

The Perceived Influence of Children's Literature on Sociocultural Understanding in UK Education

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Abstract

This article recognises the interplay between learners' understanding of the world and the literature selected for, and read by, children as a result of current curriculum design within the UK. As part of the author's doctoral study, an extensive review was conducted into the place of children's literature in the development of socio-cultural constructs; this included an appraisal of the function of published narratives within the development of a national curriculum for English in the UK. The findings of the review detailed here identified that an ideological linkage between the study of literature and the development of sociocultural values resulted from an increased politicisation of the English curriculum, particularly post-2010. Within the social and historical debates, reading was identified as a specific mechanism for transmitting adult-centric ideas around spiritual, moral, social and cultural beliefs. Issues of power and control became emphasised within the review through the exploration of the actions of gatekeepers, including publishers, librarians, teachers and even politicians, as they attempted to define a preferred canon of literature for study. Throughout the wider literature, contemporary political discourse seemingly argued for dominance over and marginalisation of different factions of society without acknowledging the implicit and explicit bias found within. The review concluded that educators have a responsibility to teach critical literacy skills to enable young readers to negotiate the ideologies being presented to them, but, in the view of this author, this is only possible if teachers enable learners to interrogate for themselves the literature chosen as resources for the classroom.

Key words: Children's Literature, Curriculum, Ideology, Power, Reading.

Resum

Aquest article tracta la interacció entre la comprensió del món per part dels aprenents i la literatura seleccionada per i llegida per infants, com a resultat de l'actual disseny del currículum a Regne Unit. Com a part de la tesi doctoral de l'autora, es va dur a terme una revisió extensiva al voltant del lloc de la literatura infantil en el desenvolupament dels constructes socioculturals. Açò inclou una valoració de la funció de les narratives publicades entorn del desenvolupament d'un currículum nacional per a l'anglès a Regne Unit. Les troballes en la revisió detallades ací, identifiquen que hi ha un vincle entre l'estudi de la literatura i el desenvolupament dels valors socioculturals resultat d'una politització creixent del currículum anglès, particularment després de 2010. Entre els debats socials i històrics, la lectura ha sigut identificada com a un mecanisme per transmetre idees adultocèntriques sobre creences espirituals, morals, socials i culturals. Els problemes del poder i el control s'emfatitzen en la investigació a través de l'exploració de les accions de les agències, incloent editorials, personal de biblioteques, docents i fins i tot polítics, en tant que intenten de definir un cànon literari preferit per al seu estudi. A través d'una àmplia literatura, el discurs polític contemporani, aparentment, ha defensat la dominació i la marginalització de diferents faccions de la societat sense tindre present el biaix implícit i explícit que s'hi troba. La revisió conclou que els i les educadors i educadores tenen una responsabilitat per a ensenyar destreses de lectura crítica per tal de permetre als i les joves lectors i lectores negociar les ideologies que se'ls hi presenten; açò

però, des del punt de vista de l'autora, és només possible si els docents permeten a l'alumnat contestar per ells mateixos la literatura que es tria com a recurs a l'aula.

Paraules clau: Literatura infantil, Currículum, Ideologia, Poder, Lectura.

Resumen

El siguiente artículo trata de la interacción entre la comprensión del mundo por parte de los aprendices y la literatura seleccionada para y leída por el alumnado como resultado del actual diseño curricular en Reino Unido. Como parte de la tesis doctoral de la autora, se llevó a cabo una revisión extensiva sobre el lugar de la literatura infantil en el desarrollo de los constructos socioculturales. Esto incluye una valoración de la función de las narrativas publicadas sobre el desarrollo de un currículum nacional para el inglés en Reino Unido. Los hallazgos de la revisión que se incluyen aquí, muestran que hay un vínculo entre el estudio de la literatura y el desarrollo de los valores socioculturales resultado de una politización creciente del currículum inglés, particularmente a partir de 2010. Entre los debates sociales e históricos, la lectura ha sido identificada como un mecanismo para transmitir ideas adultocéntricas sobre creencias espirituales, morales, sociales y culturales. Los problemas del poder y el control se enfatizan en la investigación a través de la exploración de las acciones de las agencias, incluyendo editoriales, personal de bibliotecas, docentes e, incluso, políticos, ya que intentan definir un canon literario preferido para su estudio. A través de una amplia literatura, el discurso político contemporáneo, aparentemente, ha defendido la dominación y la marginación de diferentes facciones de la sociedad sin tener presente el sesgo implícito y explícito que conlleva. La revisión concluye que los educadores y educadoras tienen una responsabilidad a la hora de enseñar destrezas de lectura crítica para permitir a los y las jóvenes lectores y lectoras negociar las ideologías que se les presentan. Pero desde el punto de vista de la autora, esto es solo posible si los docentes permiten al alumnado interrogar por ellos mismos la literatura que se escoge como recurso en el aula.

