book in order to find answers to following questions: whether the teachers in these books deal with academic and personal problems of their students; whether they have positive relationships with their students. These books have been selected due to the fact that they are very popular and they tell a story of the same girl named Trisha and they include various teacher characters throughout Trisha's primary and high school years. The selected books are as follows: Thank You Mr. Falker (2012), The Art of Miss Chew (2012), Mr. Wayne's Masterpiece (2014), and An A From Miss Keller (2015).

## II. DATA ANALYSIS

### A. Mr. Falker and the Unnamed Teacher in "Thank You Mr. Falker"

In this book, the main character Trisha is a 5 year old girl who is very willing to start school and learn to read. The story is told by 3rd person omniscient narrator, so Trisha's thoughts and feelings could be seen clearly. Her mother is a teacher, and her grandparents often read books to her, thus she grows up loving books. However, when she starts school, She has problems in reading. She struggles when trying to read letters and numbers because she has dyslexia. All her friends start reading, but she cannot. However, she is quite good at drawing. Her friends are amazed by her drawings but when it comes to reading, she is teased and bullied by her friends and that makes her feel dumb and different. Her teacher sometimes tries to help her recognize letters and read words when it is her turn to read lines out loud from a book. The name of the teacher is not mentioned at all, thus it could be assumed that the teacher does not have an important role in Trisha's life because the teacher does not realize her problem or does not pay attention to her. Regarding this unnamed teacher, it is possible to assert that that this first teacher lacks such important features of effective teachers as being caring, sensitive to students' needs and knowledge to recognize Dyslexia. As a result of this, Trisha starts losing her willingness to go to school day by day. It could be assumed that if her teacher could have realized her problem and focused on her more, Trisha may not have lost her self-respect and her willingness for school.

Trisha's life begins to change when they move to California where she meets her new teacher Mr. Falker who has a great impact on Trisha's life to help her overcome the problem with patience and love. At the beginning, Trisha is bullied by her friends in her new school. She often cries and starts hating school. Mr. Falker is mentioned as a good-looking man who always wears the neatest clothes and "it didn't seem to matter to Mr. Falker which kids were the cutest. Or the smartest. Or the best at

anything" (Polacco, 2012, p.9). It could be assumed that Mr. Falker is a fair teacher who tries to give equal attention to his students. He constantly encourages Trisha when she draws pictures by saying "brilliant" or "you are very talented" (Polacco, 2012, p.10). When he does that, even her friends who bully her, pay attention to her drawings in wonder. When they tease her, he clearly tells them to stop and remind them nobody is perfect. Here, it could be seen that he has authority in class and the students respect him. Thanks to the attitudes of Mr. Falker, her friends stop teasing her in time. "Then, one day, Mr. Falker asked her to stay after school and help wash the blackboards. He put on music and brought out little sandwiches as they worked and talked" (Polacco, 2012, p.14). At this point, Mr. Falker starts spending time with Trisha after school and they practice more and more. Mr. Falker displays an important feature of an effective teacher which is the enthusiasm to help his student. As a result, she gets better and better at reading. Depending on the examples given from the book, it can be seen that Mr. Falker is closely interested in Trisha's academic and personal problems and creates a strong relationship with her. Thanks to Mr. Falker, she learns to read and loves school again. Therefore, the name of the book clearly shows the importance of Mr. Falker who is quite an effective teacher.

**B. Miss Chew, Mr. Donovan and Mrs. Spaulding in "The Art of Miss Chew"**

The Art of Miss Chew is another book by Polacco, which shows the importance of a teacher in a child's life. The main character is again Trisha. She is at high school now and she has a great passion for art and wants to become an artist. Different teacher characters appear in the book. One of them is Mr. Donovan who sees Trisha's sketches and directs her to Miss Chew who is an art teacher and gives all the support to Trisha to pursue her passion for art. Another teacher is the substitute teacher Mrs. Spaulding who thinks Trisha is wasting time with art because she gets low scores in tests. In the book, Trisha regards tests as a problem to overcome. Although she has learned how to read, she is still slow in reading and writing and she fails to complete tests. Mr. Donovan as a good teacher realizes her problem and gives her extra time in tests, and Trisha starts passing them. It is implied in the book that a good teacher is the one who can understand students' needs and adapt their styles and rules according to the individual needs of their students. Also, it is Mr. Donovan who realizes Trisha's great talent in drawing and sends her to Miss Chew as the school does not have any art classes. The discussion so far about Mr. Donovan displays that he is able to understand his students strengths and weaknesses and he is flexible with the rules when necessary.

