

Snuggling-In: Disrupting Quality in Picture Books

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It is hard to say what effect the books we read in childhood have on our later life, but we all know they do have an effect - in images that will not be erased, in people as real as those we know, in conversations heard as echoes. (Brown, 1986, p. 46)

As a child, I can remember the warmth of my mother's arms wrapped around me as I snuggled into her on the rocking chair. My mother's lap and the gentle rocking motion lulled me into a cherished comfort where I felt love and safety. Then the anticipated moment would arrive when she opened the pages to reveal a story, my favorite story, *The Poky Little Puppy* (Lowrey, 1942). A tale about five little puppies including a poky little puppy who continuously got into mischief. My favorite part of the book was the dessert that was waiting for the puppies each day. My mother, a home baker, involved us in regular dessert preparations. The opportunity to whip up a recipe was coveted in our home because the lucky child invited to mix the ingredients enjoyed licking the beaters. We shared in the excitement of breaking the eggs, pouring the sugar, and sticking a toothpick in to check if the center of the cake was done. These domestic literate (Mackey, 2016; Nason & Hunt, 1999) encounters shared with Mom linger in my heart and on my taste buds. I remember the sense of accomplishment these experiences evoked as a child. "In important and invisible ways, the environment that the information gleaned from the reading is taken away into becomes part of the scaffold of the literate event" (Mackey, 2016, p. 170).

Later in life, in my early childhood positions, I perused bookshelves whenever I had the opportunity. In homes receiving early intervention services, I noticed that book of the month club books were favored due to access and the small monthly financial obligation. On shelves at the Early Intervention Office, a variety of books were included; however, I found myself continuing to choose the books that would expand on a child's interest or allow them to marvel at the images or words—silent award winners in children's hearts. Entering early childhood centres, I viewed stark difference: cramped shelves filled with damaged books, baskets with books accessible to all the children, and educators' favorites tucked away out of reach of children. The books varied from award winners, wordless yard sale finds, picture books with designated reading levels, and religious books. This left me wondering what intentionality educators practice when they provide books for children.

In my preliminary research, early childhood educators reported that they chose texts from observed play, events occurring in children's lives and re-occurring interests. Educators intentionally chose funny texts for children's interest in humour and fairy tales as a way to escape. In practice, books are chosen to expand on children's interest, such as hockey, but also selected based on children's daily activity levels, loss of a preferred book, or lack of organization. For example, on two occasions an educator planned to read a specific book but couldn't find it. Educators' intentionality and classroom practice may differ.

The common thread through all my positions was the importance placed on Caldecott award winning books. Early interventionists and early childhood centres alike promoted the newest winner with the hopes of changing a child's educational future. The promise of literary success forms society's definition of "quality"; however, I noticed that due to the cost of award-winning

books, they were often kept inaccessible to maintain their new condition. I wondered if this narrative of quality books limit selection. If children's reading desires counted as a measure of quality, would the reach of quality expand? By allowing medal winners to define quality, are we silencing and marginalizing other readers, authors, and illustrators? In my own home I read a variety of books with my children, expanding on their interests and favorite adventures; Caldecott books were included sometimes if the topic fit, but they weren't a priority.

While researching literacy practices in early childhood, the importance of children's ongoing relationships with books was a central theme. The term quality was reiterated many times in the research, by educators, directors and the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development as a measure of books. In this paper, I trouble quality as a way to expand literacy practices. Quality is a contested term in reconceptualizing educational practices (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). The story of quality gets simplified to quality equals success. If children are read quality books, they will read better, faster, smarter. The story of quality, however, is only one narrative. Embracing the concept of meaning making moves educators and researchers beyond the limitations produced by the quality discourse toward an engagement of complexity that values children's passions.

Given my research, *The Poky Little Puppy* (1942) might not be considered a quality text; however, as I re-read this book, I'm called back to my Mom, hearing the echoes of our shared readings and the domestic literacies in which we participated. Mem Fox (2008) states that "any books that children own and love are good books for them" (p. 135). The reader's emphasis and enthusiasm brought to sharing these books brings them alive, but I wondered if there was a particular way I could judge a book's

quality by looking at it or reading it. Initially, I hoped that I could share this knowledge with early childhood educators so they too could pick up a book and know it was just right for children. I anticipated that the texts educators presented would let children fall in love with the stories and begin to imagine how their stories might be composed in multi-modal forms in interaction with the picture books they loved.

When I began to search for the definition of a “quality” book, I thought I would find a single answer or criterion. With a critical lens, my first step was to review the *Randolph Caldecott Medal Committee Manual* (2009). The committee’s definition for Caldecott award winners is: “picture books for children, distinguished, marked by eminence and distinction, noted for significant achievement, excellence in quality and original work” (Association for Library Services to Children [ALSC], 2009, p. 10). Reflecting on one Caldecott winner’s comments, I thought the definition used for Caldecott awards did not always reflect the chosen winners. The Association for Library Services to Children who adopted the manual state “A ‘picture book for children’ is one for which children are an intended potential audience” (2009, p. 10). However, as many illustrators and authors, including Maurice Sendak, state, “I don’t think there is such a thing as actually a book for children” (as cited in Stewart, 2012, 2:27). Picture books are books for readers, which leads one to ask if multi-generational appeal is an indicator of quality.