Palabras clave: Literatura infantil, Currículo, Ideología, Poder, Lectura

Introduction

Children's literature is rarely straightforward or even easily categorised as a single genre, though scholars such as Nodelman (2008) have tried. It has a complicated relationship with young readers, who are often forced to engage with it within their educational experience but revere it when they attain fluency and comprehension, particularly when positive attitudes to reading are fostered (Smith 1990). Equally, educational policy makers within the UK appear to venerate the written word as a primary means for communicating societal norms, making it imperative for educators to be aware of the social and cultural implications of the narratives they allow in or exclude from their classrooms (Bingle 2017). Unfortunately, many professional discussions around selection focus on the quality of texts in terms of their usefulness in teaching the mechanics of reading or language skills, or even their economic viability, without acknowledging the inherent hegemonic discourses found in all narratives (Wyse, Jones, Bradford and Wolpert 2013). This can lead to the creation of limiting classroom cultures, where diversity is absent or ignored and children learn a narrow view of social values.

Within the UK, the potential interplay between learners' understanding of the world and the literature selected for, and read by, children, is easily identifiable in a review of current curriculum design. This was done as part of original research which formed the basis for the author's doctoral thesis and

preceded an in-depth analysis of literature written for child- and young adult readers. The subsequent findings informed an exploration of participants' perceptions of character depictions, namely literary teachers, as an exploration of the sociocultural relationship between readers and the texts written for them. The final research project provided a viable interdisciplinary research design in the combined fields of literature studies and social science in order to identify specific influential ideas from literature that could affect future identity construction. The literature review detailed here was pivotal in understanding the synergies between the underpinning political ideologies and the power relationships binding author, text, reader and gatekeeper in the sociocultural act of reading.

1 Through Reading in Particular: The Implied Canon within the UK Literary Curriculum

Can children's books be influential? Certainly, the belief that books are ideologically significant is held by the Department for Education (DfE), who state in the most recent draft of the National Curriculum in England that

Through reading in particular, pupils have a chance to develop culturally, emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually. Literature, especially, plays a key role in such development. (DfE 2013, p.3)

However, claims such as this are rarely, if ever, linked explicitly to empirical research which relates the shared social domain of both reader and writer to identify the influence of prevalent cultural constructs on emerging paradigms of identity. Indeed, there are dangers in assuming any method is influential in isolation: in their exploration of teacher recruitment, Carrington and Skelton (2003) warn against believing that the simple introduction of cultural, ethnic and gender role models, for example, will act as a panacea for issues of underachievement. They suggest instead that a more inclusive policy needs to be developed which will "break down cultural stereotypes and the implicit messages inherent in the hidden curriculum" (Carrington and Skelton 2003, p.25), i.e. cultural and gender role models can be influential but only within a wider social context that seeks to expose and deconstruct the hidden curriculum inherent within schools.

The 'hidden curriculum' as a concept is one acknowledged by many educationalists working within a range of disciplines; it is possibly best described as "'a set of influences that function at the level of organisational structure and culture', which manipulate teachers and learners in the context of both the formal and informal curricula" (Mossop, Dennick, Hammond and Robbé 2013, p. 135). According to Smith (2014, p.16) the influences can include elements such as an institutional insistence on compliance which "keeps some students from feeling they can challenge the very structures that repress them". However, this view assumes that the hidden

curriculum is ultimately a repressive structure, and though that may be the experience of some it is important to analyse individual social settings before attributing this sort of value to them. I prefer to acknowledge the hidden curriculum as ideology made manifest, neither as positive nor negative until contextually interpreted in terms of social and cultural acceptability dependent on values and beliefs.

Literature is one mode of transmitting such societal values, and children's literature is as much one of these mechanisms as literature for older audiences. Tonkin (cited in Samuel and Thompson 1990) proposes that books are amongst the cultural artefacts that help us form our social models, and in research regarding literacy, artefacts and identity, the interplay with identity in a school context is highlighted (McVee 2004; Scanlan 2010). However, as we traverse through the Information Age, is it still true to say that it is through books we develop our understanding of the world around us? Modern life does have the potential to expose children to a range of digital texts that seem to overpower their daily connection with the world, however Park (2012; 2015) argues the propensity for assuming that everyone in developed countries has full access to the range of connected media platforms is erroneous and strongly suggests that while digital forms are influential they are not ubiquitous. As a consequence, this means that assumptions about electronic media replacing books as the main mechanism for sociocultural story-sharing can be challenged in both rural and urban settings, although they cannot be discounted. Certainly, the public discourse around the

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The discussion surrounding the place, use and quality of literature that should be at the heart of the curriculum has been integral to curriculum development in England (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland having gone their own way over the years), particularly since the publication of The Bullock Report (DES 1975: p.125). Entitled *A Language for Life*, the writers came out very firmly on the side of literature within Britain having a place beyond that of decoding: it was viewed as being of personal, moral and linguistic importance, although there is an acknowledgement that there is no empirical evidence of "the 'civilising' power of literature" (DES 1975: p.125). That literature has a place is

one uncontested element of historical curriculum discourse: in what capacity and precisely what “it” (as a body of work) entails has been less clearly defined, although in various government reports in the UK it has been repeatedly linked to pupils’ social, moral, cultural and even economic development. Michael Gove, as Secretary of State for Education, was instrumental in the formation of the current English National Curriculum, and in a speech delivered at the Conservative Party Conference in 2010 he gave his definition of what quality literature entailed, and what he felt had been lacking from the curriculum, stating

We need to reform English.

