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CULTURE, IDENTITY AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Optimistic assertions about the significance of fiction in forming and maintaining children's personal and social identity are difficult to substantiate. Existing evidence from Northern Ireland that fiction has a meaningful role in this process is credible, if largely anecdotal and circumstantial. The necessary task of providing more substantive research evidence is theoretically and methodologically formidable.

The way in which people school their children is culturally diagnostic (Akenson, 1973, p.9).
Segregated schools stand as public proclamations of the cultural aspirations of each group (Murray, 1985, p.114).

It has often been asserted that the interaction between children and stories has powerful implications for personal and social development. For example, it has been suggested that we are 'at least in part, what we have read' (Spink, 1989, p.72). Similarly, 'the stories we tell our children, the narratives we give them to make sense of cultural experience, constitute a kind of mapping, maps of meaning that enable our children to make sense of the world. They contribute to children's sense of identity, an identity that is simultaneously personal and social' (Watkins, 1992, p.183). In one sense, of course, this is obvious. Children can only develop through their experience of the social and physical world and insofar as stories form part of that world they must surely play some part in the process of acculturation. And indeed there is some impressive evidence of a variety of types and styles that young readers' encounters with stories, both oral and written, many well be significant in the formation and maintenance of personal and social identity (good examples include Fry, 1985; Meek, 1988; Wells, 1987).

However, given that reading or hearing a story does not often produce an outcome in any simple, linear, cause-and-effect manner, the difficulty is not so

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much in demonstrating that there are important connections between children and the stories they encounter but rather in assessing the ways in which, and the extent to which, these interactions make a difference. How can stories and their implications be separated out from their interrelationships with all the vast range of historically and socially permeable institutions, organizations, structures, conventions, traditions, networks, rituals and routines, which together constitute the social context in which children are constantly immersed as they grow up? If, for example, it is asked how exactly reading or hearing stories contributes to the formation of children's political, religious, economic, cultural, or sexual affiliations and identities, the scale of the problem becomes clear. It is hard to imagine what kind of evidence could sensibly address a question of such intricacy and complexity.

CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Children growing up, in any society anywhere, learn about who they are and what their relationship is to the society of which they are a part, how they should think and act within a community; in other words, they develop an identity within a social context. Part of the process of learning who they are is also learning who they are not; that in some respects they are different from children in other historical, geographical, and social environments. However, in some relatively unusual circumstances, where the nature of society itself, how it is constituted, how individuals relate to it, even its legitimacy, are not taken for granted but bitterly contested, children may learn not only that they are different from children in other communities but that there is an 'us' and there is a 'them'. In such cases, members of other communities are not just seen as different but, to a greater or lesser degree, as threatening.

In Northern Ireland, although there is a serious risk that almost any simple statement is likely to be wrong or at least horribly misleading, such a distinction between two communities is fundamental. In a whole variety of ways, the group often labelled Protestant or Unionist is different, and sees itself as different, from that labelled Catholic or Nationalist. For example, members of the two communities are often geographically and residentially separate and have a different sense of nationality, dissimilar patterns of employment and unemployment, distinctive religious commitments, contrasting political affiliations, attend entirely separate schools, and even enjoy different sports and entertainments. As is well known, such divisions and divergences have their roots in the history of at least the last three hundred years and at times, notably in the last twenty-five years, they have led to ferocious conflict.

There is some evidence that children born and growing up in Northern Ireland learn about cultural differences at a very young age. A substantial series of varied

psychological research studies tracing such developments in children's awareness have been carried out. For example, one suggested that, by the age of ten, children can link first names with denominational adherence: names such as Robert and Susan being seen as distinctively Protestant, Sean and Bernadette as Catholic (Cairns, 1980). Another investigation showed that Protestant children believe that they live in a country called Northern Ireland, which has Belfast as its capital city, whereas Catholic children view themselves as living in Ireland, with Dublin as its capital (Robinson, 1971). Yet another study showed that about half of children aged six, and around three-quarters aged nine, had a clear, if naturally rather unsophisticated, understanding of what the terms Protestant and Catholic mean; and almost all could identify the group to which they themselves belonged (McWhirter & Gamble, 1982). Although, as Cairns (1987) points out in summarizing these and many other similar studies, there are methodological, ethical, and theoretical difficulties with much of this work, the cumulative evidence is hard to ignore: children are clearly learning about cultural and social differences between the two communities at a very young age.

Tracing the role of schools in this process is extraordinarily difficult and complicated. One reason for this is that there is not sufficient, or sufficiently persuasive, evidence, but, more significantly, much public discussion of the question rests on religious, social, and political commitment, rather than on dispassionate analysis. The issue is clearly highly contentious: for example, in the unlikely eventuality that it could be conclusively demonstrated that children's experience in schools directly contributes to community conflict, the implications for the organization and structure of education in the province would be immense.

