“No text is innocent”: Canadian children’s books in the classroom

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Abstract

This case study of one school district explored elementary teachers’ use of, and beliefs about, Canadian children’s books in the classroom. It also examined the supports that facilitate elementary teachers’ use of Canadian books, including services provided by teacher-librarians, school district personnel and others; availability of funding; and opportunities for professional development. The case study district had a teacher-librarian in every school and was committed to supporting the work of teachers through the school library. The participants had clear ideas about what it meant to them to be Canadian and about the values that were important to them as Canadians. They believed it was important to incorporate Canadian books into classroom activities. However, they often felt a need to justify their use of Canadian books, whereas they unquestioningly used American books in their teaching across the curriculum. Overall, they were more knowledgeable about Canadian books and Canadian authors and illustrators than teachers in earlier studies. However, the findings of the study raise an interesting paradox; the teachers supported the use of Canadian books but they did not appear to connect “Canadian values” to Canadian books. They seemed unaware that all books, Canadian or not, convey an ideology; “no text is innocent” (Stephens & Watson, 1994, p. 14).

“No text is innocent”: Canadian children’s books in the classroom

Books for children, as Nodelman (1999) writes, are often dismissed simply as texts for the nursery or the elementary classroom. Yet children’s books play an important role in integrating new generations of children into society. Whether children’s books explore morality and ethics, social relationships, the history of a society, or provide a glimpse into the future, they offer readers of all ages the potential to engage in and to examine particular ideologies of culture (Stephens, 1992). Stephens and Watson (1994) remind educators that “no text is innocent” (p. 14); all texts embody an ideology; all texts foreground some ideas and suppress or omit others. Having said that, it is important to recognize that ideologies are not necessarily undesirable. In fact, without a system of beliefs, it

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would be impossible for individuals to make sense of the world. Some children's texts are explicit in their ideology, e.g., *This Land is My Land* (Littlechild, 1993) and *The Moccasin Goalie* (Brownridge, 1995). In other books, such as *Dragonfly Kites* (Highway, 2002), the ideology is implicit or less obvious. Frequently, however, the ideological position presented in a book for children is one that promotes a culturally acceptable view of who the author/illustrator/publisher thinks the readers ought to be; through both words and pictures, readers/viewers are invited to observe themselves reflected in the selected representations of the text (Stephens, 1992).

Recognizing the ideological stance of a text is a crucial element in reading and selecting texts for use in elementary school classrooms. One of the teacher's tasks is to "teach children how to read, so that to the limits of the child's capacity that child will not be at the mercy of *what* she reads" (Hollindale, 1988, p. 7). However, it is not necessarily easy for young readers (or adult readers) to immediately perceive the ideology of a text. As Chambers (1977) explains: "Tone of voice, style as a whole, very quickly establishes a relationship between author and reader," "wooing" the reader into the book (p. 71). The 'wooing' is a necessary component in engaging a young reader with a text. The reader may identify with the narrator or with the protagonist and, in doing so, may have to take up, temporarily, attitudes he or she might want to resist. "It requires a willing suspension of scepticism or resentment if a reader is to give a text a chance to work on him or her" (Thomson, 1987, p. 113). Thus, through the ideological stances they take, novels and picture storybooks invite readers to take up particular subject positions, inviting them to "see" and understand the world in specific ways (Stephens, 1992). At the same time, readers are challenged to explore the values, worldview, ideas and assumptions presented.

Giroux (1995) maintains that the "Disneyfication" of children's culture in North America has created a narrow range of readily available children's books and other media, which is reducing generations of children to consumers for new commercial markets. He writes, "Children's culture is a sphere where entertainment, advocacy, and pleasure meet to construct conceptions of what it means to be a child occupying a combination of gender, racial, and class positions in society through which one defines oneself in relation to a myriad of others" (p. 1). With this narrowing range of books comes a much reduced range of ideologies, that is, the values, worldview, ideas and assumptions that children are invited to explore.