- the great tradition of our literature - Dryden, Pope, Swift, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Austen, Dickens and Hardy - should be at the heart of school life. Our literature is the best in the world - it is every child's birthright and we should be proud to teach it in every school. (Gove 2010)

This view that the classic texts of the past were missing from school life during the previous administration underpinned the discourse around the development of the curriculum between 2010 and 2013. It was also clear from Gove’s list of authors that the canon he was suggesting

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for the new curriculum should reflect a white, male-dominated literary culture as being the best of British, an irony that would have seen the work of contemporary writers such as Malorie Blackman, Children’s Laureate from 2013 to 2015, consigned to the periphery of English literature if enacted. The marginalisation of various sociocultural groups through literature choice may not have been the intention underpinning the Secretary of State’s speech or subsequent curriculum development, but without paying explicit attention to providing a diverse range of authors, genres, plots, settings and characters teachers may reinforce hegemonies otherwise at odds with current cultural values.

The idea that there is or even should be a set of canonical works experienced by all is a contested concept, though throughout the fields of literary criticism and education there are indications that many believe the canon already exists. Indeed, it could be argued that when considering the form, content and context of children’s literature texts, the least significant of

all the individuals involved is the child-reader themselves (Beauvais 2015, p. 2). However, the reliance on abstract concepts such as value, genuineness and superiority/inferiority in relation to children's literature means the criteria for inclusion is far from defined.

Theorists and researchers have attempted more tangible characterisations: in her discussion of the translation of literature for children, Pinsent (2016, p.139) identifies as a Western cultural view the idea that "the books traditionally referred to are the classics, considered as 'the canon'", a view which Hunt (2014) concedes:

Perhaps the most common definition (or assumption) is that children's classics are the best books written for children over the centuries, which pass down the values and continuities of a culture to new generations. (p.12)

In her influential comparative study of European narratives, Nikolajeva (1996 cited in O'Sullivan 2005, p.27) identified an evolutionary model for understanding the development of children's literature; her model proposes that the construction of a canon is part, though not the final stage, of the socio-cultural process of creating the discipline. Within education, though, the adult-centric view of what children should experience within their literary diet is often separated even further from the socio-historical canon, as the purpose of the corpus becomes to meet curriculum rather than cultural aims.

So who are the canon-makers in the UK educational context? Eagleton (2013) makes the case on behalf of anyone familiar with the appropriate social practices and agreed criteria for ascertaining value being given responsibility for making such judgments: all he demands is they understand literary criticism as the social practice in question. This position comes with a note of caution from Jackson (2000) however, who points out that literary criticism underpinned by certain theoretical positions (Lacanian post-structuralism in this instance) can be overly reliant on literary conceit and a "rhetorical brilliance" (p. 170) which actually renders the judgments useless to all but a minority of specific readers of the critique itself. And while teachers within the UK are often charged with the selection of texts for children, not only to inform the teaching of fiction but also to be taken home and read as part of wider book lending policies frequently found in UK classrooms, their choices are more often than not constrained by budget rather than influenced by quality (Wyse, Jones, Bradford and Wolpert 2013)¹.

¹ It should be noted that in the English education system the state has no official role in selecting resources outside of approving exam syllabi, and thus the selection of texts is left to individual teachers and/or their settings.

Thus, Eagleton's idea of literary criticism as an appropriate way of judging which texts have value (and can therefore be deemed classics worthy of canonical status) is only plausible if one understands the theoretical basis of the criticism being attempted. This stance offers an insight into why the concept of a canon is contentious, and simultaneously suggests a reason why the voice of the child-reader is overlooked when deciding what is valuable, genuine and/or superior in text. The wide range of ontological, paradigmatic, methodological and theoretical positions available to those attempting literary criticism means there is no agreed social practice that encompasses every sociocultural group.

