A Critical Exam of the Ideologies in Multicultural Children's Literature

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1. Introduction

Exposure to multicultural children's literature has been shown to be important to bolster the self-esteem and the cultural identity of children from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Louie 2006). It can also have a marking influence on their success when they are learning to read (Hughes-Hassell & Cox 2010). Moreover, for all children, including natives, images that are embedded in stories and illustrations of multicultural books can contribute to define their beliefs and attitudes regarding diversity (Yenika-Agbaw 2011). Hence, well chosen, multicultural literature can be profitable for all children.

During the last thirty years, the demographics of the French Canadian population have been through tremendous changes due in great part to immigration from all around the world. But despite the increasing diversity that came to enrich the cultural mosaic of Canada, little is known about the representations of multiculturalism in French Canadian children's literature. Multicultural literature "refers to books about specific cultural groups considered to be outside of the dominant sociopolitical culture" (Yoon, Simpson & Haag 2010, p. 110). In the present study, we refer more specifically to picture books in which representations of people who are part of visible minorities can be found. Those picture books can be the work of authors and illustrators who are themselves representatives of a visible minority or part of the mainstream culture (Ritcher 2011).

Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) sustain that the ideologies of the society are embedded in children's literature. Hence, through their exposure to multicultural picture books, youngsters can be exposed to ideologies concerning multiculturalism which may have a marking influence on their developing mind. Being exposed to cultural diversity, even through picture books, can bring children to reassess their opinions, doubts or fears towards those who are different from them (Nieto & Bode 2012). For those reason, when chosing multicultural books for children, it is important to take a critical stance toward the ideologies that they are conveying in regard to multiculturalism.

The present study aimed to analyse picture books published by French Canadian editors between 2003 and 2012. First, we evaluated the occurrences of the representations of people from visible minorities. Then we identified the ideologies conveyed in picture books in which they were represented. After exposing the context and the theoretical framework of this study, we will present the methodology, followed by the results, the discussion and the concluding comments.

2. Context

Since the 1980's, French Canadian children's literature has seen an unprecedented growth with more and more editors showing an interest in this part of the literary market. This period coincides with a growing awareness of the multicultural composition of

Canadian society and the rapid demographic changes that have occurred in Canada. According to Statistics Canada (2009), an important influx of migration from Asia, Africa, South and Central America, the Caribbean and the Oceania has taken place over the last three decades. With respect to linguistic diversity, Canada has two official languages – French and English. Even if the English language is predominant, many newcomers are joining the francophone communities to live their lives. As for its ideology of multiculturalism, Canada prides itself at home and abroad as a country made up of a cultural mosaic. The mosaic metaphor is based on the belief that Canada as a whole becomes stronger by having immigrants bring with them their cultural diversity for all Canadians to learn from (Levine & Serbeh-Dunn 1999).

If children's literature is a reflexion of society (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977), it is not surprising that some researchers have found that the French Canadians children's literature of the past decades has been influenced by the new realities regarding Canada's cultural diversity. Altogether, these studies sustain that there is an increasing representation of visible minorities in French Canadian children's literature and that those protagonists are most often represented in positive manners. However, those conclusions have been drawn from only a few studies that were conducted with samples of novels for the intermediate or adolescent readers (Pouliot 1994; Romney 2005; Sorin 2004). Therefore, they are offering an optimistic, but incomplete portrait of multiculturalism in French Canadian children's literature.

Picture books, usually intended to youngsters, also convey ideologies regarding multiculturalism (McNair & Brooks 2012). In fact, picture books are considered to be important social tools at a time when attitudes and stereotypes towards others begin to take form in the developing minds of young children. It has been shown that they are particularly influenced by implicit ideologies that can be found in the texts and images of picture books (Nieto & Bode 2012). However, research on Canadian children's literature fails to inform us in regards to ideologies that are conveyed in picture books, especially in picture books that have been published recently in the French language.

3. Theoretical framework

The foundation of the present study is anchored in two theories that are recognized as being significant in the field of multicultural education. Bringing them together offers a larger spectrum in order to get a deeper understanding of multicultural ideologies that can be found in picture books.

a. The assimilationist ideology and the pluralistic ideologies
The work of Grant, and Sleeter (Sleeter & Grant 1987, Grant & Sleeter 2009), considered as a cornerstone in the field of multicultural education, provides a framework that identifies the ideologies presented by the multicultural literature. The authors describe five approaches to multicultural education that commonly occur in educational settings. But like Yoon et al. (2010), we used only the two that were more aligned with the study of multicultural representations in literature. Those two approaches are clearly rooted in

distinctive ideologies. The first approach is the assimilationist ideology, while the second one is the pluralistic ideology.