One specific ideological stance found in children's literature, no matter from what nation it derives, is that of national identity. In fact, children's literature can be influential in shaping both notions of nationhood and national identity. Hughes (1991) explains: "It is through a rich, varied and honest literature that our young people will grow up with a real sense of what it is to be Canadian, and to recognize the uniqueness of our country that is worth protecting, preserving and fighting for" (p. 14). In the postcolonial era, any fixed notions of so-called "national identity" are difficult to find anywhere in the world. There exists, paradoxically, both increasingly permeable national boundaries and an increased desire to assert nation-hood. While Canadians continue to be preoccupied with national identity (or the perceived lack of one), we concur with Sumara, Davis

and Laidlaw (2001), who, in exploring Canadian identity and curriculum theory, write:

The premise is not that popularized conceptions of Canadian identity can capture the complexity of Canadian history and culture, but that they are part of a common sense that is influential. In other words, we do not imagine there to be a quintessential Canadian identity. (p. 146)

In our reading of Canadian children's literature, we have found cultural texts that promote a cohesive, harmonious and exclusionary view of national identity, and also texts that serve to question notions of a homogenous and cohesive sense of nation (McKenzie, 2003). These texts can help children to explore and question prevailing ideas and values, and encourage them to see "difference" through new eyes.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to further extend our exploration of elementary teachers' use of Canadian children's books and their thoughts about Canadian books. In our work in teacher education programs and schools in Alberta, we have found that teachers, both pre-service and practicing, are largely uninformed about Canadian books for children. Very little research exists on the use of Canadian children's literature in elementary schools. One Ontario survey of 1,027 elementary school teachers (Pantaleo, 2002) found that respondents accessed mainly American literature. Although they could name a number of Canadian authors and/or illustrators, Pantaleo concluded that the respondents' knowledge and use of Canadian children's literature was limited, as was their knowledge of book selection tools and resources. Findings from a study in Alberta (Bainbridge, Carbonaro, & Wolodko, 2002; Bainbridge, Carbonaro, & Green, 2005) also showed that elementary classroom teachers were largely unaware of Canadian literature for children. The study revealed many reasons why teachers do not use Canadian children's literature, among them the perceived high cost of Canadian books (as compared to the mostly American books available through book clubs); difficulty in finding information about Canadian books; the lack of trained teacher-librarians in the schools; and a lack of time to access professional resources such as book reviews, relevant websites, or professional journals. Alberta teachers were also heavily dependent on locally provided in-service workshops and book lists and on the teacher support material provided by textbook publishers (e.g., reading series).

In a study conducted by The Writers' Trust of Canada of the English-language Canadian literature used by high school teachers across Canada, Baird (2002) found that most teachers based their selection of texts for study in their classrooms on the availability of texts (books the school already owns), acceptability (provincial guidelines, community standards and the interests of students) and the agreed consensus of the school's English department. Baird concluded that Canadian high school teachers, even those supportive of Canadian literature, have limited knowledge about Canadian writers and the Canadian publishing scene. She also noted the significant competition that exists from American and British literature in Canadian high school English classrooms.

These findings, drawn primarily from survey research, encouraged us to examine in a more in-depth way the supports that facilitate elementary teachers’ use of Canadian books. According to the respondents participating in the surveys reported above, their use of Canadian books was influenced by (a) services provided by teacher-librarians, school district personnel and others, (b) the availability of funding, and (c) opportunities for professional development.

We designed our research as a case study of one school district in order to examine, in a real life context, the interaction of these factors on teachers’ use of and beliefs about Canadian children’s books. Few school districts in Alberta have all the supports in place that might facilitate and enhance teachers’ use of Canadian books in their classrooms. The selected case study site appeared to have all the supports in place, including teacher-librarians in all of the district’s elementary schools.

We began our study with the following research question: Does the presence of supports such as teacher-librarians, funding for materials, and professional development opportunities within a school district, enhance elementary teachers’ knowledge about and use of Canadian children’s books in their classrooms? The analysis of the data, however, suggested that a more critical issue might be the nature of the teachers’ knowledge/understanding of texts and the ideological messages they carry. In this paper, we begin with the findings related to our initial research question, and we go on to explore the teachers’ awareness of text as a medium that transmits cultural values.

Methodology

Case study research focuses on developing an understanding of a phenomenon or issue through an in-depth examination of a case, a bounded system (Stake, 2005). Our study, an instrumental case study, was designed to provide insight into the issues surrounding support for teachers’ knowledge and use of Canadian children’s books.