It could be argued, however, that the social practice does not need to be agreed by all, just those deemed as having agency. The involvement by political figures, for example, was the culmination of what O'Sullivan (2005, p.131) referred to as "a counter-tendency [to the negative aspects of canon formation which emerged in the 1990s, a call for a socially sanctioned canon of literary works as the basis of literary education]" and as a result influenced curriculum development within wider discourses about the place of reading and its link to social mobility within the development of the national curriculum for England. Librarians, professional organisations and associations concerned with reading and literature, and prize-giving bodies are credited with being instrumental in choosing books others then deem quality (Kidd 2009), although as Gamble (2013, p.254) notes "books that have acquired the 'classic' accolade are not necessarily those that are most admired at the time of writing". O'Sullivan (2005, p.131) points out that "schools and universities, with their need to impart exemplary values, have been and still are the main agencies in canon formation", and that as children's literature was not deemed "great literature" in the past there had been no need to establish an agreed canon. The rise in academic study of children's literature in universities, she argues, has relatively recently led to attempts to establish a canon "by means of consecrating and preserving the most important texts, by the endeavours to make the subject academically respectable" (ibid.). This is the very notion that led Marsh and Millard (2000) to decry the exclusionary nature of canon formation, arguing that "advocates of the importance of quality in children's encounters with books predicate many of their arguments on privileged childhood experiences of access to 'great' literature from a 'golden age'" (p. 84) and highlighting the way "texts which enter the home from school, therefore, are either part of an established canon of children's literature, or are embedded within a published reading scheme" (p. 110).

However, in a recent exploration of teachers' reading habits and understanding of literature, Cremin, Bearne, Mottram and Goodwin (2009, p. 207) ascertained

It is questionable whether the teachers' knowledge is diverse enough to enable them to make informed recommendations to young readers. It could be argued that their repertoires represent a primary canon of significant children's authors, most of whom are likely to be well known to parents as well as grandparents.

In other words, the canon experienced by children in UK primary schools is not actually based on issues of quality, status, superiority or literary value: it would appear, certainly within Cremin et al's research, to be primarily constructed based on adult familiarity and memory, rendering the idea of an accepted canon of genuine doctrine within children's literature both central to the discipline and a misnomer in a paradox Schroedinger would have recognised, if not approved. The idea of a children's literature canon is questionable because, as O'Sullivan emphasises (2005: p.147), "In practice, we have a number of disparate texts for which there is not, and cannot be, any single explanation of the (canonical) processes of selection, evaluation, preservation and safe transmission" and yet the idea that there is a set of classical and canonical works that should be taught to all school children remains.

2 The Role of Ideology in Children's Literature

The premise that literature is as influential on children's development as the current curriculum for the teaching of English in England suggests is philosophically prevalent in both the literary and educational fields, as well as other sociological disciplines. It is frequently linked to discourses around identity and ideology (Hollindale 1988; Bruner 1991; Stephens 1992), both in societal and personal terms, and as such has become almost uncontested as a concept; however, there is still a focus on literature as a tool for developing literacy within educational research, while within literary studies the content is analysed to lay bare the doctrine, with little thought given to the reader beyond their initial response. Longitudinal studies regarding children's experiences of literacy are more prevalent than those regarding their experience of literature, making it difficult to identify the role that books themselves have played in an individual's development beyond fond recall, and yet literature in a range of forms continues to be given a prominent role in discussions around sociocultural development.

The ideological basis for the emphasis on literature's place in children's cultural development as proposed by the curriculum is overtly apparent in the link between literary and cultural theory. Matthew Arnold (1822-88) proposed a view of literature as a means to encapsulate culture as a body of knowledge and his influential cultural agenda was deemed dominant until the 1950s after which it declined; however it would appear to have been revived by Michael Gove during his tenure as Secretary of State for Education. Arnold's well-known phrase, 'the

best that has been thought and said in the world', taken from his seminal text *Culture and Anarchy* written in 1869, was quoted but not referenced in a speech Michael Gove made to the first Education Reform Summit in London in July 2014. Arnold's work was also significantly influential for the proponents of Leavisism, whose central tenet is "to introduce into schools a training in resistance [to mass culture]" (Leavis cited in Storey 2015, p. 25). The Leavisism movement's view that there should be maintenance of literary/cultural tradition, underpinned by the view that "Literature is a treasury embodying all that is to be valued in human experience" (Storey 2015, p.28), is reflected, but not accredited, in the National Curriculum (DfE 2013, p.4) when it states "Reading also feeds pupils' imagination and opens up a treasure-house of wonder and joy for curious young minds".

The prevalent influence of F.R. and Q.D. Leavis during the development of the current curriculum is, as in the case of Arnold above, mainly found in Gove's political speeches from 2010 to 2014. For example, in his reference to the "The great tradition" of English literature (Gove 2010), discussed previously in this chapter as part of one of his early speeches as Education Secretary, Gove is seemingly giving a nod to F.R. Leavis' (1950) text of the same name. In it, Leavis argues for a particular body of work to be considered the true pinnacle of uniquely English literature, with all other works influenced and inspired by them, and though the literary figures Gove names are not the same as those found in Leavis' text, there is overlap. Certainly, much of the political discussion around the teaching of English over the last decade, ironically filtered through the mass media outlets, seemed to be concerned with the same disintegration of high culture and national identity within the teaching of English literature as Q.D. Leavis (1981, p.128), who stated

Therefore, the novel is the art most influenced by national life in all its minute particulars. It also has been the art most influential upon English national life, until the emergence of radio, television and the cinema, institutions which seem to have some connection with, though by no means all the responsibility for, what is generally recognised to be the decay and approaching death of the English novel as a major art [...]

