

## **Historical Perspectives of Canadian Children's Picture Books: an Empirical Study of Canadian Literacy Practices and the Canadian Identity**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper contributes to dialogues about children's literature and literacy research by looking at how representations of print-literacy have been contextualized in 250 Canadian picture books published across a forty-year period. This study's quantitative analysis asks how authors and illustrators represent literacy events and how these representations may/may not play a role in constituting Canada's norms around literacy. New Literacy Studies perspectives are employed as theoretical and analytic frameworks. Results suggest that, to some extent books do reflect Canadian's structured routines, inclusivity, and shape how Canadians portray themselves. Literature intervenes in our lives, affirming our ideologies and reflecting our beliefs.*

**Keywords:** Historical Perspectives; Canada; Picturebooks; Literacy Practices; Identity.

### **1. Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to an expanding dialogue about Canadian children's literature and literacy research. Specifically, it looks at how representations of print-literacy have been contextualized in Canadian children's literature published from 1970-2010. In the quote above, Sheila Egoff and Judith Saltman (1990), renowned critics of Canadian children's literature, suggest that children's books reveal a great deal about a nation's values, demonstrating who Canadians are and who they have been throughout history.

This paper leans on the research of Canadian children's literature scholars as well as New Literacy Studies (NLS) scholars as a theoretical guide and as a way to analyze data. We investigate: (1) the ways that print-literacy events are represented within a selection of Canadian picture books (both award-winning and non-award winning); (2) how these represented print-literacy events are situated within narrated structural routines (e.g., characters involved and the positions they assume and assign, implicit and explicit rules, compliance in the books' represented literacy events); (3) how these structured routines might speak to, inform, or refute Canadian's ideological assumptions about literacy practices; and question (4) the ways in which contextualized narrated relationships might open up dialogues about how literature is shared in homes and schools.

#### **1.1 Defining Terms**

*Literacy*, according to New Literacy Studies researchers, is a historical and socially-mediated process, not an unchanging essence or a set of cognitive skills independent of context and culture (Gee, 1996).

We define *Canadian children's picture books* as artifacts that satisfy three criteria:

- (1) Created and marketed for the purposes of trade publishing (as opposed to educational or self-help, for example);
- (2) Having a story told through both a written text and an illustrated text, where there is a synergy between these two modes;

(3) Having been published and marketed by a traditional (as opposed to self-published or vanity presses) Canadian publisher with Canadian Cataloguing Publication information.

We chose to examine children's picture books for three reasons. First, on a practical level, these stories are usually succinct. Therefore we were able to compare a range of stories in one sitting. Second, because picture books contain illustrations, we could examine multimodality — important aspects of the NLS theoretical frame that we employ. And third, as educators and researchers in the field of primary literacy education, our research has the potential to inform our teaching practices (e.g., understanding the historical trends in Canadian children's literature, exploring how common literacy routines such as bedtime stories or shared readings in classrooms are structured and represented in literature across Canada).

A third term, a *literacy event* is defined as: "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interactive processes" (Heath, 1983; p. 93). These events serve as concrete evidence of literacy practices (Street, 1995), and in our study may include occasions where characters represent an idea on the computer, write a letter, read a book, design a sign, and so forth. Originally, we wanted to explore even broader notions of literacy, including all of the ways that people design, interpret, and communicate meaning (through pictorial, musical, embodied, linguistic and theatrical semiotic systems, etc.), especially since these semiotic and social practices are integral to the NLS framework and to our own epistemologies about what constitutes literacy. However, an examination of this magnitude would be much too large for the scope of this paper. This is because nearly every book shows characters involved in constructing or communicating knowledge through different modes. Therefore, here "literacy" is limited to the act of using written or typed linguistic artifacts within socially situated contexts. We recognize the limitations and the irony of narrowing the focus in this way, especially since we are discussing individual ideologies and the Canadian national identity. It brings up personal and critical questions, like: Do Canadians believe that visual and embodied modes of communication deserve equal footing with linguistic modes? Who gets to define literacy and who is being excluded? It was a tough limitation to impose, yet necessary in order to manage the amount of data and to begin looking at literacy practices represented in Canadian picture books.

