The Creation of a Book Award to Encourage Child Activism

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Sometimes you have no control over what will happen next, as I discovered the year I was twelve years old—but sometimes you do. And when you do, that’s when it is time to take charge, because you sure don’t know when the chance will come again. (Joseph 2002, p. 1)

Background of the Book Award

This is the story of a book award – one designed to encourage young readers to be activists and to engage their rights. While the first award was given in 2007, the real story begins many years ago. Imagine a cold snowy day in Massachusetts as you saddle up your horse and prepare to ride to yet another one room schoolhouse. The year is 1837 and the rider is Horace Mann, who is credited as the father of American public education. Appointed Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, Horace Mann immediately began to visit many schools to learn what an American education really looked like across our young nation. What he found would not surprise you: schools were uneven, they lacked funding, the teachers were underpaid, and many children did not attend school at all.

Horace Mann believed that excellent “common,” what we now call public schools, had to be available to everyone if we as a nation ever hoped to realize the democratic ideals upon which
our country was founded. These “common” schools should prepare citizens to be engaged in society, contributing to its well-being through active democratic participation. In other words, public education was a pre-requisite for a just society. Mann was very successful in creating an excellent school system in Massachusetts, which was later used as a model to influence the establishment of a system of education throughout the country (Hays, 2007).

After decades of working towards public education in Massachusetts and across the country, Horace Mann became the president of Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio upon its founding in 1850. Mann’s progressive politics were reflected in Antioch’s democratic approach to college education: Antioch was the first college in the country to educate women equal to men with all students studying the same curriculum; The College was the first to hire a full-time female faculty member at pay equal to her male colleagues; and was one of the first in the United States to recruit and educate black students equally with white students.

Mann’s persistence in educating the whole person, and his insistence that students must learn to act on their values and their rights permeates all of Antioch University. Mann challenged the graduating class of 1859, just two months before his death, with a call to arms relevant for all Antioch students that is repeated at every graduation to this day: Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.

**The Award and Antioch University**

In 2007 the Education Department at Antioch University Los Angeles (AULA) launched the Horace Mann Upstanders Children’s Book Award because the founders knew that there was no better way to maintain and honor the legacy of Horace Mann than to name a book award honoring activist literature after him! Antioch University Los Angeles (AULA) has social justice as a key element in its mission:

The Education Department is a community of teachers and learners who value making a positive and sustainable difference in the world. All that we do is designed to help each other thrive and evolve as we learn to interact with those areas most in need of social justice attention. The pedagogies taught in the department are progressively characterized by close interactions between candidates and faculty, nurture the skills and habits of critical and creative reflection that can best serve lifelong learners, advocates for democracy. Our students seek to live lives of meaning and purpose.
It was crucial that the award should be consistent with this mission. In the Education Department, we believe that it is essential to encourage our students to make active decisions about much that they study, from choosing the text for a course and determining the project that the class will undertake.

**Guidelines for the award**

The award is given annually to the author of a fictional story that demonstrates upstanding activist behavior. As outlined in our guidelines for the award,

An ‘Upstander’ is a person who recognizes injustice and acts in some way to right that wrong. The award honors the children’s literature of that year which best exemplifies ideals of social action and in turn, encourages young readers to become agents of change themselves. (http://upstandersaward.org).

The award-winner must be fiction, for children in grades JK – 6th and have been published, anywhere in the world, in the 12 months prior to the award being given.

We owe a debt to the organization Facing History & Ourselves for our definition of the term “upstander.” Their mission states:

What ignited Facing History and Ourselves in the beginning is still what guides us today. The educator’s most important responsibility—our gift to society—is to shape a humane, well-educated citizenry that practices civility and preserves human rights. (https://www.facinghistory.org/get-to-know-us/history)

In addition, they use the term “upstander” to describe individuals, groups of nations who, when bearing witness to injustice, decide to do something to stop or prevent these acts from continuing.