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The claims regarding literature do not end at the artistic or national influence afforded by books. Story, in the form of shared narrative, is regarded by Braid and Finch (2015, p.115) as being central to the human experience, citing Bruner and Rosen in their declaration that "Stories are a way of ordering our experience, constructing our reality". Egan (1999), in his reframing of children's cognitive development inspired by Bruner and other proponents of

conceptualising the mind as "a narrative concern" (Sutton-Smith 1988, cited in Egan 1999, p.34), proposes that ideas of learning are best understood within a framework of understanding about story. For example, fairy and folktales, with their clear binaries such as good and evil or young and old, provide us with the basis of understanding how young learners conceptualise even abstract concepts; as Corsaro (2011, p. 131) postulates "A good part of the symbolic culture that children bring with them as they enter communal life with peers is drawn from cultural myths and legends". This Mythic phase gives way to what Egan refers to as Romantic Understanding, a phase during which extremes help us understand boundaries: good and evil binaries give way to the search for the hero, and concepts are understood in relation to how they affect us emotionally. In total Egan identifies five kinds of understanding, each one layered upon the preceding rather than left behind; and though they are not specifically age-related there is a rough correlation between Key Stage 1 (ages 5-7) and the consolidation of the Mythic phase, and Key Stage 2 (ages 7-11) and the development of the Romantic.

What is striking about Egan's conceptualising of learning is his clear reference to literature and literary devices as cognitive tools: rather than being a cultural repository, he argues, children's literature, in the sense of that deemed appropriate for children, enables educators to develop learners' understanding of the world alongside their cognitive processes. Unlike previous arguments that classrooms are culturally bereft due to a lack of literature, Egan's main educational concern is that, though teachers "intuitively recognize [sic] the importance" (IERG n.d.) of literary experiences, they do not fully recognise the potential of literature as a cognitive tool.

As stated, Egan's theoretical perspective is based on the assumption that research into narrative as a means to make sense of the world is valid in "its most general conclusion" (Egan 1999, p.35), citing the work of Jerome Bruner (1915-2016) as particularly influential. In a journal article outlining how narrative is part of the 'cultural tool-kit' we use to construct our

understanding of the world, Bruner (1991) offers a distinction between the literary and psychological theorisation of stories. He states that, while literary theorists are interested in the development of the narrative itself, in psychology “The central concern is not how narrative as text is constructed, but rather how it operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality” (pp. 5-6). In Bruner’s view, literature, and in particular narrative, does not just represent reality: it gives it form and structure in a way that can be conceptualised. As Nikolajeva (2014, p.21) reminds us, “Jerome Bruner suggests that fiction offers a pathway to knowledge that is different and arguably more powerful than any other form of learning”.

Hall (2001, p.167) similarly suggested that narrative is a fundamental aspect of mass communication, and that without it we cannot correspond: “To put it paradoxically, the event must become a ‘story’ before it can become a *communicative event*”, i.e. we cannot report on an event, either through written, audio or visual means, until we have created the narrative. This then needs to be encoded, transmitted and subsequently decoded within a range of frameworks and meaning structures that are not necessarily part of a uniformly understood set of social practices, i.e. the construction of the narrative at source may be different to the construction by the receiver: the impact or influence may then be diminished or increased depending on the systematic distortions of the narrative in transit. This has further implications in the context of schooling and children’s literature, as the narrative has to go through several receivers (authors, publishers, editors, librarians/bookshop purchasers, parents/carers, each with their own social, cultural and ideological position) in a series of determinate moments before being received finally by the child.

The shared codes necessary for such transmissions, Hall (2013, p.8) argues, are not genetic, as instead they are passed on as part of an “unwritten cultural covenant [...] This is what children learn, and how they become not simply biological individuals but cultural subjects”. The resulting influence of any narrative may be an explicit aim of the story, such as the moral messages and lessons found in Aesop’s Fables; or it may be a more implicit or even unwitting passenger within a seemingly innocuous tale.

However, the “degrees of ‘understanding’ and ‘misunderstanding’ in the communicative exchange” (Hall 2001, p. 169), also referred to as *distortions*, mean that at any point the message can be lost due to a mismatch in semiotic understanding; and if the lack of understanding comes from the adults mediating the literature, then any authorial intention of sharing a message may come to nought. Conversely, a book might be chosen by the teacher to

help articulate particular cultural, social or moral messages despite there being no such intention on the part of the author, due to the naturalisation of codes (Hall 2001).