The term “original work” holds great importance in the requirements for a Caldecott award, however, authors and illustrators are constantly stimulated by the world around them. Inspired by media in childhood, David Wiesner, a three-time Caldecott winner has stated that he noticed that the speech of the bugs in *Mr. Wuffles* (2013) is identical to Woodstock’s speech in Charlie Brown, and his placement of vegetables in *June 29, 1999*

(1992) mirror the images in Sci-Fi movies from his teenage years. Likewise, Ludwig Bemelmans presented Madeline to the world in the *Golden Basket* (1936) for which he won a Newberry Honor and later won a 1954 Caldecott Medal for re-introducing her in *Madeline's Rescue* (1954), thus troubling the idea of original work through the recycling of characters. It seems writers, young and old, borrow, transfer, and remake texts they have consumed across their life.

After reviewing Caldecott's definitions, I wondered who decides a book is "marked for eminence and distinction" or "excellence in quality" especially "excellence of presentation in recognition of a child audience" (ALSC, 2009, p.10). Maurice Sendak disrupts these vague qualities with his statement:

The books for which I am best known are atypical of children's books... For example, *Pierre the boy who always says, "I don't care"* is a juvenile anarchist. "He's a real favorite with children," says Sendak. "He's saying 'F— you' in his own way." Max, the boy in *Wild Things* is the kid who explodes rather than swallow his anger and behave himself. He's the kid who makes a mess. "Kids love making messes." (as cited in Stoler, 2012, para. 9)

I also wondered how children are constructed as audience members. I pondered the outcome where a child's text desires and passions challenged the adults. I wondered how might adults learn from children about their passionate connections to specific texts. Mac Barnett (2017) summed up an adult's objection to their own discomfort of a topic or the adult's vision of childhood only allows them to see children in a certain view:

Too often, the term 'kid friendly' is used to club down books that threaten *adults*. And when we too tightly circumscribe the biblioverse of children, who are trying to discover the kinds of books they'll spend their whole lives

reading, it's not just patronizing and insulting, It's downright unethical. (La Bibliothèque, para. 2)

Based on Caldecott's list of recommended resource books for reviewers, I began to research each resource with the anticipation of uncovering the quality code. I questioned how reviewers looked objectively at a new book to determine if it met all criteria of award-winning books. Can a reviewer ever look objectively at any book given my subjective relationship with *The Poky Little Puppy* (1942)? The placement of images in picture books creates power relationships and evokes emotions. The use of shapes, colors, and textures promotes associations and emotional connections. A single image creates tension; however, our response to images is unique. The integration and playful disruption of text and illustration, in conversation with our own histories, creates meaningful picture books. I wonder how this artistic complexity gets reduced by the term quality.

The justification for Caldecott's status of quality is the determinant that they have met some predetermined measure, but many texts would be silenced or ignored through this process. Given the diversity of viewers within any society, I wonder how a single committee can judge the worth of a children's picture book. "Jack Zipes would write, 'We have tried to 'nourish' children by feeding them literature that we think is appropriate for them. Or, put another way, we have manipulated them... to think or not to think about the world around them'" (Bird, Danielson, & Sieruta, 2014, p. 15). How have we as adults been manipulated to think or not think about the texts we consume?

Pence and Moss (1994) theorize that, "Quality... is a constructed concept, subjective in nature and based on values, beliefs, and interests, rather than an objective and universal reality" (p. 172). The term subjective spoke to me, and I wondered how the term quality changed from being subjective to objective—from a

dialogue of choices to a standard of excellence. Neoliberalism has promoted a relationship of competition that has extended to education where children's and parents' reading passions fade away to be consumers that rely on the rules and advice of experts. If the advice of experts is followed such as the chosen quality books, reading success will follow.

Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999) argue the term quality was a movement that began in the business world to quantify business production. Much like many business terms, it was adopted by education to quantify children's learning and educators' teaching. "The point of education is not to maximize profit, it is to maximize human potential...human potential is this beautiful, gloriously messy, inchoate thing that can never have one solution" (Adichie, 2018).

One solution is that an award should not determine the quality of a book. One of those tattered, much-loved books may have been the familiar story of a long-gone grandfather or the twisty words in an adult's poetry book may delight a child again and again. Quality is subjective. No one book can fulfill everyone's interests and wonderings, but I think it is also bigger than the book. The enthusiasm of an educator as s/he shares a favorite story can quickly spread to a child. The familiar routine of bedtime with a book can heighten appreciation.

The mechanism of quality silences the relationality of readers and fails to attend to the sensory-heart-mind body/interaction of texts. *The Poky Little Puppy* (1942) was a Little Golden book that sold for 25 cents on grocery store shelves. Although it did not win any official awards or hold the stamp of medal on its cover, it held special honours in my heart and my relationship to books. The term quality silences the snuggling in my Mom's lap and the shared baking routines that created a warmth in my heart for this book. My love for the book was not

determined by the words, artwork or awards but by the time and love that was shared in those moments. “It’s the stories that make us think and feel, laugh aloud or cry, gasp or shiver, snuggle in, or want to share that which makes us want to read and keep on reading” (Fox, as cited in Shannon & Goodman, 1994, p. 154).

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