

Miss Honey – Is Matilda’s teacher a role model or unprofessional?

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Matilda's Miss Honey: Teaching Role Model or Unprofessional Educator?

It's Matilda's 30th anniversary, so is it time to reevaluate our feelings about her beloved teacher?

Dr Branwen Bingle

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Ask any adult in the UK to name a teacher from children's literature and they will invariably cite Miss Honey from Roald Dahl's Matilda.

Research by Weber and Mitchell identified Miss Honey (and Miss Trunchbull) as part of the cultural basis for understanding the role of the teacher within the UK, and it was a popular response when I posed the question to trainee teachers as part of my own study.

Having Matilda read to them as a child explicitly fuelled participants' ambition to teach, with one student so certain that everyone who read the story would feel equally inspired by Miss Honey they thought this response a cliché.

Conversely, another indicated their dislike of the character for being a poor example of a teacher due to her inauthentic classroom practice.

This split raised a question: is Miss Honey deserving of deified teaching status, or has she been mythologised beyond her actual abilities?

In the novel, our first glimpse of Miss Honey makes it clear she's sweet and virtuous with a "madonna face".

The illustrations show her constantly surrounded by smiling children, conveying her willingness to interact with her class in a relaxed, open manner.

She is described in a 2015 post on the blog *Middle Grade Strikes Back* as "an idealistic view of what a child's dream teacher would be."

Despite this, however, Miss Honey is not totally benign: she borders on unprofessional in her description of the school's headteacher, she's not afraid to name and shame in her reprimands and she is not without flaws as a classroom manager.

Indeed, against today's government teachers' standards she may well be judged harshly: she leaves the rest of the class passively ignored while she grapples with Matilda's genius, has gaps in her subject knowledge that leave her struggling for an answer the child reaches easily, and is not above lying to her pupils to avoid answering difficult questions.

Miss Honey's success with learners then is not due to her integrity or academic ability, but her pedagogic methods.

Pupils enthusiastically describe how she uses multisensory approaches to help them learn; methods sneered at by Miss Trunchbull, who raises pertinent concerns about the gendered nature of the lesson:

“Mrs D, Mrs I, Mrs FFI, Mrs C, Mrs U, Mrs LTY: that spells difficulty.”
“How perfectly ridiculous!” snorts the Trunchbull. “Why are all these women married?”

More disturbing than unnecessarily gendered spellings, however, are the number of safeguarding issues Miss Honey fails to report, from parental neglect to the physical and mental abuse of pupils by the headteacher.

Once we realise that Miss Honey has herself suffered years of cruelty at the hands of Miss Trunchbull, though, some of her actions become more understandable, even if they cannot be condoned.

She is powerless to break the cycle of abuse, and ultimately unable to solve her own problems; it takes a five-year-old girl with special powers to address the injustices in Miss Honey’s life.

Despite not being totally convinced of her brilliance as a classroom teacher, I do have a particular soft spot for Miss Honey.

According to Dahl, she and I are alumni of the same teacher training establishment in Reading and I well remember my days as an NQT/RQT as fundamental to my development as a practitioner.

Miss Honey is still at the beginning of her career when we meet her in *Matilda* and it is unlikely, in a school with such a strong culture of bullying, that she will have been mentored or supported in the way she deserved.

Thus, while placing Miss Honey on a teaching pedestal is unwarranted based on the evidence, we shouldn’t judge her too harshly.

As an exemplar, Miss Honey must be approached with a note of caution: her altruism and willingness to take her pupil with a troubled life into her home encourages unrealistic expectations of the teacher-pupil relationship if nothing else.

However, there are worse people to aspire to be than someone who tells the children on their first day, “I myself... want to help you to learn as much as possible while you are in this class”.

For Miss Honey, providing the best learning experience in order to provide a solid foundation on which to build is what teaching is all about, and I for one wouldn’t argue with her.

Dr Branwen Bingle is the Operational Lead for ITE Partnerships at the University of Greenwich and a committed advocate of children’s literature.