

Canadian Books in Canadian Schools:
The Need for Teacher/Teacher-Librarian Collaboration
in Reading, Knowing and Doing

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This Canadian research which explored elementary teachers' use of, and beliefs about, Canadian children's books in the classroom, has implications for teacher-librarians and other educators in many countries faced with the impact of the homogenization and "Disney-fication" of children's books and other media. The research builds on previous studies which identified some of the supports that facilitate elementary teachers' use of children's books in their teaching (e.g., access to teacher-librarians, funding for materials, and opportunities for professional development). The case study school district was committed to supporting the work of teachers through the school library and had these supports in place. The study 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. The teachers relied on the recommendations of the teacher-librarians about books, but they rarely collaborated with teacher-librarians in selecting and using Canadian books with their students. The research report concludes with questions about lost potential in terms of the power of books to enhance children's sense of national identity and their sense of social cohesion.

Introduction

Children's books and media play a part in the development of young people's sense of their national and cultural identity. Although the research reported here focused particularly on issues related to Canadian education and Canadian national and cultural identity, it has implications for many other countries faced with the homogenization and "Disney-fication" of children's books and other media.

American media conglomerates like Disney and Time-Warner, publishing giants like Germany's Bertelsmann and Australia's Rupert Murdoch have near-monopoly control of global news and entertainments. ... Centuries of tradition are eroded by the technically dazzling but culturally-biased products of the corporate entertainment industry. Goodbye to Hindu classics like the Ramayana and the age-old folktales of Africa, hello Baywatch and Geraldo. (Walt's world, 1998, p. 1)

Although the challenges of protecting Canadian culture and of supporting the production of Canadian cultural products have been an issue for decades for members of Canada's cultural and literary community and for Canadian politicians, very little public discussion has occurred regarding the use of Canadian books and other media in schools. Perhaps it seems only "common sense" that Canadian children's literature has an important role to play in young Canadians' developing understanding of what makes Canada a country, what makes Canada different from other nations, and what it means to be Canadian in a globalized society. Perhaps that explains, in part, why there has been very little research on this issue until quite recently.

The findings of recent studies investigating the use of Canadian books and other media in elementary schools have been disappointing and discouraging to those interested in Canadian children's literature. For example, a survey of 1,027 elementary school teachers in Ontario, a province in Central Canada, found that respondents accessed mainly American literature (Pantaleo, 2002). Although the study respondents could name a number of Canadian authors and/or illustrators, their knowledge and use of Canadian children's literature was limited, as was their knowledge of book selection tools and resources. A study conducted in Alberta, a province in Western Canada, found that elementary classroom teachers were largely unaware of Canadian books for children (Bainbridge, Carbonaro & Green, 2005; Bainbridge, Carbonaro & Wolodko, 2002). The data for the 2002 Alberta-wide study were collected through a web-based survey and follow-up telephone interviews. Participants suggested many reasons why they did not use Canadian children's literature: lack of funding for library materials and 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; few opportunities for professional development related to 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-services and book lists and on the teacher support material provided by textbook publishers (e.g., reading series).

The results of these studies raised a question for three Alberta researchers—myself, Dr. Joyce Bainbridge and Dr. Mike Carbonaro. We asked: To what extent would the provision of supports such as funding, professional development and teacher-librarians make a difference in the use of Canadian children's books in elementary classrooms? To attempt to answer this question, the researchers designed a case study to examine in-depth the use of Canadian books in elementary classrooms a school district where supports such as funding, professional development and teacher-librarians appeared to be available to the classroom teachers. The research site for the case study was a school district which has retained its teacher-librarians and has a district-level commitment to the continuing support of teachers through the school library.

Educational Context of the Study

This study was conducted in the elementary schools of one public school district in Alberta, Canada. The province of Alberta is a very large geographic area that is sparsely populated. In Alberta, both non-denominational public schools and Catholic

separate schools are fully funded by the provincial government. The ministry of education for the province sets the goals of schooling, establishes curriculum guidelines and requirements, evaluates student learning through a testing program at grades three, six, nine, and twelve, and provides educational funding. The delivery of schooling is delegated to school districts; districts are governed by elected boards of trustees and range in size from several schools and a few hundred students to over 200 schools with tens of thousands of students. The organizational structure for public education in Alberta results in considerable local autonomy for schools, even those within the same school district. This local autonomy, combined with reductions in funding to education by the provincial government over the past two decades, has led to decreases in time allocation for many teacher-librarians and decreases in the overall numbers of teacher-librarians in the province. Only a very few school districts in the province still have teacher-librarians in all of their elementary schools. Elementary schools in Alberta serve children from ages five to twelve, from kindergarten to grade six; in both rural and urban settings, kindergarten to grade six programs often are located within schools serving secondary students as well (i.e., a kindergarten to grade nine school, or a kindergarten to grade twelve school).