Consequently, as Brenner and Apol (2006, p.38) point out "children's books are not innocent, nor are the portrayals they contain ideologically neutral. Instead, texts are motivated cultural constructs". While ideology as an "intersection between belief systems and political power" (Eagleton 1991, p.6) or "A systematic scheme of ideas, usu. [sic] relating to politics or society" (Oxford English Dictionary, cited in Hollindale 1988: p.3) has long been part of literary criticism as part of theoretical research practices, the idea that educationalists, particularly those teaching children aged 5-11, should concern themselves with texts beyond their morality or ability to teach reading as a literacy skill only really took hold with the curriculum discussions of the 1970s and 80s (DES/Bullock 1975; DES/Kingman 1988; DES/Cox 1989). As a result, "in the very period when developments in literary theory have made us newly aware of the omnipresence of ideology in all literature" (Hollindale 1988: p.7), the focus on controlling what children read led to an increased focus on surface-level ideologies that fit the contemporary sociocultural narrative. The three levels of ideology found in children's literature (introduced by Hollindale in *Ideology and the Children's Book* in 1988, but developed and clarified in later works) and acculturation happens in response to all three. The active, passive and organic levels (see Figure 1) can sometimes be in conflict; also, time and place can affect how each is perceived.

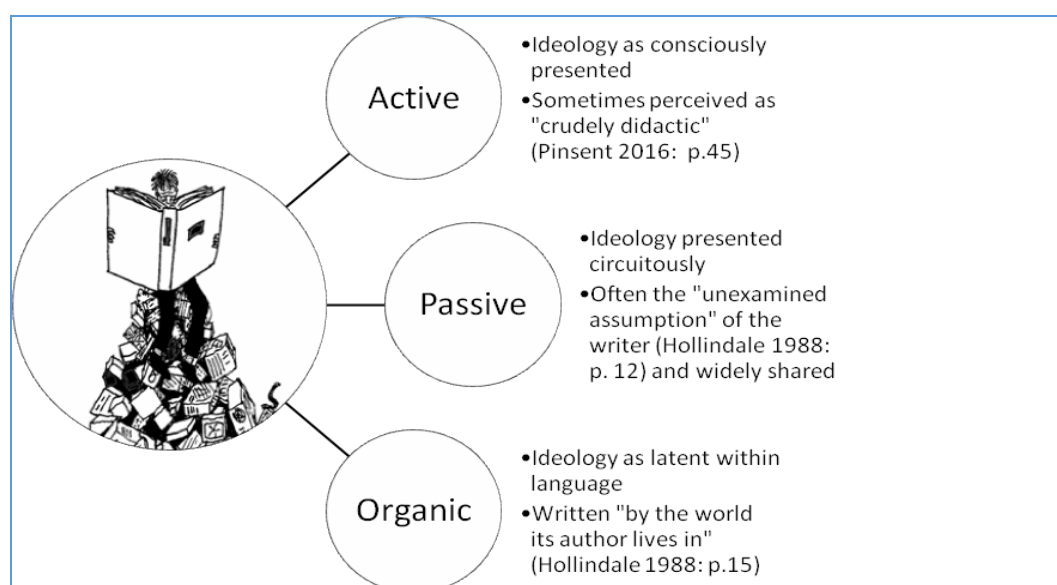


Figure 1. Hollindale's three levels of ideology

Hollindale provides several examples of how different levels of ideology work within their context, such as the passive anti-racism couched in the organic use of racist language found in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain 1884), and warns against making snap judgments based on superficial readings of texts. Rather, he argues for greater understanding of the way ideology is embedded in children's literature (Hollindale 1988; Pinsent 2016), particularly in reference to literature in education.

3 Children's Literature and Values Education

In a further exploration of the place and function of ideologies within books for children, McCallum and Stephens (2011, p. 360) assert that

The creation and telling of stories – what we will refer to as *narrative discourse* – is a particular use of language through which society expresses and imparts its current values and attitudes, and this happens regardless of authorial intention.

The focus on societal expectation in the UK, and specifically in England, has become central to education through a strong focus on developing British Values as part of the spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) curriculum. Since the Education Act 2002 it has been a requirement for maintained schools² to enable SMSC provision; however this has become more culturally focused as a result of the *Prevent Strategy* (HM Government 2011), which included a duty placed on schools as part of the anti-terrorism legislation prevalent in 21st Century Britain, stated as “Schools should promote the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs” (DfE 2014, p.5). This set of principles is also enshrined in the Teachers' Standards (DfE 2011), which detail the expected personal and professional conduct of all teachers in maintained schools. Current guidance for schools states

It is not necessary for schools or individuals to ‘promote’ teachings, beliefs or opinions that conflict with their own, but nor is it acceptable for schools to promote discrimination against people or groups on the basis of their belief, opinion or background (DfE 2014, p.6)