The study was conducted in elementary schools in a small urban school district. The schools ranged from approximately 250 to 600 students, with 80% of the schools having between 350 and 400 students. School staff sizes varied from eleven to thirty teachers. Although there was a teacher-librarian in every school in the district, only the high school teacher-librarian had full-time library responsibility. The teacher-librarians in the elementary schools were allocated between 0.3 FTE (full time equivalent) and 0.5 FTE for their library assignment; the remainder of their time was spent either as administrators or as classroom teachers. There was, however, a full-time library aide in every school library in the district.

The researchers invited all grade two and grade five teachers plus teacher-librarians and administrators to participate in the research project. Twenty volunteers completed a web-based survey, a self-administered questionnaire, to provide information about their use and knowledge of Canadian children’s books. Of the 20 respondents who completed the survey, 12 taught grade two, six taught grade five and two were part-time teacher-librarians. Their years of teaching experience varied from one to thirty-three years. Twelve of the 20 respondents had spent their entire teaching careers in the school district in the study, while four teachers had spent most of their careers in the district.

Two weeks after the survey was completed, the researchers made informal visits to six school sites in the district, and held interviews with seven teachers who had completed the survey (4 teaching grade two and 3 teaching grade five). In addition, the district superintendent, two school principals and two teacher-librarians were also interviewed. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. These interviews allowed the researchers to refine and add to the data collected in the survey. A follow-up visit three months later allowed for further conversations with participants about the preliminary findings.

Procedures used in the analysis and interpretation of the data included tabulation of numerical data and content analysis of written questionnaire items and interview transcripts as well as field notes from the site visits (Berg, 2001; Mason, 2002; Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Trustworthiness of the study findings was enhanced by the use of multiple sources and types of data and by triangulation of descriptions and interpretations through data redundancy and through participant examination (member checks) of data, findings, and insights (Stake, 2005).

Findings of the Study

Being Canadian

One of the questions we pursued in the interviews was, “What does it mean to you to be a Canadian?” All the participants commented on the difficulty of answering this question. However, while some participants were clearly surprised by the question, and some offered fairly superficial responses, all offered a variety of ideas about what it means to them to “be a Canadian.” An analysis of the participants’ responses highlighted the following themes: appreciating Canada’s freedoms; taking pride in the country; valuing nature and the environment; having a sense of place; being a multicultural collage or mosaic; accepting difference; embracing values of acceptance, respect, tolerance, understanding, and open-mindedness; accepting challenges and taking on responsibility as a country. Several participants commented that not being American or not like America was part of their sense of being a Canadian; for others, going abroad had heightened their awareness of how ‘good’ Canada is and had helped them see what it means to be a Canadian. Here are some comments from the participants:

That’s the toughest question you could ever ask a Canadian. I think . . . when I’ve traveled internationally that’s when I’ve noticed what being a Canadian is. To me, people seem to appreciate Canadians and see Canadians as good people. I think that Canadians are good people. I think our hearts are in the right places. We don’t always make the right choices, but I think our hearts are in the right places. (Dennis, grade five teacher)

We’re seen as being ambassadors for believing in the rights of others . . . the challenge that we have, I think, is living up to the expectations that the rest of the world has for Canada in terms of, you know, our tolerance and understanding . . . I think that’s a huge moral responsibility and it’s an obligation I think we have to continue because some other countries don’t do that. But that’s a tough thing to live up

to, I think. We set high expectations for ourselves, and then when you try and achieve them the rest of the world also has high expectations of you, and sometimes you can’t always meet them, hence the American shock when we didn’t go to Iraq even though we believed it was the wrong thing to do. (Carol, school principal)

I certainly think that as Canadians, we’re a microcosm of the world. They talk about the United States being a melting pot . . . but we are the microcosm of what the world should look like in the future--where all peoples of all kinds, all beliefs, are able to come and live in peace. And I believe that our society is the forefront to that . . . I prefer to think of us as Canadians that have a lot of diverse backgrounds but we all think and feel sort of the same way about our country and how the world should look. That’s what it means to me. And, of course, I think that we’re the greatest in the world. Without question, we are number one. (Sean, school principal)

Remembering first Canadian books

When asked to name the first Canadian book they remembered reading, many participants struggled with a response. Some were unable to recall the first time they read a Canadian book, but many participants recalled specific titles or authors. Among those they mentioned were *The Hardy Boys* (written by Canadian Leslie McFarlane for the first 20 years of the series); *Who has Seen the Wind* (written by W.O. Mitchell in 1947); *The Lure of the Labrador Wild* (written by Dillon Wallace in 1905); and *Mine for Keeps* (written by Jean Little in 1994). One teacher remembered reading the early works of Margaret Atwood. Participants often remembered these first books written and/or illustrated by Canadian authors through the content (e.g., hockey) or through a connection with place (because the book was set, for example, in British Columbia, Saskatchewan or Newfoundland).