Canadian Identity and Values

What is it to be a Canadian? What are Canadian values? These questions underpin questions about what is a Canadian book and what is important about Canadian children having access to and using Canadian books. Diakiw (1997) states most Canadians--consciously or unconsciously--accept, promote and take pride in ten “commonplaces”; these commonplaces are beliefs that Canada:

- is a “wilderness nation”
- has powerful regional identities
- continues to engage in equity struggles
- possesses a strong sense of social welfare
- has strong native [indigenous] roots
- is a nation of immigrants
- is founded on two cultures and is a bilingual nation
- possesses enormous resources and a high standard of living
- is rich in cultural traditions in the arts, sports and popular culture
- serves as peace-keeper for the world.

Living next door to the United States of America (and being different from the United States) is a consistent identity theme for Canadians, and Diakiw suggests that this facet of Canadian identity could be an eleventh commonplace. Diakiw believes that the layering of these ten (or eleven) commonplaces produces a unique and distinctive Canadian culture.

Because, as children read or are read to, they are unconsciously absorbing the values and attitudes presented in the text (and its images, in the case of picture books), it is important that the adults selecting books for children are aware of the values and attitudes presented in the books they share with children (McKenzie, 2003). Even children as young as Grade 3 recognize that Canadian students should read Canadian

books to help them learn about their country (Panteleo, 2000). Canadian children's books present more than content about the country, its history, and its culture; they show Canadians what values they respect and how they look at themselves today and in the past (Egoff, 1975). Developing a national identity and a sense of social cohesion becomes a very challenging task for Canadians if students and teachers do not use resources that reflect Canadian values, experiences, and perspectives, if students and teachers use resources that instead reflect the values, experiences, and perspectives of another country such as the United States (Haycock, 2003).

Most Canadian teachers believe that it is important to have Canadian books in schools. Unfortunately, although teachers, including pre-service teachers, often assume that Canadian books are readily available in schools, the reduction in the number of teacher-librarians (and in teacher-librarians' time allocation) has resulted in reduced attention to Canadian books in schools (Haycock, 2003). The issues around developing children's Canadian cultural identity and their sense of social cohesion have underpinned several recent research studies undertaken in Alberta (see, for example, Bainbridge, Carbonaro & Green, 2005; Johnston & Mangat, 2003).

Methodology

Earlier studies of the issues surrounding support for teachers' knowledge and use of Canadian children's books have been primarily been conducted using survey methods. In order to provide understanding of the phenomena identified in the survey studies, this study was designed as an instrumental case study. Case study research focuses on developing an understanding of a phenomena or issue through an in-depth examination of a case, a bounded system (Stake, 2005). Case study research relies on multiple sources of data: in this study, data was collected through a web-based survey, interviews, and observations. An instrumental case study is designed "to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization" (Stake, 2005, p. 445). The primary purpose of an instrumental case study is to advance understanding of an issue or generalization; the selection of the case study site is dependent on the nature of the issue or generalization to be studied. To study the extent to which the provision of supports such as funding, professional development and teacher-librarians would make a difference in the use of Canadian children's books in elementary classrooms, the researchers needed to find a school district where most, if not all, of the supports were present.

The selection of the school district in which the case study could be conducted required a purposive sampling approach because not all schools in Alberta have teacher-librarians. 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. The focus on teachers in grades two and five allowed the researchers to examine book use in the primary and upper elementary grades while avoiding adding extra pressures on teachers involved in the provincial testing program (grades three and six). 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 interviews were held 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 to the district three months later allowed for follow-up 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 using multiple sources and types of data and by triangulating descriptions and interpretations through data redundancy and through member checks, that is, participant examination and review of data, findings, and insights (Stake, 2005).

Findings from the Study

The findings of the study are reported in two sections: findings derived from the survey questionnaire and findings from the interviews. The survey and interview results confirmed expected findings, that is, that teachers who have support of teacher-librarians, adequate levels of funding for library materials, and some opportunities for professional development are more knowledgeable about Canadian books and they do tend to use Canadian books with their students. However, the interviews revealed one unanticipated finding of the study, that is, teachers' lack of awareness that "no text is innocent" (Stephens & Watson, 1994, p. 14). This is one aspect of the research findings that the researchers are disseminating here for the first time for an international audience.