The assimilationist ideology gives rise to educational practices that help visible minority students master the elements of the traditional school curriculum destined to everyone. The main principle of this approach is to encourage visible minority students to adjust to prevailing standards in the ultimate goal of taking part in the economic development of society. This ideology stresses the importance of fairness, but it is attainable only if visible minorities acquire the knowledge and skills that allow them to blend in with the dominant culture. This approach is not addressed to all students, but only those who are "culturally different." Such an ideology can be recognized in children's books that feature visible minorities characters. It is expressed by the development of conformity to prevailing norms for achieving success or, for deterrence to use the specific culture of origin.

Unlike the assimilationist ideology, the ideology of cultural pluralism takes into account the education of all students, indifferently of their cultural and ethnic background. According to Grant and Sleeter (2009), such an ideology sometimes requires significant changes in the school environment so that all stakeholders and all students can be made aware of the importance of human diversity to society. This ideology is also concerned with equity. To achieve that goal, it promotes dialogue that challenges hegemonic values. Discussions on the cultural identity of minority groups, as well as that of the dominant groups are encouraged and are designed to promote understanding of others for all students. Multicultural youth literature that supports the ideology of cultural pluralism presents characters of visible minorities that is free of stereotypes. In these books, the cultural differences that are specific to each group in question are valued.

b. Bishop's typology
The work of Bishop (1982, 2003), although dealing more specifically with children's literature for African Americans in the United States, provides a complementary aspect for identifying the ideologies promoted by the multicultural children's literature in which minority groups are represented. In his seminal study, Bishop (1982) developed a typology that took into account the cultural background of the authors and their ideological intent, that is to say, the prospect for which their work is produced. This typology includes three main categories that are used to classify literary works as they promote social consciousness, the melting pot or cultural consciousness.

According to Bishop (1982), the children's books that focus on the development of social consciousness present characters of colour, but they are written by white adults for the benefit of white children in order to help them understand children of colour. Written from an "outsider" perspective, these books sometimes lack authenticity, in addition to portraying stereotypes vis-à-vis minority groups.

Children's books that are promoting a melting pot ideology are also written by the authors of the majority, from an "outsider" perspective. These books, in which the characters of colour are found alongside white people, deal with universal themes such as friendship,

family, school and daily activities. The books depict whites and non-whites together without differentiating among them and show people of colour to be no different than whites other than skin colour. Moreover, these books often lack of authenticity regarding expressive language, references to religion or food. In fact, only the illustrations are showing some ethnic or racial differences, which are often largely exaggerated in a stereotypical manner. Based on the text alone, these differences would not be noticeable.

Finally, books that are promoting cultural consciousness are written by authors that are themselves from minority groups. They are written from an "insider" perspective, intended primarily for minorities' children. These books carefully and authentically describe their life experiences. The authors refer to the culture in their writings by including songs, sayings, phrases, names and nicknames specific to the culture of the group represented.

4. Research questions

The first part of this research was basically a quantitative analysis. This was done mainly in order to seek the occurrence of representations of visible minorities in French Canadian picture books. As for the second part, qualitative analysis of picture books in which visible minorities were represented was used to identify the ideologies that were conveyed. More specifically, we intended to answer the following questions:
1) What percentage of picture books published by French Canadian editors from 2003 to 2012 feature people from visible minorities? What groups are represented and to what extent?
2) What is the racial or ethnic background of the authors and illustrators of these picture books?
3) In picture books in which there are members of visible minorities, what are the ideologies that are conveyed regarding multiculturalism?

5. Methodology

Content analysis was the method retained for this study. The unit of analysis was the individual picture book. From a quarterly journal dedicated to reviewing all the French children's books published in Canada, we were able to make a list of the picture books published by French Canadian editors between 2003 and 2012. As much as 1,132 books were identified.

In order to answer the first two questions of the study, each picture book was analysed independently by two assistants and the researcher to record the following information: race or ethnicity of the characters, race or ethnicity of the authors and the illustrators (mostly obtained by online research) as well as bibliographic information. Following a classification developed by Hughes-Hassell and Cox (2010), the picture books were then classified into categories regarding the representations of different races and ethnicities. Inter-rater agreements for those categories were between 88.7 and 100 per cent.