Broadly, the evidence suggests that there are both similarities and differences between primary schools working within the two main education sectors, known as 'maintained' and 'controlled.' Almost all Catholic children attend maintained schools and almost all Protestant children, and some others, attend controlled schools. The striking and interesting differences between schools in the two sectors can lead to an underemphasis on the ways in which they are actually very similar (Darby et al, 1977). Both maintained and controlled schools teach the Northern Ireland Curriculum which is closely related to the National Curriculum in England and Wales; both are subject to the same external tests, notably the 11+ or transfer procedure; the day-to-day organization and management of both are very similar; and teachers' classroom practice often appears identical. In other words, much of children's experience in school, especially of the formal curriculum, is independent of sector; there may be differences in the teaching and learning of Mathematics from school to school, but not ones related to religious or cultural background. There are certainly a few curricular differences too: somewhat dissimilar religious education

programmes are used, children sometimes engage in different sporting activities, and Irish is only taught in maintained schools, if at all, but these differences are relatively minor in the context of the curriculum as a whole.

Significant differences between maintained and controlled schools are generally rather more subtle. In a case study of two physically close primary schools in a middle-sized market town, Murray (1985) demonstrated how different emblems, symbols, ceremonies, and rituals contributed to a conceptual, moral, and cultural gulf between the two, and how attitudes towards and stereotypes and prejudices about the other side were formed and maintained. For example, one very straightforward form of symbolic representation is that controlled schools fly the Union Jack outside the school whereas maintained schools routinely exhibit religious iconography such as statues, pictures, and crucifixes. The comments of teachers from the two schools are revealing:

> They fly the flag down there to show that they are more British than the British themselves. It is also to let us know that they are the lords and masters and we should be continually aware of it.
>
> I don't know why you are making such a fuss about the flag. Why should we apologise for flying it? We are a state school and the flag is the emblem of the state ... Would you rather we flew the tricolour or the hammer and sickle?
>
> I never fail to be impressed by the plethora of religious pictures and icons staring at you around every corner ... They must know that these are the very things that we object to, yet still they are flaunted everywhere.
>
> We are a Catholic school. Statues and pictures are part of the Catholic way of life. They are in this school for the benefit of the people within the school, not for any outsiders who might visit us. If they take offence well that's too bad but it is also irrelevant. I think that it's typical of the general Protestant approach to Catholics ... I think they would prefer that we didn't exist at all (Murray, 1985, p. 69-71, 113-4).

Similarly, Murray shows how other symbols, rituals, and circumstances are differently treated and viewed by teachers and to some extent by children too: attitudes to prize days, the monarchy, the police, poppy day, local authorities, support for football teams, and outlook on religion and politics, are all dissimilar. He concludes that the two schools epitomize incompatible and irreconcilable cultural assumptions, because each represents the community it serves.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

If it is very difficult to assess the extent to which primary schools contribute to, or merely reflect, the social context which they exemplify, it is even harder to assess the role of children's reading or the literature which they read in this process. There is simply very little relevant evidence. The only relatively wide-

ranging investigation of the use of children's literature in Northern Ireland analysed questionnaire responses from some 400 primary schools. The study argued that generally teachers in primary schools of either persuasion, and especially and markedly those working with younger children, make rather little use of children's literature in the sense of novels and stories in their classroom practice. The evidence suggests that many such teachers believe that reading schemes and the materials associated with them provide a sufficient and adequate reading diet. When teachers of 6- and 7-year olds were asked what novels and stories they used with their children, the ten most common responses all related to materials linked with reading schemes, apart from two books by Roald Dahl (*Fantastic Mr Fox* and *The Magic Finger*). Picture books of any kind were only rather rarely mentioned in responses. With older children, although books about or set in Ireland, especially those by Walter Macken, were occasionally listed by maintained schools, none was particularly popular compared to the ubiquitous Roald Dahl and favourite old warhorses such as *The Silver Sword, Charlotte's Web,* and *Stig of the Dump* (Marriott, 1986).

Some suggestions have been made that textbooks, especially in the teaching of History and to a lesser extent Geography, adopt different approaches, depending on whether they are sourced in Britain or Ireland (e.g., Akenson, 1973). Murray (1985) provides no evidence specifically about textbooks, but he does indicate that the maintained school he studied tended to order books published by Irish publishers, which were unknown in the controlled school, and he also provides examples of characteristically different religious texts available for children's reading in the two schools. He goes on to point to the different focuses of books in the school library:

> In Rathlin the vast majority of such books were strongly British in content. Books such as *The Plague and Fire of London, Gunpowder Plot, Warwick John and Magna Carta, The Crusade, Great Men and Women from Britain's Past, Norman Britain, Roman Britain, The Book of London, Come to London* and *This is London* were typical ...
>
> (In St. Judes) the bulk of such books tended to emphasis an all-Ireland or Nationalist culture - *O'Connell Man and Boy, The Republic of Ireland, Ancient History of Ireland, Tales of Irish Enchantment, The Charm of Ireland, Irish Myth and Magic, Ireland from Old Photographs* were typical (p. 57).