For Facing History & Ourselves, the use of the term Upstander is a response to the frequent by-stander position that often seems the default in society. A civil society requires an active citizenry who know their rights and exercise them—these are Upstanders. In a now
famous quote from Staub, Facing History provides the teachers they train with thorough information about the Holocaust and a view of altruism.

Goodness, like evil, often begins in small steps. Heroes evolve; they aren’t born. Very often the rescuers make only a small commitment at the start – to hide someone for a day or two. But once they had taken that step, they began to see themselves differently, as someone who helps. What starts as mere willingness becomes intense involvement. https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/DecisionMaking_Injustice_Lesson_15.pdf, p 259-260

How do we encourage individuals to engage in altruistic behavior and model that for others? As a student begins their tenure in the Antioch University Los Angeles (AULA) Teacher Credentialing program, they take a course about the foundations of social justice education which includes an introduction to the United Nations “Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC),” (United Nations, 1989) foregrounding the importance of personal agency and taking a stand both with and on behalf of children. Three articles from the CRC are most applicable:

**Article 12**

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

**Article 13**

1. The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.
Article 14

States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

For students at the AULA Teacher Credential Program, we focus on these rights by asking: How does a society provide for these rights? What can be done to encourage the ability of a child to know their own thoughts, to act on those ideas and understand these rights and to be an upstander?

Even at a progressive institution like Antioch, students often have difficulty trusting themselves to make these kinds of decision and often return to their well-schooled expectations that it is the responsibility of the instructor to determine what should be done, what the assignment guidelines should be and when it is due. Attempting to create a counter-narrative to this set of expectations has been aided by the development of the book award by positioning our award in a strategic way inviting our students and others to contemplate what upstander behavior looks like and its connection to the CRC.

Civic Engagement and the Award

Creating a discussion about civic work and its connection to altruism is tricky. We use this definition from the Yale Civic Engagement Project as a way to make this connection clearer and operational.

Civic Literacy is the knowledge of how to actively participate and initiate change in your community and the greater society. It is the foundation by which a democratic society functions: citizen power as a check and as a means to create avenues for peaceful change.

http://www.yale.edu/macmillan/pier/classroomresources/14.%20CIVIC%20LITERACY.pdf

This is a fairly abstract concept for young children. As many in this field argue, a civic literacy approach enables us to make use of true stories to promote civic learning—learning that is essential for participation in a democratic society. As McGuire (2007) pointed out, simply
reading about topics in the social studies for comprehension and skill development does not address social studies goals or the civic mission of schools.” (p 621) To promote civic competence, McGuire suggested that when learning about our nation, we should also consider the relevance of this information for today: What connections can be made to life today and how do we respond to the events of our time? These connections are important for two reasons: they give purpose for learning about our nation's past, and they reinforce the important role individuals have in a democratic society. (McGuire, 2007)

Pursuing civic literacy is essential if we want students to participate in a democratic society. Learning about the experiences of others can guide us as we make difficult decisions. According to Levine (2005), "we need detailed 'thick' descriptions that give us portraits of whole situations over time" (p 6) to guide us as we think about today's problems.

It is all well and good to encourage civic literacy, but without encouraging critical thinking and ways to act, these ideas remain wholly abstract. How can we teach this and how can we expect young people to engage at this level of activism when there are few examples for them and when the models are from the past, are abstract and do not provide the opportunity for children to see themselves as activists? We have many models for well-known Upstanders in Children’s Literature: Mahatma Gandhi, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Helen Keller, Lech Walesa… One can easily find many books applauding their efforts. But how can young people imagine their own opportunity to make a difference? Do these books teach them to stand for what they believe in? Even more importantly, do these books teach a young person to make the decision to make a difference? As Delpit (1995) stated, “seldom are students encouraged to tackle the deep moral issues they must tussle with in this complex time-nor are they led to think about themselves as agents responsible for the larger world.” (p. xvi). The same holds true for inspiring change. It is difficult for young people to see themselves as an international change agent in the future, when the only change agents they study are rooted in their ancient history.