To answer the third question of the research, only the picture books in which there were multicultural representations were considered. A first analysis of those picture books was conducted in light of Sleeter and Grant's framework (Sleeter & Grant 2009). To do so, the assistants and the researcher work independently to retrieve excerpts from each picture book in order to determine which ideology was prevailing: the assimilationist ideology or the pluralistic ideology. In cases where neither of those ideologies was clearly prevailing, picture books were classified as being neutral. A second analysis was done by using Bishop's typology (Bishop 1982). Picture books were classified into three categories, being social conscious, melting pot or culturally conscious. Again, some excerpts were retrieved in order to demonstrate which ideology was predominant. To validate their judgements, the three evaluators held a meeting to discuss their classifications. Disagreements among evaluators were resolved by discussion.

6. Results

Descriptive data, reported in form of frequencies and percentages, are presented to answer the two first questions of the study. To answer the third question, we are presenting the results of our classifications and we are giving a few examples of excerpts from the picture books.

For answering the first question of the study, 338 picture books were excluded from the sample of 1,132 picture books because they did not show human figures. Thus, only 794 picture books were considered to enable us to answer this question which aims to determine the proportion of picture books in which there were representations of visible minorities. Data that are presented in Table 1 are showing that in the 794 picture books in which there were human beings, people of visible minorities were represented in 43 (5.4 %) picture books altogether. The details regarding the distribution of those 43 picture books between different racial or ethnic backgrounds appear in the table. It is to be noted that white people were present in 756 (95.21 %) picture books that were analysed. For 20 (2.52 %) picture books, we were unable to identify which racial or ethnic groups were represented.

- Insert Table 1 –

The data in Table 2 give us answers to the second research question regarding racial or ethnic background of the authors and illustrators. Data were computed from the 1,132 picture books in order to take into account the work of most of the creators involved in the production of French Canadian picture books. We can see that only 16 (1. 41 %) picture books were written by authors that are part of a visible minority group and that 30 (2.65 %) of them were illustrated by a member of a visible minority. On the other hand, 1,087 (96 %) of those picture books were written by a white author and 1 060 (93.6 %) were illustrated by a white illustrator.

- Insert Table 2 -

The third question of the study brings us to consider the multicultural ideologies conveyed in the 43 picture books in which visible minorities were found. As mentioned earlier, two classification systems have enabled us to answer this last question.

We made a first classification of the 43 picture books according to their dominant ideology, as defined by Grant & Sleeter (2009). We found eight picture books (18.6%) that promoted assimilationist ideology while 21 others (48.8%) supported the ideology of cultural pluralism. Fourteen picture books (32.6%) were considered to be neutral because no ideologies seemed to be predominant.

The assimilationist ideology was clearly illustrated in *Château de neige* [*Snow castle*] (Bolté 2005) when Aïxa, a young girl from Haïti, arrived in Canada in the dead of winter. At school, she was told by the teacher that to be accepted by her classmates, she would have to pronounce her words by taking the accent of her new country. The assimilation to the linguistic norm is evident when, after a few weeks of practice, Aïxa expresses her joy that at last, she is speaking like everybody else in the classroom. The assimilation of the young girl is a sure thing, but to the detriment of her own cultural background.

An example of cultural pluralism can be found in *Le kimono de Suki* [*Suki's kimono*] (Uegaki 2003). Suki, a second generation Canadian of Japanese descent, decides to wear the kimono she just received from her grandmother for the first day of school. As soon as she arrives at school, she gets teased by other children. In class, the teacher asks every kid to talk about a special thing they did during summer time. Then, Suki has the opportunity to talk about her costume and to teach her classmates a traditional dance that she learned from her grandmother. Her classmates applaud with admiration and join her in her dance. At the end of the story, we can see that the young girl is very proud of her cultural origins. This picture book, written from an "insider" perspective, is a celebration of a minority's culture.