Beyond this very limited empirical evidence about the reading matter available in schools, there is only personal observation and anecdote: that, for example, *The Children of God* series of religious texts is omnipresent in maintained schools but is never seen in controlled schools, and that while all primary schools use one or more reading schemes with young children,

maintained schools sometimes use ones published in Ireland whereas controlled schools always use schemes produced in England or Scotland. Similarly, while teachers of older primary-school children in maintained schools occasionally made use of Irish myths and legends or novels such as *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (about the Irish Famine), in controlled schools the choice is much more likely to be something like *Carrie's War* (about the evacuation of children from London during the war). Further, atlases may represent Ulster as part of the United Kingdom or as contiguous with the Irish Republic, and Northern Ireland's second city may be referred to in texts as Derry or as Londonderry. And so on, and so on.

RESPONSES TO CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

One study exists which considers some 10- and 11-year old children's cultural assumptions in the context of their voluntary reading of Joan Lingard's novel *The Twelfth Day of July*, which is about inter-communal conflict in Belfast in the early years of the recent so-called 'troubles.' In the story, the principal girl character, Sadie, is a Protestant, and the leading boy, Kevin, is a Catholic. Generally one would expect children of this age to identify with the most important character of their own gender, but not necessarily in this case. Two children discussed who they liked best in the story:

(Protestant boys)

Pupil 1:	Er I liked Sadie.
Interviewer:	Sadie?
Pupil 1:	Yes - she was tough.
Interviewer:	Ah you thought she was tough did you?
Pupil 1:	She was tough.
Pupil 2:	I liked Linda an' Sadie they were alright.
Pupil 1:	An' Tommy.
Interviewer:	Tommy yeah - why did you think Sadie was tough in it?
Pupil 1:	'Cos she always fought the boys an' all she didn't care.
	(Marriott, 1985, p. 57)

In this example, not only Sadie, but other relatively minor Protestant characters in the book were discussed with approbation and Kevin is not mentioned at all. In contrast, when Catholic boys were interviewed, and religion and gender were mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory, only Kevin (and his friend Brian) were considered and approved. Later on, many of the children discussed the wider implications of the story. While some continued to take a partisan approach, others reflected thoughtfully on the issues:

(Protestant boys)

Pupil 1: The part about the Catholics catching Sadie ... I didn't think they would do that there.
Nah.
Pupil 2: 'Cos I think they're decent people.
Pupil 1:

(Catholic boys)

Pupil 1: I thought it was y'know a bit funny the way they didn't go in the parade just 'cos y'know 'cos y'know they were loyalists and you'd think they wouldn't miss the twelfth for anything.
Interviewer: Well why didn't they go on the parade?
Pupil 1: They just felt y'know sick about Brede y'know normally they would go y'know - y'know boys that throw bricks at each other an' they don't care if they hit a person normally.
Interviewer: So you didn't think it was very realistic?
Pupil 1: Och y'know it was a bit 'cos y'know Sadie she liked oh Brede y'know 'cos o' the day she gave Brede gave her tea in the house.
Pupil 2: I didn't think they would go to the beach. I didn't think they'd be that friendly.
Pupil 1: On the twelfth especially.
Interviewer: Yes yes.
Pupil 1: It was funny - y'see when the police came you'd think they'd just run they just y'know stayed there - normally if it's Protestants and Catholics y'know fighting just y'know squirt when they hear the sirens - they just stayed.

(Protestant boy)

Interviewer: Whose fault was it?
Pupil: None of them were in the right.
Interviewer: None of them were in the right?
Pupil: Because it was their boths faults there were two faults because they shouldn't have started it in the first place anyway and er the Catholics the Kevin and that did it first so I think that um Kevin and that did it more than what Sadie and that did it because Sadie was only paying them back what they did and I think the both of them weren't doing the right thing. (Marriott, 1985, p. 59-60).

In each of these quotations children seem to be working at the reconciliation of a 'them' and 'us' view of the world with the contrasting idea that in some respects at least they might be much the same as us; many children made comments such as 'they're decent people' (often with the hint of an implicit subtext 'but not as good as us') which encapsulates the tensions of such a view. Similarly, in the final quotation a Protestant boy tries to come to terms with the perception on the one hand that the Catholic children 'started it' and thus, according to the common code of children, deserved 'paying back,' and, on the other hand, the idea that both groups were in the wrong.

EDUCATION FOR MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING?