Trisha meets Miss Chew and she is highly fascinated by her attitude and her appearance. She is Chinese and a lovely person with tall nice fingers. The appearance of the teacher is emphasized, and it could be assumed that the appearance is important for students as teachers often become role models. Miss Chew's art class is depicted as very colorful and full of interesting materials and drawings which attract Trisha's attention. Miss Chew constantly makes her students brainstorm and question the world around them while drawing. She seems to help them improve critical thinking skills and aims to teach them the language of art. Trisha takes her sketchbook everywhere because Miss Chew encourages them to do so. It can be seen that Miss Chew's passion for art is reflected upon her students. When Mr. Donovan loses his dad and goes to Ireland for funeral, the class has a substitute teacher. Mrs. Spaulding, the substitute teacher, never smiles. She seems to have lost her appetite for teaching and does not have a good rapport with the students. She does not give extra time to Trisha in

tests and she starts to fail again. Additionally, Mrs. Spaulding asks Trisha to stop going to art classes and instead to sit and study for the tests. Miss Chew, however, takes a different approach when Trisha tells her about Mrs. Spaulding's attitude. She takes Trisha to a reading specialist with her own car after taking her parents' permission. Finally, Dr. McClare, the principal, Trisha's mother, Miss Chew and Mrs. Spaulding have a meeting. This scene is significant as it shows that Miss Chew managed to deal with Trisha's problem very professionally with the help of a specialist. At the end of the meeting, Mrs. Spaulding learns that Trisha has Dyslexia and accepts giving her extra time in tests. When Mr. Donovan comes back, Mrs. Spaulding is no more needed. Mrs. Spaulding is reflected in a very negative way because she has no emotional bond with her students unlike Miss Chew and Mr. Donovan who constantly encourage, try to understand the needs of their students and try to be fair towards them. They are also depicted as competent teachers who have vast knowledge in their fields which make them effective teachers.

**C. Mr. Wayne and Mr. Tranchina in "Mr. Wayne's Masterpiece"**

In this book, Trisha, still a high school student, tries to overcome her fear of speaking in front of people with the help of Mr. Wayne, the drama teacher. One day, when a teacher of Trisha's, Mr. Tranchina, asks her to read her essay in front of the class, she gets really nervous and cannot read it. Although her teacher encourages her with a soft voice, he lets her go back to her seat when he sees that she is extremely stressed. The scene displays that Mr. Tranchina is aware of her problem and tries to relax her. He is quite considerate and wishes to help her to overcome this problem by directing Trisha to Mr. Wayne who is the drama teacher of the school. Mr. Tranchina could be regarded as a good teacher as he never hesitates to get help from his colleague which makes him a collaborative teacher.

Mr. Wayne invites Trisha to be a part of a play which they have been working on for a while. Trisha gets quite stressed with the idea of being on stage, however, Mr. Wayne gives her a different responsibility: painting the scenery for the play. As Mr. Wayne is aware of her fear, he lets her get used to the environment by giving her another responsibility and he benefits from Trisha's talents and interests; thus, she finds a chance to observe and get familiar with the atmosphere. While she is picturing the scenery, other students constantly rehearsing the play and Trisha learns all the lines by-heart while listening. One week before the play, one of the students moves away from the city, and Trisha is the only person who knows the whole play. Mr. Wayne and all her friends ask her to take the role, she is hesitant to do it. Mr. Wayne, as an effective teacher, starts practicing with Trisha alone and helps her overcome her hesitation. He uses specific techniques and activities to teach her how to use her diaphragm. When the day comes, she gets on the stage and acts out the role. She feels surprisingly free and very proud on the stage. She even helps her friends with their lines when they cannot remember. In this book, two effective teachers make great changes in her life and they manage to do it by understanding her weaknesses and strengths, and by finding different ways suitable for her needs and for her personality. Reminding her strengths to Trisha and giving her some time are important techniques used by the teachers in this book.