Using Canadian books in Canadian schools

Of the 20 survey respondents, 18 maintained that it was important to use Canadian books in their classrooms, though not exclusively. All of the interviewees believed it was important to use Canadian literature in Canadian schools. The reasons they gave included: relevant content / curriculum fit; familiar settings, contexts or places; learning about Canadian culture / history; supporting Canadian authors; and providing role models to students in regard to writing and writers. Many participants consciously used Canadian books in their teaching, especially when profiling an author, or when the book was on a ‘recommended’ list. Teachers provided the following rationale:

- We live in Canada so the focus should be on Canada
- The books offer a perspective unique to Canadian life
- They provide personal links in the students’ learning
- They instill a sense of pride in Canada; they celebrate Canadian achievements and promote an understanding of Canadian celebrations and holidays

- They contain Canadian vocabulary, colloquialisms, spelling (e.g., harbour, cheque), measurements and money
- They help to provide a sense of community; they show communities, settings and contexts that help students become aware of other places within Canada and the cultures within these communities
- Children relate to and identify with the books; the books hold the child's interest
- Children relate to the multicultural mosaic represented in our Canadian stories better than to the Hispanic and black cultures portrayed in American stories
- The settings of Canadian books may be places the students have visited or lived in themselves.

Interview comments include the following:

Canadians see that there's a huge importance in place. Our geography is hugely important . . . we have certain values that are distinct from other countries and I think those need to be reflected in our books. I mean we're probably the only country in the world that would choose Tommy Douglas as our biggest Canadian hero . . . I can't tell you exactly what is a Canadian value, but I think if we have Canadian authors writing those books, that's going to be reflected in those books. I think we need to encourage a wide range of authors to write books. It cannot be just based on commercial success. Otherwise, it would be a very narrow focus. I think we really need to have people from our north writing, people from Quebec . . . We have to reflect those different areas of our country, and so geography and values are very important, I think. (Marion, teacher-librarian and assistant principal)

Well, you know, some of the children look up to authors who come in and do book talks, and our purchasing their books allows them to be writers. They are somewhat role models for our students. Living in Canada, it's more relevant to us because it's home. It's good to learn about home first and then you kind of go out in the world. So, you have to have some sense of your country, I think. (Dennis, grade five teacher)

To my way of thinking there is so much value in [Canadian literature] because children learn best when we have a starting point with what we know and we make connections with everything in our life around us... I think they're just going to become better readers, they're going to remember what they're reading, they're going to make all their associations, they're going to recognize so many of the things they already know in books. I think it's really important that children read Canadian literature to keep our culture strong. Not to make it just a sole diet of Canadian literature but I think it really important that we have a good quality and quantity of Canadian literature. That's one of the reasons I kept the Networks series. Because the little stories in there are very good. And it's Canadian . . . The kids relate to them really well. (Sheila, grade two teacher)

Some teachers were not aware that they were using Canadian books. One teacher discovered during the interview that most of the novels she had read aloud to her class were, in fact, Canadian. Most of the teachers selected books on the basis of curriculum fit rather than on the national origin of the book.

Disadvantages of using Canadian books

When asked to discuss any disadvantages in using Canadian books in their teaching, 11 survey respondents believed that there were none. However, some teachers reported the following disadvantages:

- Access to and availability of appropriate resources for curriculum areas or for specific topics
- The expense of the books
- Getting information about Canadian books and knowing which authors and illustrators are Canadian.

One survey respondent wrote:

Using good literature is the most important criteria. If Canadian authors fit, then great.

Another of the survey respondents wrote:

Reading recovery - especially guided reading - is becoming a reality in our school as so many kids are not reading well by the grade 5 level. We take and purchase what is available in prepared kits because it works. It is too time consuming to personally level Canadian books to make up a collection that would be useable. I wish Canadian publishers would get on this and provide these essential materials as they are often a better match in terms of content.

