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Ideology Issues

Janice Bland

Ideology refers to socially acquired and shared thought and belief systems that underlie social practices and lived experience. These are often unconscious and embedded in group interests. The two main research areas that are intertwined in the journal *Children's Literature in English Language Education* – research on children's and young adult literary texts in educational contexts and English language teaching – are naturally immersed in ideology issues, as international discourse and texts from around the world are relevant for both fields. English, at least in school settings, is centrally and crucially located both in education and in global issues, so that pedagogy and ideology are inextricably linked.

Ideology implies habits of thought; these may be unexamined assumptions that are taken for granted. A neutral, non-pejorative understanding of ideology refers to concepts like ideas, beliefs, attitudes, discourse and context, and, according to Teun van Dijk (1998, p. 11), 'not only provides a more solid framework for a critical approach, but also allows comparison among different kinds of ideologies'. Alistair Pennycook (1999, p. 346) sees critical approaches to ELT 'rather as complex clusters of social, cultural, political, and pedagogical concerns' and 'located at the very heart of some of the most crucial educational, cultural, and political issues of our time'.

In children's literature scholarship, ideology is a central concern. All texts, wherever and whenever they are produced, are pervaded by ideology, which of course will influence the reader, who may be young and very impressionable. Naturally, this also applies to coursebooks for ELT and textbooks for whatever age group and topic. An ideology close to that of the reader appears invisible, and yet can be highly manipulative: 'Ideologies can thus function most powerfully in books which reproduce beliefs and assumptions of which authors and readers are largely unaware' (McCallum & Stephens, 2011, p. 360). Children's literature scholar John Stephens (2010, p. 192) writes 'an ideology-free text is unthinkable'. He then goes on to reflect that 'many overtly interrogative texts also encourage audiences to think critically about the ideals they advocate because all ideologies are socially and historically contingent'.

In contrast to the quite widely held research interests into ideology in children's literature scholarship, in ELT 'a widespread naturalized assumption in the field', according to Seyyed-Abdolhamid Mirhosseini (2018, p. 5), 'is that pedagogical traditions are based on no ideological beliefs'. Mirhosseini outlines 'how the mainstream ideology has continued to survive and reproduce itself through self-proclaimed non-ideological focus on professional and pedagogical purposes' (2018, p. 6). This can indeed often be observed in the practice of English teaching in schools and at university, even if it does not truly represent the theory of ELT since Pennycook's observation more than two decades ago: 'I like to see critical



approaches always in flux, always questioning, restively problematizing aware of the limits of their own knowing, and bringing into schemas of politicisation' (1999, p. 346).

A student's agency is strongly connected to ideology issues. Paulo Freire is the great 20th century educator who immediately comes to mind when considering the agency of students, his insistence on empowering their imaginations, their learning to read both the word and the world as the way to be fully integrated in the struggle for critical agency and social justice. According to Freire (1985, p. 19), critical pedagogy begins already with young children, who 'should come full of spontaneity – with their feelings, with their questions, with their creativity, with their risk to create, getting their own words "into their own hands" in order to do beautiful things with them. The basis for critical reading in young children is their curiosity'.

Within the research areas of ELT and children's literature research, I suggest a definition of agency as follows (Bland 2022, in press): 'Agency refers to the capacity of students, and any individuals, to act with self-determination. Limitations to agency and autonomy are often regulated by gatekeeping institutions, which can be influenced by gender, ethnicity, age, social class, religion and so forth'. How students are positioned is determined to some extent by the imposition of ideology; for example, an individual's subject position is partly constructed at different times through peer groups, social class, ethnicity and gender expectations, but also through texts they read. Questions on canonical literature in school and university are also connected to ideology. Who prescribes texts for ELT in school settings and at university? Are they too aligned with dominant cultural groups, with the West, potentially with 'dead White men'? Ideological concerns that have recently been addressed in *Children's Literature in English Language Education* include global education, native-speakerism, Othering, #ownvoices, We Need Diverse Books, gender issues, racism and ethnicity, LGBTQ+ issues, multilingualism and interculturality.

The three articles in this issue help develop an awareness of ideological issues. With the first, Werner Delanoy and Iris van der Horst's paper 'Transhumanism, Language Education and Young Adult Literature: Neal Shusterman's *Arc of a Scythe* Trilogy', the topic of biologically improved humans is addressed. The authors consider how critical engagement





with a popular, but somewhat dystopian utopia (the trilogy may not be quite as convincing as a utopia as Shusterman meant it to be) can lead students to (self-)critical reflection and participation in a complex ideological debate.

The next article is contributed by Ariane Manutscheri. With her paper, “‘Your now is not your forever’: Destigmatizing Mental Health through Young Adult Literature’, Manutscheri takes up a topic that is ever more urgent in our Coronavirus times. There is no doubt that the neglect of care for mental health problems, in comparison to physical health, is an ideological issue that is connected to prejudice, stereotyping, ableism, and Othering of neurodiversity. Manutscheri explores opportunities for destigmatizing the topic of mental illness with the aid of John Green’s *Turtles All the Way Down*, and sensitively guides the reader with viable classroom discussion ideas on mental health in English language classrooms.

Jena Habegger-Conti’s article, “‘Where am I in the text?’ Standing with Refugees in Graphic Narratives’, studies three graphic narratives from a critical visual literacy perspective, interrogating and demonstrating positions of privilege in the texts. Habegger-Conti examines opportunities for students’ ethical encounter with two Somalian brothers and fellow refugees who spend their childhood and youth in a camp, in the #ownvoices graphic narrative, Victoria Jamieson and Omar Mohamed’s *When Stars are Scattered*. The author includes questions for informed classroom discussion, aimed at supporting students in recognizing the interconnectedness of all humans.

David Valente contributes this issue’s book review on *Exploring Challenging Picturebooks in Education*, edited by Å. M. Ommundsen, G. Haaland and B. Kümmerling-Meibauer. Their edited volume offers contributions on encounters with carefully selected picturebooks that challenge the student to more complex and nuanced readings, interpretations and understandings.

This issue also offers a tribute to the much-loved picturebook creator, Eric Carle (1929-2021), introduced by David Valente, and with enchanting introductions to four of Carle’s classic picturebooks contributed by Wendy Arnold, Tatia Gruenbaum, Emily MacFarlane and Romina Mangini.



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