This confusing and seemingly contradictory terminology in the guidelines (schools ‘should promote’ on p.5, but it's not ‘necessary’ to promote on p.6) is matched by an unspecific set of

² In England, a maintained school is one that is under the control of the local authority and is state-funded.

strategies for action: while literature is not mentioned per se, the advice is to choose “material” and “teaching resources” which feasibly would include a range of children’s literature as part of normal planning. In this current political and educational environment it is conceivable that teachers will be driven to mediate, ever more carefully, the link their pupils have with the wider world around them by choosing books and other resources to be used for SMSC purposes across the curriculum that are already ‘approved’, either through common usage (normally determined by how many other teachers use them or how many resources the publisher has produced to support the text) or through recommendation. This sort of endorsement is normally offered by an authoritative body such as a literacy charity, local authority/School Improvement Advisor or educational publisher, the latter of whom often favour the commission of books they feel will address current educational requirements. As Beissel Heath (2016, p.132) notes,

[...] not only do societal institutions and family expectations for children tend to attempt to shape children in established, and often conservatively limiting, ways, [...] children’s literature itself purges from its pages that which is seen as unacceptable for young audiences.

Thus, when one looks to the books being used purposefully in schools to develop SMSC understanding, it is likely they will conform to a range of known ideologies, stereotypes and social structures that do not deviate too far from the “proper and professional regard for the ethos, policies and practices of the school in which they teach” (DfE 2011, p. 14). This has the potential to have significant impact on children’s cultural, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual development as identified in the National Curriculum for English (DfE 2013). Challenging stereotypes found within literature can be both a benefit and a perceived difficulty: while teachers want to ensure they are developing children’s understanding and tolerance of other faiths they also have to consider how it might be interpreted as promoting a faith or ideology that is contrary to British Values. If they look to stories that successfully challenge authority this could be seen as undermining democracy, unless the authority is deemed

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undeserving. We have not yet reached the stage of overtly censoring books in educational establishments for the actions of the characters within the current political climate, but there is precedence: Clause 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 (*Prohibition on promoting homosexuality by teaching or by publishing material*) specifically forbade the teaching or publishing of material that promoted homosexuality as a direct result of an MP being offended by a book found in a library (Mars-Jones 1988). It is conceivable that we could be constrained in the level of subversiveness allowed, for example exclusively accepting narratives in which the figure of authority (e.g. the teacher in a school-story) can only be undermined and overthrown if they are a poor example of their profession or status: pupils must not be seen to triumph against perfectly reasonable structures (as defined by British political policy) for fear of being deemed as ignoring the rule of law.

Alexander (2004) indicated that this situation, far from being sinister or unusual in schools, is to be expected, as “all education is grounded in social and indeed political values of some kind” (p. 8). However, the idea that narrative should be seen simply the medium of expression for the dominant political and/or societal outlook does not seem to represent the views of literary theorists (nor indeed, in relation to literature in the curriculum, Alexander’s); instead, they see the transformative potential of literature, particularly for the young. Rather than seeing literature as a controlling tool, Reynolds (2009, p.107) is excited by authors’ “ability to envisage and engage young readers with possibilities for new worlds and new world orders” in terms of both the social and the aesthetic, while Pinsent (2016) and Nikolajeva (2005) exclaim literature’s role in identity construction through representation.

Lofty ideas of utilising literature as a panacea, however, are firmly debunked by Rustin (2000, p.196), who argues “Classroom teaching aimed at changing attitudes may therefore do no more than ruffle the surface” if cultural differences between teachers and pupils are unresolved, or worse unacknowledged. Childhood and adolescence are when we form quite robust views about ourselves (i.e. opinions and perceptions that are hard to change) and Cremin et al (2008, p.19) refer to “Recent work about identities and reading [which] suggests that the choice of books and teachers’ mediation of them has a profound effect on ‘how [children] [sic] see themselves and who they want to be’”. Pinsent (2016, p.148) highlights the “increased awareness” of those she terms the *culturally invisible*, in this case through the way ethnicity and race are (un/mis)represented in the children’s literature of the past, and indeed the present; Hall (1990, p.225) had previously identified how, in terms of culture, “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past”. Teachers, then, have a responsibility to their learners to

choose carefully the representations they share; at the very least, they should be open to readings from their learners that are different to their own as texts appeal to different sensibilities and sensitivities.

Literature's capacity to engender an emotional response is considered a benefit to the teaching of empathy and emotional control, something Nikolajeva (2014, p. 82) ascertained was a feature of children's literature globally:

The conflict between emotions and reason, including a sense of duty, is the central theme of all world literature. An important component of socialisation is managing to control one's emotions, and again fiction provides many examples [...]