Sources assisting in the selection of trade books

When asked about how they access information to help them in selecting books for their classrooms, or in discovering ‘new’ books, or finding out which books are considered ‘good,’ the study participants indicated a range of sources. The most frequently cited source was the teacher-librarians in the schools across the district. These staff members make recommendations to individuals, give presentations about new books at staff meetings, create a “Top Twenty” student-selected list each year, and purchase materials from the *CanLit for Kids* program. The teachers also noted recommendations made by other teachers across the district, friends and family, library technicians and students. In other words, most of the recommendations teachers received about books were by “word of mouth.”

Some teachers recalled their pre-service teacher education courses and also in-service activities they had experienced in recent years (writing seminars, Teachers’ Convention, Early Literacy Symposium, Learning Resources conference). They learned about new books from author visits to schools (Peter Eyvindson, Sheree Fitch, Glen Huser, and Ian Wallace had all visited the district in the last few years) and from children’s bookstores.

One respondent recalled:

I did have a course at the University of Lethbridge with [Professor X] and that was interesting because she talked about children's literature. And that initially got me excited, and then through our district in-services and teachers' conventions, with various people promoting literature. That's been good as well. (Dorothy, grade two French Immersion teacher)

Teachers spoke about searching out award-winning books, and noted in particular the Caldecott and Newbery awards for American children's books, and some of the Canadian provincial awards such as the Silver Birch Award (Ontario) and the Rocky Mountain Book Award (Alberta). None of the teachers mentioned Canadian national awards such as the Governor General's Award or the Canadian Library Association awards:

When I'm looking to choose literature [I ask] have I seen any reviews on it? Has it won, you know, the typical awards that you see for whatever reason, Canadian, non-Canadian. Has it won the Caldecott medal, has it won the Newbery award? Things like that. So that other people have said that this is quality for children that age. (Carol, school principal)

Teacher-librarians used lists from the larger school districts as a guide for selecting new books; they visited bookstores often (and the Edmonton Public Schools' Book Depository' once in a while); and used the Internet increasingly when searching for information about books:

I find I use the Internet a lot. I used to use the [Canadian] Children's Book Center, those kinds of publications, but I do a lot using the Internet now. We use the Internet more and more. (Marion, teacher-librarian and assistant principal)

The websites they used most frequently were those of professional journals such as *Resource Links*; *CM: Canadian Review of Materials*; *Canadian Children's Book Centre*; *Canadian Children's Literature Service: National Library of Canada*; *CanLit for Kids*; and *Lit Alive*. Occasionally, teachers and teacher-librarians mentioned that parents and students recommended good books to them:

I will take requests from students into consideration. We have a book in our library, a binder that they can write in titles of books that they've seen, that they really want to have, that they enjoyed reading and really feel we should have. So they'll fill that information in. (Naomi, teacher-librarian and special needs teacher)

The teachers and teacher-librarians also spoke of their own personal values or pedagogical beliefs:

As long as it’s got good illustrations that captivate the students and it’s a good story at their level, that’s the trick - finding storybooks at their level. (Dorothy, grade two French Immersion teacher)

When I’m buying books for my classroom collection, I’m buying books that excite me. I get something that might appeal to the boys or just something exciting that captures you. That’s why I do it. I tend more towards good literature and don’t buy the latest Walt Disney movie that’s a hit right now, type of thing. (JoAnne, grade two teacher)

The teachers spoke at length about the importance of book fairs in acquiring new books. Teachers acquired large numbers of free books for their own classrooms as a result of holding the fairs, especially those sponsored by Scholastic. These books made up a considerable percentage of the books available in the classrooms for “free reading,” but very few of them were Canadian publications.

Curriculum-related use of Canadian children’s books

The teachers mainly spoke about the need for ‘curriculum fit’:

The thing that influences me the very most, I would say, is not so much whether it’s Canadian or non-Canadian. I’m looking for two things. The curriculum fit and ... good literature. When I was choosing literature for my own students or when I was going to read a story to the class or whatever, I ask is it fitting the theme that I’m teaching right now. It might be I’m teaching a Social Studies unit on pioneers. So then I would look for a book like Sarah Plain and Tall or something like that, that would enhance the curriculum that we’re already doing. (Carol, school principal)

The survey respondents reported that they used Canadian children’s books in a variety of subjects, predominantly in language arts and social studies. Science was the next subject area in which Canadian trade books were used, followed by mathematics. Eight respondents reported that they made a point of using books by Canadian authors and/or illustrators in their classrooms. Respondents wrote in the survey:

- *When the books are available I will read them to my students; the more we use Canadian literature the better*
- I enjoy the versatility it provides for planning
- I like to do Reader’s Workshop and have a few Canadian titles in the collection. Our class novel studies are all Canadian: 1) Murder on the Canadian by Eric Wilson is tied to the Social Studies unit on Canadian Geography; 2) Owls In the Family by Farley Mowat.