## 1.2 Children's Literature and the Canadian Identity

In recent years, several researchers have examined topics that explore the relationships that exist between the Canadian children's publishing industry and the Canadian identity. For example, Edwards and Saltman (2010) have illuminated the connections between Canadian publishing and Canadian nationalism by conducting over 130 interviews with authors, illustrators, editors, booksellers, and other stakeholders in the Canadian children's picture book industry. These scholars believe that Canadians need opportunities to be critical and candid about Canadian children's literature in order to help readers figure out Canada's ideological assumptions and truths. Although they are clear that there is no *one* way to be neither Canadian, nor one Canadian identity, their research suggests common sets of beliefs, practices, and values for Canadians (p.191). Moreover they posit that Canadian content does matter because Canadian children's books do indeed demonstrate subtle cultural nuances. These cultural nuances are shaped by Canada's history, its physicality, as well as by the rituals and routines that Canadians practice, and by the beliefs, values, and attitudes that Canadians hold.

Perry Nodelman (1999) writes that children's books provide glimpses into a country's social relationships and practices, offering readers the potential to engage in and to examine particular ideologies of culture. Other Canadian scholars build on Nodelman's premise (Bainbridge, Oberg, & Carbonaro, 2005; Johnson, Bainbridge, & Shariff, 2007; Pantaleo, 2002), exploring the ways that Canadians perceive and construct notions of "ourselves" and "others" in and beyond classroom settings. Preliminary findings from a national study (Courtland, Hammett, Strong-Wilson, Bainbridge, Johnston, Burke, Ward, Wiltse, Gonzales, & Shariff, 2009) suggest that literature provides opportunities for children to better understand their national and local cultures alongside the ideological perceptions that underpin them. Furthermore, Canadian children's literature shapes readers' empathy for the Canadian experience and challenges stereotypes and inaccurate notions of multiculturalism.

Edwards and Saltman (2010) state that during the 1990's there was a shift to "homogenize" Canadian culture in Canadian books. This shift was market-driven; its intent was to ensure that Canadian books could be sold in the United States and the United Kingdom. Yet, Patsy Aldana, founder and past-publisher of a highly reputable Canadian children's publishing company believes that by universalizing the Canadian experience, Canadian children have fewer opportunities to know their own multicultural realities. She writes, "Children are at risk of losing the opportunity to see them reflected in the books they read" (cited in Edwards & Saltman, 2010; p.137).

These researchers agree that represented literacy events (e.g., those in books, pop culture, movies, and so forth) do, to some extent, represent the notions, beliefs, and values of the creators that make them. Given that we also believe that creators (authors, illustrator, editors, etc.) cannot step outside of the social and cultural frameworks that they inhabit, and that Canadian children's picture books are nearly exclusively written, illustrated, and produced in Canada and by Canadians (because of the Canada's granting systems), we (the authors of this paper) were curious to know how literacy practices are patterned and represented in Canadian children's picture books across four decades. Specifically, we wanted to explore the nuances of these patterns, especially in relation to theories of New Literacy Studies, such as: what structured routines might emerge as significant from four decades of children's literature; to what extent might these materializing routines and patterns reflect Canada's national identity; and how might these narrated structured routines and emerging patterns broaden/deepen dialogues about children's literature and literacy practices?

### 1.3 New Literacies Studies

Literacy practices are considered purposeful, ideological, and multiple—constantly shifting and becoming hybridized through “a process of translation” (Bhabha, 1994; Fox, 2001). The New Literacies Studies (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Gee, 1996; New London Group, 2000; Street, 1995; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005) suggest that when people use literacy, they display their own social mores: their past relationships (including power relations), their non-material values and understandings about lived experiences, their traditional and cultural ways of making-meaning, as well as their structured routines and guidelines for social interaction.

Viewed as a culture resource, literacy offers a powerful way of conceptualizing the act of reading and writing, and also the social structures they reflect to constitute it (Rogoff, 2003). In order to better understand reading and writing as a cultural resource Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic (2000) posit six propositions:

