

Good impressions—and bad

Peter Carver

Résumé: *L'auteur fait le point sur le retrait en 1992 de la série Impressions dans une école élémentaire de Manning, en Alberta. Il fait ressortir le fait que l'intimidation est la tactique préférée des groupes de pression, qu'elle trouve ses appuis et son encadrement dans les milieux fondamentalistes américains et que son efficacité est telle, qu'elle démoralise les adversaires et réduit quasi à néant la liberté de lire.*

On May 8, 1992, Manning Elementary school in Manning, Alberta, decided to remove the *Impressions* reading series from its Grade 1 to 3 curriculum. On the surface this was an unexceptional decision, reached by an orderly process involving a committee of parents, teachers, trustees and board officials. As one board official said, it was close to the “ideal” method of resolving a discussion about curriculum materials to be used in the schools. One irony was that concern over *Impressions* began with complaints about material contained in books for grades four to six; these books were not being used at the Manning Elementary School.

So there is a sub-text to this apparently orderly process. At the beginning of the 1991-2 school year Rosary School was marked by vigilante-ism, the bypassing of due process, the resignation of an experienced teacher, and the intimidation of a community by a small minority. More ominously on another level, this appeared to be just one reflection of the concerted attempt by fundamentalist religious organizations to control the public school system in Canada and the United States.

A previous chapter in the Manning story occurred one early September day in 1991 at another school in the small town of Manning, almost 600 kilometres northwest of Edmonton. This time it was Rosary Catholic School, where a small but determined mob of 30 parents showed up to object to the *Impressions* series. Their demand was that the principal immediately eliminate the books, which were being used in Grades 1 to 3. By the time the day was over, the parents had entered the school, threatened the principal and staff, tied up the phones, and even warned they would burn the books on the spot unless they were immediately removed. It was the culmination of months of conflict over the use of the much-praised Canadian reading series.

Within a couple of days, the Catholic school board held a tele-conference and

instructed the school superintendent to remove the books—reversing a previous decision the board had reached, in consultation with parents, teachers, and the Alberta Department of Education which has endorsed the series for use in all Alberta elementary schools. Another reading series would be substituted—at a cost of \$7,000. At this point, the Grade 1 teacher at Rosary school resigned, distraught at having parents of children she taught turn on her. The school's principal, shaken by the tactics used by the mob and the board's decision, wondered whether he should sell his house and move out of the community where he had been principal for 17 years. [For more information about these events, see the article by Elizabeth MacCallum entitled "U.S. fundamentalists blamed for dispute."]

An organization known as Parents for Quality Education has its provincial headquarters in Calgary, and its objective is to coach parents in methods of challenging the use of certain curriculum materials in Alberta schools. Observers feel that the real aim of the organization is to take control of the schools.

That an educational reading series should cause such extraordinary behaviour is difficult to believe. The emphasis in this and other educational reading series has been to move away from the controlled vocabulary, phonics-based basal readers which used to blanket the elementary school system in North America. Dr. Booth talks about the importance of *story* as a way of drawing children into reading. For teachers who have worked with children and with literature in the classroom for years, the whole language approach makes sense. Like any pedagogical philosophy, whole language and the materials which have been created to apply its theories need to be adapted to the practical needs of each classroom and community. The intelligent classroom teacher probably uses a combination of phonics and whole language in teaching reading.

In Manning, Alberta, teachers at the public and Catholic schools had been using the *Impressions* series since the fall of 1989. When controversy began, it wasn't the pedagogy of the series which caused trouble. Rather it was accusations that the series contained satanic symbols, messages of death, the occult, witchcraft, and devil-worship. Among the more bizarre objections to emerge from these campaigns is that the "u" in the word "colour" is actually a satanic sign (spelling in the books is Canadian rather than American).

The list of objections is identical with those identified by national organizations in the U.S.—such as Citizens for Excellence in Education, the Traditional Values Coalition, the American Family Law Association, and the Christian Educators Association International. These are large, well-funded bodies which have been fighting running battles with the *Impressions* series for years.

The events in Manning demonstrate that the kind of confrontational tactics long in use in the U.S. have now moved across the border. The campaign against the *Impressions* series has surfaced in a number of communities across Canada. But the misinformation which fuels such attacks originates in brochures produced in the United States.

Because of research carried out during the fall of 1991, the story of Manning, Alberta, became known across Canada. An account of the events was carried in the newsletter of The Writers Union of Canada. Most significantly, CBC TV's *Fifth Estate* aired an item on the controversy surrounding *Impressions*, with particular reference to the Alberta context, in late 1991.

The sad truth is that, when 30 parents pre-empted the authority of the school and the school board on that morning in September 1991, no one was there to defend the freedom to read. No one was there to assert the rights of children in that school to have access to reading materials chosen for them by professional educators. Rather, ignorance and misinformation and intellectual hooliganism ruled the day. It was the most destructive stage in a series of events which included schoolyard confrontations between children from opposing camps and parental abuse of teachers in Rosary Catholic School. When asked why he didn't call the police to dispel the crowd that gathered at this school that day, the school superintendent said he felt it would be better for his school and community not to escalate events any further. Indeed, much damage had already been done.

A community has been fractured, the freedom to read has been abrogated in Manning, the life of Manning's schools and teachers has been severely damaged. A small band of agitators has demonstrated that it can make an elected school board yield to its wishes through tactics which go beyond any semblance of legal action.

And, across Canada, schools and teachers and parents should be warned—Manning may be a precursor of what can occur in many communities here, a microcosm of what has already happened on a much larger scale in many American states. One battle has been lost, and the war is not over.

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This article is excerpted from the 1993 *Freedom to Read* kit published by the Book and Periodical Council. The kit is available each year through the BPC, 35 Spadina Road, Toronto, Ontario, M5R 2S9. Tel: (416) 975-9366, Fax: (416) 975-1839.