Nine survey respondents reported that they did not make a point of using books by Canadian authors and/or illustrators in their classroom. Their survey comments included:

- I use what resources are available that meet the needs of the curriculum
- I haven't made an effort to include it in my year plans
- I pick books based on interest more than on author
- I just don't know enough about authors / illustrators in general!

The teachers generally defined curriculum fit in terms of the surface content of the work. They selected books that were about a topic, rather than looking for opportunities for exploring the “big ideas” of the curriculum. For example, a book for classroom study might be selected because of its setting (e.g., the mountains) or its topic (e.g., bears) rather than the ideas it raises related to a curriculum outcome such as understanding how people work together to make a community or the impact of human activity on the environment. When teachers select books based on surface content, on the media tie-in, or the books’ ready availability, many high quality books and many Canadian books will be overlooked.

Curriculum-related use of Canadian children’s books

In their lists of authors/illustrators read the most in their classrooms, the teachers responding to the survey named Canadians Robert Munsch, Phoebe Gilman, Ian Wallace, and Janine Tougas. They also listed American authors Marc Brown, Jan Brett, Norman Bridwell, Andrew Clements, Barbara Park and Lois Lowry, which resulted in a fairly balanced mix of Canadian and American materials. Among the other Canadian authors noted were Paulette Bourgeois, Eric Wilson, Barbara Reid, Kit Pearson, Kenneth Oppel, Marie-Louise Gay, Farley Mowat, Linda Bailey, and Andrea Spalding. Fewer respondents indicated that they had a favourite Canadian children’s book illustrator, but those named included Barbara Reid, Ted Harrison, Michael Martchenko, Georgia Graham, Ian Wallace, and Vladlyana Kryorka. Overall, many of the teachers were familiar with Canadian authors and illustrators, and used Canadian materials in their classrooms. However, when providing examples of books and awards in their interviews, American names came more readily to their minds.

Teachers’ Reflections on the Study

Many participants showed appreciation for the research. Their involvement in the survey caused them to think about their own practices and drew attention to the use of Canadian literature in their classroom or school. One teacher said:

I was disappointed in myself – my lack of knowledge of Canadian authors –so [the survey] really pointed out a need to me and I think it’s wonderful. And the thing is, this is going to help me. It just made me do a lot of thinking. (JoAnne, grade two teacher)

Another participant commented:

It made me reflect on my classroom practices using the books. So that was a good point. I thought it made me all of a sudden become aware of, Yeah, I could make a choice using Canadian authors as opposed to not. I just used what we had in our library and we’ve got a combination of all sorts of authors, and so it was nice that you had the space that I

could write the comments for that and also put in the fact that we really, really appreciate having librarians who we don’t want to lose any funding for. It makes such a huge difference having librarians and library [aides]. (Dorothy, grade two French Immersion teacher)

Discussion and Recommendations

The participants in this study had clear ideas about what it meant to them to be Canadian and about the values that were important to them as Canadians. They expressed pride in being Canadian and believed it was important to incorporate Canadian books into classroom activities. They endorsed the use of Canadian books as a ‘common sense’ assumption: Canadian students should be reading Canadian books. These findings contrast with the findings of earlier studies, cited at the beginning of this paper, of elementary teachers in Ontario (Pantaleo, 2005) and Alberta (Bainbridge, Carbonaro, & Green, 2005) and of high school English teachers across Canada (Baird, 2002). The elementary teachers in our case study placed value and importance on Canadian books and, overall, they were more knowledgeable about Canadian books and Canadian authors and illustrators than the teachers in the earlier studies.