- *Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be observable in events that are mediated by written texts.* This proposition suggests observing what people do with texts in order to better understand what these texts mean to them within and across situated contexts.
- *There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.* Domains of life are “patterned contexts within which literacy is used and learned” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Literacy changes when it is moved from the home to the school or to the workplace, depending on the assumptions and beliefs brought to texts, the relationships of the people involved the discourses around the text, and the expectations of how literacy routines are structured.
- *Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others.* Gee (1996), drawing on the work of Heath (1983), argues literacy practices carry potentials for the positioning of individuals. For instance, what are the rules of appropriate engagement? Who is allowed to participate in the event? Whose behaviours are valued within the context? Here, literacy practices are always associated with relations of power and cultural ideologies; they are not simply neutral technologies (Street & Lea, 2006).
- *Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.* Barton and Hamilton (2000) describe literacy as often being “a means to some other end” (p. 12). For example, one might read a recipe in order to bake a cake. Printed texts do not hold autonomous meaning or function independent of their social contexts. Rather, people use and assign meaning to printed texts in specific ways in order to suit their own needs. This means that literacy practices are embedded in broad social goals, and ultimately within cultural practices (Maybin, 2000).
- *Literacy is historically situated.* Literacy is a dynamic, social process; like all cultural phenomena. It has its roots in the past. In order to understand contemporary literacy practices and definitions of literacy, one must explore the historical influences that have shaped cultural beliefs, attitudes, and ways of thinking.
- *Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making.* Over time, the ways that we practice literacy transform. Twenty years ago few people used computers for communication; today people feel they can't live without their mobile technology. People favor new ways of making or conveying meaning. In this way, humans continually construct new understandings of information and because of this, create or acquire new ways of communicating and thinking about the world.

These six propositions play a significant role in the ways that we coded and then analyzed the underlying literacy assumptions reflected in Canadian children's books, and for initiating a dialogue around how these representations reflect or play a part in constituting Canada's national identity. Specifically, we pay attention to literature that many Canadians value (e.g., award-winning books), to the ways textual patterns are culturally shaped (e.g., social rules of contexts represented, how books are relational within these narrated communities), the ways characters' patterns of behavior and their beliefs about the text (e.g., structured routines, inclusivity, compliance) become significant.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Sampling

Phase I of the study was conducted in the children's departments of the Vancouver Public Library, Toronto Public Library, and St. Catharines Public Library. In these libraries, picture books are separated by genre and not by national origin. Books published from Canadian publishers, however, although integrated with books from other nations, are easily identifiable as they often have red and white maple leaf stickers on their spine. To get a random selection of books, the first author visited each library three to ten times over a three-year period. Each time, she randomly pulled from the shelves 20 Canadian picture books (A-Z in the "J+Fic" and "J Fic Easy" sections). Since libraries have multiple copies of the same titles she sometimes found repeats; when this happened, she randomly chose another book. In total, 250 Canadian children's picture books (or illustrated books) were analyzed—150 from the picture books (J + fic) section and 100 from easy fiction (J Fic Easy).

After selecting the twenty books, the first author looked for any literacy events as represented in either the illustrations or the words. Literacy events were tallied for each book as: multiple literacy events; single literacy event; or no literacy event. For each book, a tally was also kept if it had been recognized with an award such as a children's or parent's choice, and literary. Other data were gathered to include in our reference list (see Appendix A) such as the author's name, illustrator's name, publisher, publishing date, library cataloguing information, and an annotated biography.

**Table 1:** (see below) summarizes the total sample (N= 250) by decade publication date and displays frequencies for the literacy events and awards.

**Table 1: Frequencies by decade publication date for the literacy events and awards**

Decade	Number of Books	Literacy Events			Awards	
		Multiple Literacy Events	Single Literacy Event	No Literacy Event	Yes	No
	250					
1970's	8	1	5	2	4	4
1980's	28	4	10	14	8	20
1990's	77	14	17	46	15	62
2000's	137	20	22	95	37	100

### 2.2 Coding

In Phase II, as a way to describe the literacy events, we consulted the work of Hamilton (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivancic, 2000; p.17) that defines, "Basic Elements of Literacy Events and Practices" that includes: participants; hidden participants; settings; routines; activities; artifacts; domains of practice; other resources. Although we were using a different genre of text (picture books instead of photos), Hamilton's framework (2000) provided an essential tool for conceptualizing the data in this study. The authors categorized the literacy events in the picture books based on how they were represented situated contexts. The nomenclature of the codes was adjusted from Hamilton's original terms to fit this current study's purpose. The codes were clustered into two broad categories: Context or Social Mores.

Context categories capture the qualities of the literacy events such as where the event(s) took place, who participated in the event(s), and the objects included in the event(s). The Social Mores categories describe the interactions that took place in the literacy event(s) and the extent to which individuals are actively engaged in the interactions. Nominal qualifiers (i.e., 1 – 5) were assigned to the categories. **Table 2**(see below) summarizes these nominal qualifiers and the categories.