The second classification in regard to multiculturalism ideologies was made according to the work of Bishop (1982). The picture books were classified as being part of social consciousness, melting pot or cultural consciousness. In all, there were 31 picture books (72.1%) supporting the development of social consciousness, eight picture books (18.6%) promoting the melting pot and four picture books (9.3%) promoting the development of cultural consciousness.
Une petite bouteille jaune [*A small yellow bottle*] (Delaunois 2010) is an example of a picture book conveying a social consciousness ideology. Through the words of a child from the Middle East, the story tells the sad reality of children who are victims of anti-personnel bombs. The French Canadian author (with French European origins) provides an "outsider" perspective of an important issue that has a marking influence on the lives of children from a foreign country. It is to be noted that this picture book does not seems to convey any stereotypical images even if it is written from an "outsider" perspective. The accent is not on cultural differences, but on the courage of those young victims.

Three picture books from the same collection are examples of the melting pot ideology. In *La promenade* [*The stroll*] (Brière 2006), *La sieste* [*Nap time*] (Brière 2007) and *La*

collation [*Lunch time*] (Brière 2008), activities of children in a daycare centre are described. In each of those picture books, we can see a young Asian girl and a young Black girl among other children. However, no mention of their cultural origins can be found in the texts. It is noteworthy that at nap time, the young Black girl holds a white doll dearly to her heart. As for the young Asian girl, she invents a bedtime story, but the characters we see in cartoons, are all whites. Those picture books, written from an "outsider" perspective, do not value the cultural diversity of the visible minorities' characters.

Cultural consciousness ideology can be found in *Je suis fou de Vava* [*I am crazy about Vava* (Laferrière, 2006). The renowned Canadian author, originally from Haïti, relates the life of a young haïtian boy and his grandmother living in the village of Petit-Goâve, the town where the author was born. Written from an "insider" perspective, the descriptions of events, both in text and illustrations, seem to reflect the personal experiences of the characters with authenticity. For example, numbers of sayings are reflecting the grandmother's wisdom.

7. Discussion

By conducting this research, we wanted to know if the Canadian multicultural mosaic was reflected in children's picture books that were published in the French language from 2003 to 2012. We took into account the representativeness of the visible minorities in those picture books as well as the cultural origins of their authors and illustrators. In Canada, people who are part of a visible minority represent 20 % of the population. Since only 5.4 % of the picture books are showing people from visible minorities, it can be said that there is an important gap between Canada's demographic reality and the representativeness of diversity in the French Canadian picture books.

Romney (2005) sustained that in the 1990's it was possible to witness a growing representation of people from visible minorities in children's literature. As for Sorin (2004), she underlined that many books for the youth that were written by authors from various cultural backgrounds were published by French Canadian editors. We can rejoice to the fact that those studies, conducted on novels for intermediate and adolescent readers, could underline the multicultural spirit of the French Canadian children's literature. However, the cultural mosaic of Canada does not seem to express itself with as much emphasis in picture books that were edited between 2003 and 2012. In fact, our results sustain that chances are slim for French Canadian youngsters who are part of the visible minorities to come across a French Canadian picture book in which their cultural origins are celebrated; in short, a picture book in which they can recognize themselves.

Results of this study are showing a scarcity of authors and illustrators that are themselves part of minority groups. As stated by McNair & Brook (2012) cultural background of the author and the illustrator is an important factor to consider in view of the quality of picture books, since it can influence the cultural authenticity of their work. For this reason, it seems sensible to encourage editors to publish more works from multicultural authors and illustrators. Nevertheless, mainstream authors and illustrators who are

conscientious about authentic representations of multiculturalism are also able to produce high-quality multicultural picture books, as long as their work is grounded in well documented research (Louie 2006).

Our findings bring us to underline the need to heighten public awareness, in particular for parents and educators, of the important impact that under representations of the visible minorities can have on children. The effects are not only related to their developing ideologies about multiculturalism, but also to the success of minorities' children who are learning to read.

Influences of multicultural literature on minorities' children's reading abilities

The role of the motivation in learning to read has been demonstrated many times (e.i. Guthrie, Klauda & Ho 2013). In this regard, it is well known that readers are more interested in texts that are reflecting their personal experiences. Hence, reading could be considered as an irrelevant activity for readers that are rarely able to relate to the characters, as it could be the case for the French Canadian youngsters that are part of visible minorities. It is possible to see disengagement from literacy activities in these children if they never have the chance to recognize themselves in picture books that are presented to them. On the other hand, when picture books are showing characters that look like them and whose stories are reflecting their own cultural or personal experiences, they can relate to reading as a reflection of their own life, which could be a motivational factor in learning to read. Multicultural literature has also been shown to be related to children's reading comprehension. As any other readers, to understand a text, minorities' children have to be able to establish some links between what they are reading and their prior knowledge. In fact, Gangi (2008) has shown that when they interact with texts that are reflecting their cultural experiences, reading performance of minorities' children improves significantly.