However, the findings of our current study leave us with an interesting paradox: the teachers supported the use of Canadian books, but they generally did not appear to connect “Canadian values” to Canadian books (one teacher-librarian proved to be an exception). They seemed largely unaware that all books, Canadian or not, convey an ideology. The teachers unquestioningly used American books when teaching language arts and science and sometimes even when teaching Canadian topics in the social studies curriculum. They did not problematize their use of those materials in the way in which they problematized their use of Canadian materials. It appeared to us that they often felt a need to justify their use of Canadian books, whereas they unquestioningly embraced American books in their classrooms. The teachers and administrators in this study appeared to be unaware that “no text is innocent” (Stephens & Watson, 1994, p. 14), and that Canadian books are likely to espouse an ideology that is particular and specific to Canada, just as texts from the United States or Australia are likely to espouse a more American or Australian worldview. Pre-service and practicing teachers need to be encouraged to read critically, to select books for their classrooms with care, and to discuss those books (and the ideology they present) with their students.

The books children read influence the ways in which they see themselves and the world in which they live. Canadian books provide one vehicle for Canadian children to learn what it means to be Canadian (with all its complexities). The use of leveling books, as mentioned by some of the teachers in this study, has become orthodoxy in some schools. In some districts, leveling has become a primary method of matching text to reader. The many lists of leveled books available to teachers (for example, Pinnell & Fountas, 2002) generally lack Canadian content. In addition, many of these leveled books in no way reflect the rich literature many teachers could bring into their classrooms if they accessed library resources. Teachers using leveled books need to supplement their students’ reading materials with Canadian books from their school libraries.

Many of the teachers in this study did not recognize the importance of Canadian books in the education of young Canadians beyond the scope of a narrowly defined “curriculum fit” (i.e., the topic or content of curriculum, rather than the overall outcomes or “big ideas” of curriculum). Teachers need to take time to read children’s books, to know Canadian literature and to know their students, in order to be able to offer opportunities for developing a richer learning environment in their classrooms. The inclusion of Canadian books would allow children to engage in meaningful conversations with their teachers and peers about issues that underlie Canadian culture and values.

Educators are not alone in disregarding the value of Canadian literature. The federal government continues to provide low levels of funding and support to the literary arts and the publishing industry. We have noticed the paucity of Canadian children’s books included in booklists in some provincial programs of study and in course reading lists from teacher education institutions. We have searched (sometimes in vain) for Canadian children’s titles in some Canadian bookstores. We have personally noted the difference between Canadian and Australian bookstores; Australian stores display Australian books at the front of the store whereas Canadian bookstores usually do not display Canadian books prominently or attempt to make buyers aware of the latest Canadian publications and award winners.

Hade and Edmondson (2003) add to the discussion by noting that, “commercialization has brought popular culture texts and products into children’s book publishing, possibly compromising the potential for books that reflectively engage children” (p.135). Fifteen years ago, Hughes (1991) suggested that there needs to be “a continuing acceptance and encouragement of those writers who help to nourish [children’s] imaginations, even though the books may not have mass market appeal” (p.14). Few independent publishing companies now exist worldwide. Canada is fortunate in having perhaps five or six such companies publishing children’s materials, a situation that is uncommon in many countries. Scholastic, however, having bought out many smaller companies, is now the largest publisher and distributor of children’s books in the world and has a presence in virtually every school in North America (Hade & Edmondson, 2003). Emphasis is increasingly placed on books that will sell - and sell a wide range of related products (e.g., the Harry Potter line of movies, toys, costumes, pencils, lunchboxes, and so on).

At the end of this research study, we are left with the question of how pre-service and practicing teachers can be helped to engage critically in decision-making related to the books and other media selected for use in schools. The teacher-librarians in our study were aware of the importance of developing library collections rich in Canadian books and other kinds of resources. Their monthly meetings supported their ongoing learning about children’s literature as well as about other instructional and administrative matters. The teachers in the district appeared to be open to learning more about Canadian books, and they asked the researchers for lists of Canadian books and for resources such as websites where they could locate Canadian materials for potential use in their classrooms. This suggests the need for more district level in-service professional development sessions (possibly provided by the teacher-librarians, where they

are available) that put an emphasis on Canadian books and the opportunities within the curriculum for integration of Canadian literature.

Finally, we challenge readers of this paper to consider the ways in which they might be complicit in failing to recognize the importance of Canadian children's books in their own practice. The importance of children's books - and of the independent companies that produce those books - are overlooked at our peril.

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