#### **D. Miss Keller in “An A From Miss Keller”**

In this book, Trisha is chosen for Miss Keller’s writing class. At the beginning of the book, the rumours about Miss Keller are presented. From students’ perspective, she has an evil temper, hold grudges, take a personal dislike to some of her students, and has never given an A. She is called “Killer Keller” by her students and by some teachers. In the book, it is clear that there is no emotional bond with the teacher and the students. This kind of portrayal of a teacher could be said to be quite negative. When Trisha goes home on the day she’s been chosen for Miss Keller’s class, she meets her neighbour who is an old man named Pop Scholls. She sits and talks to him about Killer Keller. He knows the teacher because his children were once her students too. Although Miss Keller is introduced as an evil teacher at the beginning, she does not offend any of her students throughout the book. It could be believed that she is strict and distant to her students but she is actually very knowledgeable and very willing to help her students discover their talents in writing. For instance, she constantly gives feedback on their writings and she does different activities in the class to stimulate their critical thinking skills about emotions and tries to improve their word choices. While doing all these beneficial activities for her students, she does not smile much and there is no humour in the class. This could be the reason why her students feel distant towards her and call her “Killer Keller”. At the end of the story, Trisha manages to get an A from Miss Keller with hard work. She is no longer scared of her and she feels appreciated because Miss Keller has helped her improve quite a lot. In a sense, Trisha takes this as a challenge and tries to prove her quality to Miss Keller.

Although Miss Keller does not smile much, and does not give positive reinforcement openly, she still displays some features of effective teachers. She is willing to help her students improve, she spends extra time after school to read and give feedback to her students’ writings, she is never offensive, and she is absolutely fair towards her students. To sum up, although she is depicted as a disciplined teacher, she gives an important message to the readers: not all teachers are the same. Some are strict and disciplined but they still aim to improve their students in their own way.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

Eight teachers presented in the selected books show the importance of teaching profession and how teachers can change the lives of their students. Mr. Falker, Mr. Donovan, Miss Chew, Mr. Wayne and Mr. Tranchina are the teachers who manage to build good relationship with their students and send positive messages to readers. These teachers are portrayed as follows: Caring and friendly, encouraging/ stimulating, good looking, patient and helpful, emphatic, sensitive to student’s needs, enthusiastic, and giving goals clearly.

The unnamed teacher in “Thank You Mr. Falker” may not be regarded as an effective teacher. Although she tries to help her read, her attempts could be called to be quite insufficient. She clearly lacks information about Dyslexia and she never suspects Trisha’s problem. The teacher does not try to understand the underlying causes of her failure and she only saves the day for Trisha. Therefore, this teacher fails to build a good teacher-student relationship.

The substitute teacher Mrs. Spaulding believes art is a waste of time and Trisha should drop the art class and study for her academic tests more. She is similar to the unnamed teacher. She never tries to understand Trisha. She does not care about Trisha’s problem of time management during tests and she does not have enough knowledge to realize that she has Dyslexia. Although this type of teacher is

not pleasant for students, it may also give messages to readers such as the importance of following one's own passions and may show different ways to deal with problems.

Miss Keller seems to be a little bit different than the unnamed teacher and Mrs. Spaulding. She is strict and not very friendly, however she is quite enthusiastic to improve her students' writing skills. The way she does it may be questioned in terms of effective teaching, however, in the end Miss Keller also gives another important message to young readers: strict teachers also care about their students' progress and having a strict teacher is not a bad thing because every teacher cherishes their students differently as they all have different personalities.

It is possible to conclude that these four books present realistic images of school life and teachers, and they may imply that even when students fail or have a problem, they can always overcome these problems with the help of their teachers' support and with their own enthusiasm. Therefore, these books and other books with similar content could be quite useful for young readers in terms of displaying different teacher characters and helping young readers get familiar with school life.

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