Given the influences of multicultural literature on children, we can only wish for more high-quality multicultural picture books in the French language. In the mean time, it is important to consider what can be done to compensate for the paucity that is observed in that area. Parents and educators have to be advocates on behalf of the children in demanding for more multicultural children's literature in the French language. By providing an access to multicultural literature, minorities' children will succeed both socially and educationally. In the spirit of the cultural mosaic of Canada, they will feel included and valued in the Canadian society. Also, all Canadian children are enriched by having access to a multicultural literature. However, awareness of these matters seems to be lacking in the part of French Canadians editors that are publishing children's picture books.

8. Conclusion

Imagine a child who, throughout his childhood, does not encounter any books in which he can identify with the characters. Imagine also that the books that are presented to him tirelessly tell him that white people are the heroes of this world. Being unable to identify

with books, the message he receives is clear: his story and the one of his peers are not important enough to be written in books. We know that the effects on the development of self-concept and self-esteem (Hughes-Hassell & Cox 2010) as well as his learning to read (Gangi 2008) can be devastating. Yet despite the growing number of young Canadians who are part of visible minorities, the production of children's literature over the past decade does not reflect this evolution of Canadian society. The gap is such that drastic measures would be necessary to achieve a fair representation of visible minorities in the picture books. One can only hope that authors and illustrators, being from visible minorities or not, would be aware of the urgency of the situation and that they will react by creating more picture books of high quality in order to give visible minorities their rightful place. All Canadian children would benefit from this, especially visible minority children.

Finally, we can say that in Canada, there are few French picture books published from 2003 to 2012 that are representing members of visible minorities. In addition, minority authors and illustrators are not legion. Regarding the ideologies conveyed in picture books vis-à-vis multiculturalism, some promote cultural pluralism, cultural consciousness and social consciousness. However, some hold assimilationist ideologies while others present cultural diversity as a melting pot, which does not correspond to the values of Canadian multicultural mosaic society. We believe it is important to get children to think critically against ideologies that are proposed in multicultural books. As Cai (2008) pointed out, literature can help children to understand themselves and to be open to cultural diversity. In this regard, the role of parents, teachers and educators who are choosing children's books can be decisive. Adults should be well advised in order to support the development of critical thinking of the children they are responsible for.

Further research is needed to better define the ideologies that drive literature towards multiculturalism. This aspect of the research seems to have been largely neglected by Canadian researchers. In particular, it seems imperative to focus on the representation of First Nation people in children's literature. Being excluded from visible minorities, it seems that they deserve special attention in order to achieve a greater understanding of cultural representations in Canadian children's literature. Finally, since reading is a process of constructing meaning, it is important to conduct research with an interest in interpretations made by children who have the opportunity to be exposed to multicultural books. Since this literature leads to an opening to others, it would be interesting to see how it can influence social relationships in an environment where multicultural perspective is highly diversified.

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Table 1

Racial / Ethnic groups represented in picture books

Racial or ethnic group	Number of picture books (N=794)	
	n	(%)
Black	11	(1.39)
Hispanic	2	(0.25)
Maghrebi	4	(0.50)
Japanese	2	(0.25)
Chinese	4	(0.50)
Philippino	5	(0.63)
South-East Asian	4	(0.50)
West Asian	4	(0.50)
South Asian	0	(0.00)
Koreans	0	(0.00)
Multiples representations	7	(0.88)
White	731	(92.01)
Unknown	20	(2.52)

Table 2
Racial or ethnic origins of authors and illustrators

Racial or ethnic group	Author N=1,132 n (%)	Illustrator N=1,132 n (%)
Chinese	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)
South Asian	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)
Philippino	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)
South-East Asian	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)
West Asian	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)
Korean	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)
Japanese	1 (0.09)	2 (0.18)
Black	3 (0.27)	1 (0.09)
Hispanic	4 (0.35)	7 (0.62)
Maghrebi	8 (0.71)	20 (1.77)
White	1,086 (95.94)	1,060 (93.64)
Unknown	30 (2.65)	42 (3.71)