It is easy to assume that these biographies are the only books about “upstanders” out there – but the truth is, there exists a literature for children that demonstrates what Fletcher (2004) called “Activist Learning”, an “intentional strategy for creating knowledge, characterized by taking action to realize just relationships that transform unequal power structures in our personal, social, political, environmental, spiritual and economic lives” (p 3). These books exist,
but are often overlooked by traditional award committees for more marketable or mainstream texts.

Modeling a process of asking questions and making choices is a significant first step in establishing an environment of civic engagement. Imagine a curriculum that believed that children have the right to their own ideas and that they have the right to make choices. It is necessary to model the kinds of decision making skills and dispositions we expect of our young citizens and doing that through our behavior is essential.

Such dispositions are not likely to be learned from instruction, exhortation, or indoctrination. For example, the dispositions to be curious, generous, responsible, and be a change agent cannot be learned from admonitions or lectures on their importance and desirability. Dispositions, both the desirable and undesirable ones, are likely to be learned from being around people in whom they can be fairly easily seen or reading about appropriate characters. In addition, if dispositions are to be strengthened, they must be manifested or expressed with a certain frequency; in other words, dispositions cannot be strengthened unless they are behaved. Furthermore, the manifestation of the dispositions must also be experienced as satisfying and effective. Developmentally appropriate curricula and teaching methods can be used to provide contexts and opportunities for children to manifest desirable dispositions such as to cooperate, to resolve conflicts, to investigate, to hypothesize, predict, and to take a stand. No matter what curricula, activities and teaching strategies are employed, learners' dispositions and feelings are likely to be influenced by them, whether intentionally or by default.

So how, then, do we demonstrate upstanding behavior? One clear way is with excellent literature. Bishop (1990) stated that “literature functions as a major socializing agent. It tells students who and what their society and culture values, what kinds of behaviors are acceptable and appropriate and what it means to be a decent human.” (p 159). Can literature and stories about upstanders have any impact on student behavior? Can a character in a story serve as a model for the disposition of upstanding perspectives? What we know from practices interrogated by Dobbs-Oates (2011) is that a child's interest in literacy can tell us a lot about that child's behavior. This study indicated that the child who is interested in literacy-related activities is more likely to show positive, adaptive behavior. Books that portray realistic solutions and outcomes will resonate with readers to a greater degree than offerings that minimize the problem or suggest solutions that readers readily identify as implausible or ineffective. We also know
from studies of bibliotherapy that literature can have a “small to moderate effect on child and adolescent internalizing and externalizing and prosocial behavior.” (Montgomery & Mauders, 2015, p 44) Anecdotal responses from participants in Antioch’s award conference who have read and shared the winning literature with their classes indicated that, indeed, children are moved to choosing to speak out and to take action in small but important ways.

Kuzminski (2009) stated that careful selection of materials should be made that promotes the philosophy that we are all human beings that share similar needs, fears, and desires. Our differences should be embraced in that they make us unique, and that children's literature provides a wealth of possibilities for exploring this concept. Kohl (1995) described the challenge for adults in just how to let children feel free to develop their own evaluation of cultural practices allowing them to freedom to explore things while trusting them to make sensible and humane judgments.