**Table 2. Nominal Codes for Context and Social Mores Categories**

Qualifiers	1	2	3	4	5
Context Categories					
Situated Contexts	Domestic + Local Community	National/ International Community	Other (e.g., worldly, fictional)		
Settings	Indoors (e.g., school, library, house)	Outdoors	Other (e.g., castle, ship)		
Protagonists	Child/student + other children (e.g., known or strangers)	Parent + other family	Teacher/ librarian + other adults (e.g., known or strangers)	Inanimate/ fantastical personified	
Secondary Characters	Child/student + other children (e.g., known or strangers)	Parent + other family	Teacher/ librarian + other adults (e.g., known or strangers)	Inanimate/ fantastical personified	
Artifacts	School /work + writing resources (e.g., paper, pen)	Digital devices	Other (e.g., letter, proclamation, signs, magazines)		
Social Mores Categories					
Gatherings	Recreational	Congregational	Informational or educational	Functional in daily life	Socio-cultural- or political- oriented
Implicit or Explicit Guidelines for Interactions	Rules are implicit and understood/ not understood by all characters	Rules are explicit and understood/ not understood by all characters			
Understanding Interactions and Complying with Guidelines	Rules (implicit or explicit) are understood and followed	Rules (implicit or explicit) are not understood and may/not be followed			
Inclusivity and Access	Inclusive; everyone is taking part.	Exclude people for particular reasons (i.e., age, ability, race, etc.)			
Rituals	Common practice in Canada	Uncommon practice in Canada			

### 2.3 Data Analyses

These nominally coded data are categorical so therefore non-parametric statistics were run in SPSS (SPSS Software, 2012). Chi-square tests were calculated to determine if there were significant relationships between the categorical variables. Comparisons were made within and between the Context and Social Mores sub-categories. A significance level was set at 0.05 for all analyses. When the comparisons had dichotomous categories, then McNemar's Chi-square tests were run, whereas, when there were comparisons with more than two categories, then the Cochran Q test was appropriate.

## 3. Findings

The following four significant findings are derived as a function of the data analyses. Non-significant findings have not been reported here.

### 3.1 Literacy Events AND Award Winners

Using the data from **Table 1**. that describe the sample, the combined category that is most significantly populated, is that with no literacy events and no award,  $\chi^2(2, N = 250) = 5.578, p < .05$ . This implies that there were a significant number of books over the forty-year span that did not receive awards and did not have literacy events.

### 3.2 Understanding Interactions and Complying with Guidelines AND Implicit or Explicit Guidelines for Interactions

When the literacy events were deconstructed, the most frequently occurring qualities are when implicit guidelines for interactions were understood and followed,  $\chi^2(1, N = 176) = 34.354, p < .00$ . This suggests that there are a significant number of events featured in books that include structured routines and rules. Books portray that even when literacy-related routines and rules are implied, characters still follow these rules. This suggests amenability is valued.

### 3.3 Understanding Interactions and Complying with Guidelines AND Inclusivity and Access

When examining the interactions and inclusion of the characters, the most significant cell is the one in which literacy events feature characters who are included and taking part in interactions, and they comply with the rules and routines. These rules or guidelines are either implicit or explicit,  $\chi^2(1, N = 176) = 9.709, p < .00$ . This suggests that there are a significant number of events where rules that are clearly understood are being followed by characters that are also included in literacy events. If characters understand the rules and are a part of the community of practice, they are likely to follow the structured routines; compliance is an emphasized behaviour.

### 3.4 Implicit or Explicit Guidelines for Interactions AND Inclusivity and Access

Finally, a significant result was found for literacy events that feature characters who are included and taking part in interactions despite the fact that guidelines for these interactions are simply implied and may or may not be understood,  $\chi^2(1, N = 176) = 6.224, p < .01$ . This suggests that there are a significant number of events where implicit rules are understood /not understood and are being followed by characters that are included in literacy events. Even those on the periphery of understanding were included so long as they followed the structured routines. As long as they follow the rules it is okay if they don't understand. Thus, even if the character did understand what was happening during the literacy event or if he/she did not understand, it became a problem for the other characters if they did not comply with the structured routine.

## 4. Discussion

In Canada, book prizes and awards are highly sought after. Such awards are recognized by the media and heighten prestige for a publication along with building credentials and lucrative marketing opportunities. The first finding holds that the majority of books from the last four decades that did not win awards did not include literacy events in their plot, especially not readers' choice or parents' choice awards. Why? Two reasons spring to mind. First, perhaps seeing characters engage in literacy events such as reading and writing might be viewed as a subdued, idle activity. Such activity might not be particularly entertaining for a child or parent to read or view—not as engaging as reading about a character actively doing something. Second, not until the mid 1990's were many of the readers' and parents' choice awards in place in Canada.