Although seeking to understand the historical and cultural causes of the conflict in Northern Ireland is obviously a valid and useful enterprise, there is not a lot of mileage in attempting to apportion blame, and in particular there is little point in confronting either the maintained or the controlled sector of education with its limitations and arguing for a merger; that is not going to happen. But it is surely undeniable that schools have a role to play, even if it is only a limited one and even if it is difficult to delineate precisely, in children's basic socialization and acculturation, and thus the search for ways in which they can contribute something to a fairer, less antagonistic, and more peaceful society is worthwhile. In the last ten years or so, attempts have been made to find means by which schools can do this. The first approach has been the formation of a third 'integrated' education sector within which new schools have been founded and one or two existing schools have changed their status, in order deliberately and self-consciously to enable Protestant and Catholic children to be educated together (see Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, 1995). This sector is healthy and growing, but is still very small and, for the foreseeable future, the vast majority of children will continue to be educated in separate maintained or controlled schools. The second development has been the inclusion of Education for Mutual Understanding (popularly known as EMU) and Cultural Heritage as two of the four 'cross-curricular themes' within the legislated Northern Ireland Curriculum for primary schools, and thus compulsory elements of all schools' programmes. EMU includes a variety of topics, such as bullying, disability, racial and sexual stereotypes, family relationships, and so on, but it also includes consideration of such issues as nationality, community, and social conflict, and inter-school contacts and joint projects of various kinds are encouraged (Northern Ireland. Department of Education, 1992; see also Northern Ireland Council for Educational Development, 1988). In addition, and crucially, extra money has been made

available for schools that are willing to engage in ventures which incorporate links with schools from another sector.

The extent of meaningful shared activity is difficult to assess, and has probably been rather limited so far, particularly in geographical areas of the most tension and conflict. At its least effective, co-operation between schools seems to have extended only to joint completion of the grant application; at its best, real and valuable links have been forged. One hopeful sign is that the recent proposals for the revision and slimming down of the Northern Ireland curriculum (Northern Ireland Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, 1995) were criticized by schools for their apparent neglect of the cross-curricular themes, which were therefore re-inserted in the final version (Northern Ireland. Department of Education, 1996), which schools were required to implement from September 1996.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND EMU

There are many picture books which deal with aspects of children's behaviour, relationships, feelings, and problems, and with topics such as the family, animal welfare, and conservation, but social and national conflict is not such a common theme. Examples do exist, like some of the work of David McKee (*Two Monsters*), Michael Foreman (*War and Peas*), and Raymond Briggs (*When the Wind Blows*), but these are relatively rare. There are, as far as I know, no picture books which deal specifically with conflict in Northern Ireland. However, there are several very well known novels for older children set in the province which take account of the hostilities, such as Joan Lingard's *The Twelfth Day of July* and sequels, Peter Carter's *Under Goliath*, and Catherine Sefton's *Starry Night* and sequels. These books have all remained in print for extended periods and therefore presumably sell well, but there is no empirical evidence about the extent of their readership and use in schools in Northern Ireland.

One interesting recent development has been the production of resources specifically for EMU and Cultural Heritage by the Northern Ireland Centre for Learning Resources. Most of the material available so far is historical, geographical, or religious in its orientation, and much of it is intended for children of post-primary age. However, two useful collections of stories for younger children, taken from Northern Ireland schools' radio broadcasts, have recently been published. Both are edited by Sam McBratney, who is a primary school teacher in the province and also the author of many mainstream children's books. *Today & Yesterday*, for example, consists of a very varied and attractively illustrated collection of local stories: memories of growing up in rural Ulster and especially the experience of school, what it is like to be a

member of an ethnic minority group, different kinds of family life, the experience of emigration, and so on. Once again, however, no evidence exists regarding readership in schools.

CONCLUSION

That children growing up in Northern Ireland are immersed in the culture of one of two disparate communities is hardly hot news. Nor is it particularly surprising if texts in the broadest sense, including fiction and non-fiction but also the emblems, symbols, images, and iconography that are found in schools, reflect to some extent the social and cultural context in which they are embedded. What is much more difficult to assess is the role texts, and more generally the experience of school as a whole, play in the development of children's basic social beliefs and commitments. If, for example, such ideas are substantially formed within the home, the church, and the peer group, schools may do no more than passively fail to challenge the assumptions on which they are based. Alternatively, it is possible, even likely, that the role of schools is much more active and dynamic, a process in which cultural elements are mutually reinforcing. The belief that the latter is the case has influenced recent structural and curricular developments in the school system.

Rather little hard evidence exists which considers the ways in which children in primary schools in Northern Ireland interact with literature, although intuitively and anecdotally it can be argued plausibly that the experience of fiction is of relevance to children's personal and social development. Establishing empirically the extent and significance of children's encounters with stories is a theoretically and methodologically formidable enterprise. But if stories are really as important as we often say they are, bland and optimistic assertions that reading is good for children, in any or all possible ways, are no longer sufficiently persuasive.

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