Over the past number of years, a number of fictional stories have been written that clearly demonstrate to the reader that standing up against unfair behavior and taking a risk is a worthwhile action. The award concentrates on books for the youngest of readers ages 3 to 12. Finding brave characters in upper grade stories seems much easier since authors have more room to develop deeper story lines. Harry Potter stories are an excellent example. It has been challenging but quite exciting to find books that encourage child activism. The book that began the idea of the award is “The Araboolies of Liberty Street” by Sam Swope (1995). This is a perfect book to describe the kind of dispositions and modeling that can encourage readers to understand oppression in a meaningful way and to also see behaviors that can create change. The story introduces us to General Pinch and his wife who do all they can to stop every child from having any fun in the neighborhood. Always on guard at his window, he uses his bull horn to stop whatever he does not like, all the while threatening to “call in the Army.” His world changes dramatically when the Araboolies move in next door. They have strange animals who live in the house, they have a huge bed that the entire multicolored family sleeps in outside and they play and laugh. Unfortunately for General Pinch and his wife, the Araboolies do not speak English (actually we do not know what they speak) so when he tells them to be quiet, they just do not understand. Finally the Pinches have had enough and they call in the army directing them to remove the “house that is different.” But little did they know that one young neighbor girl has overhead the order and organizes the entire neighborhood to outsmart the General. This book
provides an excellent opportunity to discuss what it means to be an active citizen who is not afraid to stand up against injustice. Swope was awarded the Lifetime Award for his work both as author of this book and for his personal commitment as a social justice upstander. A further discussion regarding the Lifetime Award follows.

**The Winning Books for the Past Eight Years.**

The following is a list of the award winners for Antioch University’s Horace Mann Upstanders Children’s Book Award and a short synopsis of each tale.

Year 1:
“Mrs. Marlowe’s Mice” by Frank Asch tells the tale of a cat dominant society where mice are hated. Mrs. Marlowe, however, protects a large mouse community and is almost caught thanks to a mouse-hating neighbor. Her bravery and cunning outsmart the Cat Police.

Year 2:
“Violet the Pilot” by Steve Breen recounts the tale of Violet, a different kind of a kid who likes to invent things, particularly things that fly. After building a plane so she can enter a flying race, she stops along the way to rescue the very boys who consistently bully her, preventing her from making the race. In the end, the community recognizes her upstanding behavior.

Year 3:
“Almost Zero” by Nikki Grimes is a story about a young girl who demands a new pair of shoes from her mother only to be taught a lesson about greed. Only when she chooses to help a classmate whose home has burned does she understand what it means to stand up for others.

Year 4:
“Ghetto Cowboy” by Greg Neri is a complex story. The main character is a pre-teen boy who is taken by his mother to live with his father who he does not know. The father and his friends rescue horses and use them to help teens connect to something important and leave gang life. In the end, all of the characters have to make hard decisions about standing up for what is right and taking on the challenges of the city.
Year 5:
“The Dunderheads” by Paul Fleischman describes a group of schoolmates who are constantly insulted by their teacher. After she takes a toy cat from one of them, they come together to plot how to get it back and taking lots of risks and, by working together, they outsmart the teacher and win the day.

Year 6:
“Unspoken” by Henry Cole is a beautiful wordless picture book that takes place during the Civil War. The young protagonist puts aside her fear of the unknown by helping a runaway slave.

Year 7:
“The Real Boy” by Anne Ursu introduces us to a strange and silent boy who works for a magician. As the world around him starts to fall apart he is forced to make some choices. In the end he chooses exactly what is right and risks his life to fix what is wrong.

Year 8:
“The Smallest Girl in the Smallest Grade” by Justin Roberts is the perfect book about standing against bullying. The main character watches carefully all of the nasty and mean things that happen every day in her school. Finally tired of the behaviors, she stands up and challenges everyone to stop.

**Other Titles That Have Upstanding Characters**

Additional stories that present a character who must make a difficult decision and take a risk are discussed here. They were not winners because of the year of publication.

“Farmer Duck” by Martin Waddell is the story of a duck who works for an abusive farmer. The other animals on the farm decide to actively end this abuse by chasing the farmer off the farm, providing the Duck with a new life of freedom.
“The Composition” by Antonio Skarmeta is a story of oppression. A young boy is challenged to rat on his parents who illegally listen to free radio. When he is bribed to turn them in he, bravely creates a story that protects them.