Another question might be why did so many literary award-nominated or winning books contain literacy events? Predominantly, literary awards are nominated and awarded by professionals such as librarians and teachers. Professionals are more likely to value activities that involve literacy, whereas, children (who are only relegated to nominate a few book awards) are likely to appreciate activities that are more interactive and entertaining. Since it was the case that adults were choosing the award-winning books, then the recognized texts are those that favour the inclusion of literacy events. This finding is consistent with the point that represented literacy events exemplify the notions of authors and as Edwards and Saltman (2010) note, Canadians' common set of beliefs and values are reflected in Canadian children's literature. Since literacy is viewed as a cultural resource (Rogoff, 2003), and since book-loving adults are the gatekeepers in the publishing industry the conceptualization of reading and writing might be an integral part of what is portrayed in literature. It is interesting to notice how some authors, illustrators and publishers try to present literacy as a an active experience, perhaps acknowledging the challenge of this tension. Presenting literacy practices in this way appeals to literary, educational, and children's trade markets alike. For example, in both *Gordon Loggins and the Three Bears* (Bailey, 1997) and *Jeffrey and Sloth* (Winters, 2007)<sup>1</sup>, the main characters (both school-aged boys) experience the act of reading and writing in real

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<sup>1</sup>*Gordon Loggins* was not nominated for any awards; this is because many awards were not yet established, especially readers' and parents' choice awards. Ten years later however, when *Jeffrey and Sloth* was published, various awards were more widely available. This latter book was nominated for both literary and children's choice awards in British Columbia and Ontario.

and visceral ways, and in doing so bring the acts of reading and writing to life. These books appeal to both professionals and children.

For example, in both picture books the main characters physically encounter and interact with the storied animal characters—instead of just reading about them. Additionally, these protagonists then leave their stories with new knowledge about themselves, their secondary characters, and about their storied worlds—an aspect that appeals to literary professionals (i.e., that books connect readers with diverse experiences, intense feelings, and new perspectives). As Canadian scholar Sylvia Pantaleo (2002) writes: “Literature allows us to enter into realities that are different from our own. When we do this we broaden our perspectives and extend our humanity by considering ways of thinking and making sense of loves other than our own” (p. 46). Perhaps these two Canadian picture books suggest two Canadian ideologies—that print is not only used for connecting us to new knowledge, but also for experiencing new realities.

The second finding speaks to the prevalence of communicating structured routines within the context of a literacy event. It is not surprising that there are a significant number of events featured in books that include structured routines and rules. An example of a common structured routine in Canadian picture books and Canadian classrooms is how teachers read picture books to young students. During this practice, teachers sit in chairs and children gather at their feet, usually sitting cross-legged.

What is more interesting about this second finding is that when these literacy-related routines and rules are implied (and not explicit), characters knew the routine and they understood the rules of engagement. For example in *Something From Nothing* (Gilman, 1992), when a Joseph declares that it is time to listen to a story, his family automatically recognize this as a cue to congregate around him in a common area to hear the story. Similar implicit behaviours are represented in Bianchi’s (2007) *Young Author’s Day at Pokeweed Public School* during the free reading every day (FRED) period. This finding suggests that compliance is a valued behaviour for engagement in Canadian children’s literacy contexts. This finding is consistent with the Canadian classrooms that we have visited where students are expected to learn and follow the guidelines. This finding also resonates with parts of the New Literacies Studies (e.g., Barton et al., 2000) frame that suggests that there are often implicit expectations of how literacy routines are structured and that these structured routines can sometimes be complicated, depending upon factors like the setting, the relationships of the people involved, and the discourses around the text. Moreover, Pahl and Rowsell (2005) demonstrate in their research that when engaged in literacy activities, people often display their understandings about lived experiences including understood structured routines and guidelines for interaction.