By far the overriding emotion the current curriculum advocates for in terms of reading is enjoyment: it is even stated in the programme of study that children must be taught to "develop pleasure in reading" (DfE 2013, p. 11). Cremin et al (2014, p.9) list the researched benefits to the development of a reading-for-pleasure agenda: "improved general knowledge [...] increased self-confidence as a reader [...] a richer vocabulary and increased accuracy in spelling [...] an improved capacity for comprehension [...] and greater pleasure in reading in later life". Nikolajeva (2016) argues a similar case when she cites the claims of advocates of ethical criticism, in particular Nussbaum, who "goes as far as to say that reading makes us better people and citizens" (Nikolajeva 2016, p.4), in part through our interactions with fictional characters; although this is presented as a problematic notion, there is an element of tacit agreement with the sentiment.

While this sort of extreme value judgement about the effect of reading upon our character may be unjustified, it is certainly commonplace to find theoretical discourse proposing that narrative changes our behaviour, both cognitively and physically (for example in the research findings of Bruner 1991; Kohl 1995/2007; McVee 2004; Bearne 2009). It must be noted, however, that literature is a convention of text-based as opposed to oral traditions: published material is often perceived as being fixed and unchanging, a stable influence. This is a misnomer, as the publication practices of those producing children's books have been careless, negligent and at times downright obstructive, when it comes to exploring the field through their omission of bibliographic details, including those relating to editions and versions. Grenby (2011, p.40) contends that

Children's book publishers also tend to be very lax about noting changes they have made in new editions of a work. They are prone to change the illustrations, or

abridge texts, or even rename characters and revise plots, without acknowledgement, often with the intention of erasing phrases or attitudes thought to be unsuitable for modern children.

Anne Fine (n.d.), a previous Children’s Laureate (2001-2003), outlines a far more knowing and deliberate process of revision, often by the authors themselves, in a piece on her website adapted from an article written for *The Times* in 2007. She argues that “Writers want readers more than they want to stand by the unthinking insensitivities that make their books unwelcome in a more modern world”, and that changes in children’s literature should not be seen as airbrushing; instead they should be viewed as ways of keeping the negative language and derogatory stereotypes of the past out of the experiences of young readers. Although she ends by declaring that the originals are the texts “I myself would save from a fire”, she also makes it clear that these would not be for the benefit of the child-reader, who she hopes will be attached to the newer, more palatable versions. In this we find antonymous echoes of Foucault’s (1988, p17) assessment of the church when he stated “Christianity has always been more interested in the history of its beliefs than in the history of real practices”; in the development of children’s literature it would seem we have been more concerned with the history of its impact on real practices than in its physical being.

4 Implications for Educational Practice

Empowering teachers to lay bare the constructs being presented in the texts they choose to share in the classroom, and in turn teaching children how to recognise the system of constructs within the text, would encourage a more thoughtful approach to sociocultural bias

By being aware of the constructs most prevalent in literature as a mechanisms for sharing social norms it is possible for those mediating between the child-reader and the sociocultural view to challenge perceptions, rather than focusing on trying to change social and cultural perceptions. The narrower the range of constructs in evidence within the canon we share with children, the more limited their personal construct system will remain, and common individual constructs become pervasive sociocultural ones. If we accept that readers are influenced by the range of

reading material they access, we must remember this will affect the scope of ideas writers will choose to present as they, too, were once child readers. As Butts (2010, p.viii) acknowledges

It is not simply that children’s books carry references and allusions to their society [...] rather, the very form and structure of these books, and their authors’ responses,

are affected by these social forces, and, directly or indirectly, influence society in return.

Literature, then, is a significant resource that supports collective sociocultural activity, in which the author and other gatekeepers (publishers, parents, librarians and teachers) actively participate in the process of transmitting societal values to the reader. Empowering teachers to lay bare the constructs being presented in the texts they choose to share in the classroom, and in turn teaching children how to recognise the system of constructs within the text, would encourage a more thoughtful approach to sociocultural bias. In our communities, learning alongside our young citizens, are potential policy-makers, construing issues of age, gender, orientation and diverse characteristics, which will inform their response to a range of people and events throughout their careers. In addition, our future writers are in the same classrooms, also formulating the constructs that will influence the way they represent the world around them, including those in it. If literature has the influence on socio-cultural understanding that the current curriculum in England suggests, then text choice becomes pivotal in addressing the “danger of a single story” (Adichie 2009), i.e. the risks posed by white, able-bodied hegemony embedded in literature for children: the invisible force of political and social power which excludes, silences and divides. ⁱ

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ⁱ This article is derived from original research which formed the basis for the author's doctoral thesis. This included in-depth analysis of literature written for child- and young adult readers, the findings of which informed an exploration of participants' perceptions of character depictions as an exploration of the sociocultural relationship between readers and texts. The study utilised grounded theory method within a social constructionist framework and provided a viable interdisciplinary research design in literary studies and social science in order to identify specific influential ideas from literature that could affect future identity construction.