Findings from the Survey

Respondents were more knowledgeable about Canadian books, authors and illustrators than respondents to the earlier Alberta-wide survey, and they expressed the interest and need to know more about Canadian materials. Of the 23 authors identified as "most read by students and teachers," the majority (13) were Canadian [Robert Munsch, Phoebe Gilman, Ian Wallace, Janine Tougas et al, Paulette Bourgeois, Eric Wilson,

Barbara Reid, Kenneth Oppel, Marie-Louise Gay, Farley Mowat, Barbara Demers, Linda Bailey, Andrea Spalding]. Although almost one-half of the respondents reported that they did not make a point of using Canadian books, 90% stated that they believed it was important to use Canadian books in their classrooms and 75% used Canadian books in teaching one or more of the curriculum areas. Respondents appreciated the role that teacher-librarians have played in their schools in locating materials that they needed for their classrooms, particularly curriculum-related materials. They appeared to rely quite heavily on the expertise of the teacher-librarians in selecting books for their classrooms and for their schools' libraries.

Findings from the Interviews

The interviews confirmed that the teachers depended on the teacher-librarians to keep them informed about books and to select books for them. Teacher-librarians were seen as master teachers and curriculum coordinators and as instructional leaders in the schools. There was a deliberate policy decision at the district level to keep teacher-librarians in every school in the district, even if their time allocations had to be reduced for a time due to provincial funding cuts.

The elementary classroom teachers reported in their interviews that they were using children's books in their classrooms in a variety of ways, predominantly for read-alouds and as supporting materials for theme and/or topic based curriculum units. Interview participants stated that it was good to use Canadian books, but they did not necessarily seek out or know Canadian books. Participants had clear ideas about what it means to be Canadian and what values are important to them as Canadians but they appeared to be unaware that all books, Canadian or not, carry the values of the culture from which they originate. This raised an interesting paradox for the researchers: 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. That ideology might be explicit or not, it might exemplify or challenge notions of the culture from which it came, but an ideology would be present.

Implications of the Research

The first implication of the research reported here relates to the importance of teacher-librarians having a comprehensive knowledge of Canadian children's books. The elementary teachers responding to the 2002 Alberta-wide survey indicated that they had little knowledge of Canadian children's books and they were feeling the lack of support in this area because of the reduction in library staffing in Alberta schools over the previous decade (Bainbridge, Carbonaro & Wolodko, 2002). Elementary teachers in schools with teacher-librarians in the case study district had more knowledge of Canadian children's books and were more likely to be using these books in their classroom, but they relied heavily on teacher-librarians and other teachers for recommendations as to which books to use in their classrooms. Most of the elementary teachers interviewed for the case study were not confident in selecting Canadian books on their own because they lacked comprehensive knowledge of Canadian books. Some also expressed concerns

about choosing books to use in their classrooms that might prove to be controversial in nature.

A second implication of the study is that teacher-librarians have an important role to play in helping teachers to select and know more Canadian books. Their role here begins with developing and improving school library collections. Canadian studies beginning in the 1960s have shown that the literature available to teachers and students is influenced by the quality of school library collections and the expertise of school library personnel. For example, the lack of written policy resulted in inferior fiction collections (Kamra, 1969), and more Canadian literature was available in schools with qualified teacher-librarians (Prevey, 1978). However, Canadian teacher-librarians need to do more than select books for the school library: they need to find ways to share their knowledge with teachers, and they need to find ways to encourage teachers to build their own knowledge of and experience with Canadian books.

A third implication of this and other studies is that teacher educators need to ensure that pre-service teachers have the opportunity to learn more about Canadian children's books in their teacher education programs. The challenge for teacher educators extends beyond developing the pre-service teachers' knowledge base about Canadian children's books. Johnston and Mangat (2003) found that secondary pre-service teachers lacked knowledge of Canadian children's books and held uncritical views of what it is to be Canadian; they were unconcerned about their lack of knowledge of Canadian books and were unaware that they might be called upon to select books for their classrooms or school libraries. These findings were consistent with studies of high school teachers in practice. For example, in a study of English-language Canadian literature used by high school teachers across Canada, Baird (2002) found that most high school teachers based their selection of texts for study in their classrooms on the availability of texts (books the school already owned), acceptability (provincial guidelines, community standards and the interests of students) and the consensus of the school's English department members. 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.

A final implication relates to the importance of teacher-librarians taking a leadership role in the school around issues of intellectual freedom and social responsibility, especially since many teachers are not knowledgeable about these issues and prefer to avoid controversy at all costs. Many pre-service teachers, both elementary and secondary, appear to be unwilling to engage in a critical analysis of the books that might be read by their students in or out of class. Canadian teacher-librarians should be aware that even the bright new teachers in their schools may not only lack knowledge about Canadian books: some may be unconcerned about their lack of knowledge and many, like more senior teachers, may be resistant to using books that present non-mainstream or controversial points of view.