Finding books that mix up these structured routines can sometimes be helpful because they bring forth new perspectives and encourage conversation. Picture books from our study that challenge the implicit and sometimes rigid nature of routines include *The Composition* (Skarmeta, 2000) and *Once Upon a Golden Apple* (Little & DeVries, 1991). In *The Composition*, a story about a boy living under an unspecified dictatorship, Pedro is coerced and bribed by a military officer to write a composition about what his family does at night. Understanding what is happening, Pedro refutes the routine and writes a false composition that ultimately protects his family. Here print is used as a powerful tool for attaining evidence, and for spying on families—an uncommon literacy practice in Canada. In *Once Upon A Golden Apple*, a father sits under a tree and reads to his children. However, as he reads he intentionally changes the words of the story; for example instead of “Once upon a time,” the father says “Once upon a golden apple” (p.1), or “Once upon a singing fiddle” (pp. 2-3). The children, knowing this is not how the routine is supposed to be structured, react by giggling, filling in the blanks, and so on. In the end the family creates an extraordinary and silly story.

The third finding suggests an intersection among understanding and complying with guidelines, as well as being accepted and included by others. It is most often the case that literacy events feature characters understanding and following the rules of engagement, and hence being allowed to participate in the community literacy practice. These rule-abiding characters are likely to understand and follow the structured routines—suggesting acquiescence. Within the picture books that we examined though, a few characters (and there are typically only one or two characters per story) deviated from this norm. For example a character/pair of characters may choose not to comply or may not know the rules. When this happens (very rarely), these characters have the potential to be excluded from the group. In other words, to be included is to follow the *correct* or *appropriate* way of behaving.

This implies that complying with rules, routines, and guidelines in Canada is expected and that those that do comply are usually included in the literacy events. Practical examples can be seen in *The Hockey Sweater* (Carrier, 1979) and *Jeremiah Learns to Read* (Bogart, 1997). The first example demonstrates that if characters follow the rules of engagement they get to participate in social practices as seen when Roch's mother sends a letter to Monsieur Eaton (Carrier, 1979). Her letter gets an immediate response. However if a character does not fit in with the established norm, this character may be excluded from the social practice altogether. For instance, although Jeremiah is shown to be a skilled craftsman he doesn't know how to read, and is therefore unable to participate certain social practices. His brother tells Jeremiah that he is too old to learn. Only when he learns to read is he allowed to borrow books from the library. This idea resonates with Street and Lea (2006) who suggest that literacy practices are always associated with relations of power and cultural ideologies, and have the potential to position individuals and define the rules of appropriate engagement.

Some books use non-compliance and its consequence of exclusion as plot points, for example, *Taming Horrible Harry* (Chartrand, 2005) and *The Girl Who Hated Books* (Pawagi, 1998). It is interesting to note that throughout both these stories, the protagonists learn to follow the structured routines. In Chartrand's (2005) *Taming Horrible Harry*, a terrible monster finds a book in the forest and discovers the value of reading. When acting like a monster (e.g., scaring people), Harry is considered "horrible" and is socially excluded. However, when Harry discovers the joys of reading properly (e.g., sitting quietly with his book and enjoying the story) he is accepted into a range of communities, including human and fantasy. In *The Girl Who Hated Books* (Pawagi, 1998), Meena's parents collect numerous books. In this Indian-Canadian home, books are valuable because they represent access to knowledge. However, Meena resists the books and might be considered a "black sheep" in the family. It isn't until Meena comes face to face with the characters in her books that Meena becomes an avid reader and an integrated member of her family. "I thought books were full of words, not rabbits!" is her response (p. 13). She is changed by her interaction with the characters in her books; she learns not only to love books, but understands her family better too.

Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic (2000) state that people use and assign meaning to printed texts in specific ways. Besides the assumption that learning to read and enjoying books is a good thing (because it helps you engage with various communities), there is another ideology at work here. This ideology is about using literacy as a capital (i.e., literacy gives users access to knowledge). This ideology is projected through Canadian universities (<http://literacyconference.oise.utoronto.ca/earlylit.html>), library associations (<http://www.accessola2.com/superconference2007/wed/p012/kelly.pdf>), educational programs (<http://www.canada.com/national/features/raiseareader/statistics.html>), provincial governmental agencies (<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/literacy/rsl/>), and more.