“The Breadwinner” by Deborah Ellis is set in Afghanistan where 11-year-old Parvana lives with her family in a bombed-out apartment building in Kabul. When her father is arrested for the crime of having a foreign education, the family is left with no money or resources. Forbidden to earn money as a girl, Parvana must transform herself into a boy and become the breadwinner.

“Finding Lincoln” by Ann Malaspina is a story about a young boy who, because of the color of his skin, is not allowed to use the library. However, an upstanding librarian finds a way to provide access for him welcoming him into the library.

“The Misfits” by James Howe is an endearing story of four kids who are outcasts but who come together to challenge the status quo. Their brave efforts change the culture of their school.

“Red” by Jan De Kinder is a simple picture book about a child who is constantly bullied. The female protagonist tries to stand up for him but just cannot find the strength to do so until she finally gains enough confidence to speak out and is joined by many of her classmates.

“The Great Greene Heist” by Varian Johnson is a political middle school thriller that describes a challenge to a moneyed parent who has bribed the principal.

“Monty’s Magnificent Mane” by Gemma O’Neill is about a narcissistic lion who is very proud of his lovely mane and allows the meerkats to play in it. Heading to the river to admire himself, he is tricked by a hungry alligator who chases him. Monty realizes that he is leading the alligator to the meerkats and has to take a brave stand to protect them.

“Mr. Marlowe’s Mouse” by Frank Asch introduces us to a brave mouse who lives in a cat-dominated society. Just as Mr. Marlowe is about to eat him, he escapes and frees all of the other captured mice.
“The Deliverance of Dancing Bear” by Elizabeth Stanley is a story about a poor man who gives up all of his money to free a chained bear and then buys her cub as well.

“The Streets are Free” by Kurasa is about a community of children who have no place to play. They plead with the mayor to build them a playground. He agrees, but does not follow up, so the children find other ways to get what they want.

“Good Griselle” by Jane Yolen is an impressive fairy tale-like story about a kind woman who adopts an unruly child as part of a bet between angels and gargoyles at Notre Dame. The main character stands up for her child against all odds.

“Nobody’s Family is Going to Change” by Louise Fitzhugh is a story about a brother and sister who have goals in opposition to that of their parents. Emma and Willis work hard to stand up for what they believe is best for them.

**How We Manage This Book Award And How You Might Do One Yourself.**

The process of selection begins each spring as we contact as many publishers as we can with a request for their nominations. We only ask for one copy of the book. As each book arrives we screen it to determine if it meets the criteria. Unfortunately, we often receive books that are non-fiction such as the life of Gandhi and those books are donated to a bookstore that provides books for inner city classrooms. In the fall, the graduate students enrolled in the children’s literature class read all of the entries that have been initially screened and evaluate them based on multiple criteria. Often the books are about doing good deeds, but the character has not needed to take a risk or to put themselves into a challenging situation. Finding books about youth activism is difficult. After the students have ranked the books, a committee of professors and librarians carefully review the top selections and makes a recommendation. A consensus is arrived at and the author is notified and invited to attend our yearly conference to speak and to receive both their cash award and their plaque.

Over the years the concept of the Upstander Award has expanded and we have added a Lifetime Achievement Award as well as a Community Upstander Award. To be considered for
the Lifetime Achievement Award or the Community Upstander Award, the author must have produced a body of work that supports activism.

The winners in these two categories include the following:

**Lifetime Achievement Award**
2013 Sam Swope
2014 Tomie de Paola
2015 Eve Bunting

**Community Upstander Award**
2013 Father Greg Boyle
2014 Luis Rodriguez
2015 PEN USA

**A Brief Conclusion**

We all remember stories that transported us to new ideas. Memorable tales and characters that perhaps had a long lasting influence on us like Peter Pan, Harry Potter and the Wimpy Boy. These characters provide the reader with possibilities that they may never have considered. So too with upstander characters who may well influence our young readers with ideas about their rights to expect that their voices should be listened to. Providing our young people with activist characters may well help them chose that role for themselves. In our world our children can become the change agents of the future.
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