Recommendations for Practice

Teachers and teacher-librarians need to be able to work together and to support each other in the work of developing their students' sense of national identity and in enhancing their sense of social cohesion. Together teachers and teacher-librarians can explore some of the issues that multicultural societies must grapple with, issues that are often played out in classrooms and libraries. Some recommendations for practice in schools are suggested here in terms of the sub-themes of this conference: "Reading, Knowing, Doing." These suggestions certainly are not new ones: in actuality, they are core activities of the practice for which teacher-librarians are trained. Teacher-librarians need first to examine their own practice and then to provide leadership in their schools for a new and revitalized practice.

Reading

Teacher-librarians need to continue to read widely and voraciously the books and other media being produced in their country, with special attention to newer writers and creators and to those working outside of the mainstream publishing world. Teacher-librarians need to be adventurous readers themselves if they are going to be able to encourage teachers to read outside of the books recommended on approved lists developed by the ministry of education and beyond the popular items available from mass-market publishers. Teacher-librarians can use many different strategies to inform teachers about new books and other media and to provide teachers with ready access to these materials. For example, teacher-librarians may: offer new books to classroom teachers that match the teachers' personal interests; sponsor or organize a book discussion group for teachers; provide holiday reading packages of new books for teachers at the end of the school term; help teachers to match books to curriculum topics and outcomes; and engage teachers in the selection of books and other media for their classrooms and for the school library collection.

Knowing

Teacher-librarians need to work with teachers to understand more about the ideological nature of books and other media and more about the relationship between a country's books and other media and a country's identity. In Canada, this means challenging teachers' selection of literature studied in the classrooms. Many of the books (nonfiction and fiction) studied in Canadian classrooms at all grade levels still are American and British "classics" (Altmann, Johnston & Mackey, 1998). It also means asking teachers to consider Canada's newer literary voices, many of whom challenge the notion of an homogenous Canadian identity, who reveal the internal contradictions and complexities of Canada's official multiculturalism policy (Johnston, 2000). It means, too, looking for the ideology—the values and beliefs—that are implicit or explicit in those books and other media (and all books and other media). Teacher-librarians may choose to do this work with teachers individually or to develop programs such as school-wide professional development activities, book discussion groups for teachers, or hosting local writers to work with students and teachers.

Doing

Teacher-librarians can work with other school leaders to conduct school-based action research projects to examine the schools' achievement of school and curriculum goals related to national identity and social cohesion. In working with other school leaders to advance these broader goals, teacher-librarians will find many opportunities to raise issues about the nature of the books and other media used in the school and the relationship of those materials to the school and curriculum goals related to national identity and social cohesion. As Lance (2001) has pointed out, teacher-librarians who contribute as school leaders build their credibility as educators and also increase the willingness of others to work with them and to support them in the achievement of their goals.

Final Reflections

Although the research reported here was conducted in one school district in Canada, the researchers—myself and my research partners at the University of Alberta, Dr. Joyce Bainbridge and Dr. Mike Carbonaro--believe that our work may resonate with school library researchers and teacher-librarians in other part of the world. We believe that children's literature has an important role to play in young people's developing understanding of what makes their country unique, what makes it different from other nations, and what it means to be a citizen of a country within a globalized society. School is an important place to read and learn about the literature of one's own country and to explore, discuss and debate the ideas and values presented in that literature.

Many countries today, like Canada, are multicultural countries with a diverse range of cultures and ethnicities. Anderson (1991) argues that a country is an "imagined community" based on shared stories. What stories lie at the heart of a country's national identity? What are a country's children reading and hearing that will give them a sense of who they are and what their potential role might be in an increasingly globalized society? Bissoondath, a Canadian writer born in Trinidad, writes that Canadians need to "seek out and emphasize the experiences, values and dreams we all share as Canadians, whatever our colour, language, religion, ethnicity or historical grievance. And pursue acceptance of others - not merely tolerance of them" (1998, p. 22). Bissoondath and other contemporary Canadian authors present points of view from many different cultures and ethnicities, and they also attempt to present points of view that draw on more than one cultural repertoire. They "speak from the in-between of different cultures, always unsettling the assumptions of one culture from the perspectives of another, and finding ways of being both the same as and different from the others among which they live" (Johnston, 2000). Unfortunately, in many Canadian classrooms, there is not much evidence of these new Canadian books and other media, and many important opportunities to understand our complex national identity and to develop a stronger social cohesion based on acceptance of difference and diversity are being lost.

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