The belief is that by learning how to decode and encode print and be able to follow structured literacy routines gives students advantages in school, in life, and in the workforce. This finding raised questions for us about how these narrated structured routines might speak to, inform, or refute Canadian's ideological assumptions about literacy practices. Are conformity and compliance really that important to the Canadian identity? And if they are, perhaps these ideologies should be problematized further? For example, in what ways does literacy hold capital in Canadian schools and libraries? Who is marginalized and/or not included? How might books containing contextualized narrated structures and relationships open up critical dialogues about power in both schools and homes? The final finding illuminated the predominance of literacy events that feature characters that are included and taking part in interactions despite the fact that they may not understand the structured routines—for example, characters on the periphery of understanding. Results of the present study suggest that even if the character did not understand the rules of a situated context (e.g., sit cross-legged at the teacher's feet and quietly listen to a story), it only became a problem for the other characters if that character did not comply with the structured routine. Accordingly, literacy is posited as a set of social practices mediated by written texts such that observing what people do with texts offers insight into what these texts mean to them (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000). This underscores the point that literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Literacy does not function independent of a social context and indeed literacy practices are embedded in broad social goals (Maybin, 2000). For instance, in *Big Ben* (Ellis, 2001), Ben doesn't understand why little kids (i.e., preschoolers) don't get report cards. Yet, despite his lack of understanding and frustration he is composed and compliant. For this, he is rewarded. His siblings create a family report card for Ben, which makes him feel included—and as the title suggests, "Big!"

This finding is not uncommon in Canada (Author 1; Author 2). These two studies about global comprehension demonstrated that many Canadian children, though below the national standard for success in reading slip below the radar and are placed in reading groups that are too difficult for them because they are follow the expected routines. In the latter study less proficient readers were invited to participate in reading groups and classroom activities with their more successful reading peers until these struggling students disrupted the literacy practices. Here, the more outwardly frustrated and boisterous children were quickly moved to “lower reading groups” and in some cases were tested for learning difficulties. Perhaps books could be used as a discussion tool for educators and pre-service teachers, whereby these narrated practices can be examined. Questions can be raised about ways to better understand and program for children who may not know the structured routines (e.g., English Language Learners, students coming from diverse backgrounds and schooling systems) and also for children who may know the structured routines but struggle to understand the texts themselves.

## 5. Conclusion

Print-literacy has been contextualized in Canadian picture books for more than forty years. This study demonstrates that the 250 picture books examined here reveal more than childhood stories and illustrations, but a microcosm of the country’s literature and literacy practices, “reflecting in miniature the nation’s themes and cultural vision” (Saltman, 1987; p. 18). Canadian children’s picture books do to some extent reflect national ideas about culture and about the Canadian identity, especially since the picture books selected for this project were published in Canada, primarily created by Canadian authors and illustrators, and marketed within Canadian contexts.<sup>2</sup> The beliefs and values held by authors, illustrators, editors, publishers, booksellers, reviewers, and current market trends cannot help but depict a Canadian sensibility inherent in their composition.

Canadian picture books help shape and are shaped by Canadian’s beliefs and values about structured routines, inclusivity, and play a role in how Canadians portray themselves: this is one of the reasons why national literature is important. Based on this premise, the ways that literature is created and used within Canada becomes important too. Authors, illustrators, and publishing companies, for example, might want to examine their own ideologies as they create and share books, specifically when the stories involve stereotypes, compliant characters, or social systems of power differentials. Schools and libraries may want to explore the physical spaces and resources they provide, knowing that these arrangements will shape the ways literacy is practiced.

Perhaps too, what is required of scholars, professionals, and parents is to allow for child readers to engage in critical discussions about these ideological assumptions and structured routines, questioning their procedures and rules of engagement. For example, professionals in the literary world might want to question how their ideologies affect their decisions when nominating books for awards. Additionally, educators and parents might encourage children to ask critical questions about what they see in picture books and how these ideas shape readers. How do these routines and their guidelines (both implicit and explicit) affect other characters? What structured routines are practiced within narrated and real life classrooms and homes? How might these practices affect both the compliant and non-compliant individuals? Who understands what is happening in both the narrated and real-life settings? What rules are present? Who holds the power within these practices?

This study sheds light on national social practices by examining 250 Canadian picture books over four decades. The findings have the potential to deepen dialogues within and outside schooled settings about the Canadian identity, compliance, and inclusivity, as well as about the ways that cultural routines and picture books are shaped by and also shape national and local understandings of what it means to be Canadian.

## 6. References

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note here the ways that the Canadian publishing industry is financed by the Canadian government (<http://canadacouncil.ca/en/writing-and-publishing/find-grants-and-prizes/grants/book-publishing-support-block-grants>). Block grant rules state that to be eligible for financial support publishing companies must be located in Canada, 75% owned by Canadians, and contain at least 50% Canadian creative content (text or graphic).

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