

Towards a Better Future: How Engage Books Creates
Books That Make a Difference

by
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B.A. (English) Simon Fraser University, 2019



Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Publishing

in the
Publishing Program
Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology

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Simon Fraser University
Spring 2021



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Declaration of Committee



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Abstract



This report looks at the changing landscape of Engage Books as they switch their focus from publishing classic titles to publishing children's books under the mandate 'books that make a difference,' and the tactics they are implementing to push boundaries within the children's publishing industry. To provide context as to where Engage Books stands as an independent children's publisher, the report gives a brief overview of the history of the acceptability of sensitive topics in children's literature and the relationship between censorship and small presses. Engage Books has adopted the philosophy that it is easier to shape the minds of children than it is to change the minds of those who are already set in their ways, and thus, has begun introducing previously censored information and major world crises to children in an attempt to help the next generation become informed and engaged citizens who can help create a better society.

Keywords: Engage Books, small press publishing, children's publishing, censorship

Acknowledgements



I am so grateful to have worked with a company as wonderful as Engage Books. Thank you, Alexis Roumains, for being so kind and encouraging and inviting me to be a part of something I truly believe in.

A huge thank you to my partner, Andreas Mock, for supporting me and making me write this paper, even when I felt I was at my wit's end. I would also like to thank his mother, Marianne Mock, for inviting me into her home during the Covid-19 pandemic and getting Andreas off my back when she could see I needed a break.

Thank you to my mom and dad, for always encouraging me and supporting me when I decided to go back to school. I could not have done this without your help.

To my sister Kelsey, thank you for helping me procrastinate!

To the Andrews family, thank you for always being there and being so understanding of the years between visits.

Finally, to the faculty and staff of the Master of Publishing program, thank you for being so understanding and willing to make work-arounds for anyone in the program struggling with mental health or other personal issues. It is really unique to find such lovely people.

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1. Introduction



Juvenile and young adult literature is one of the highest grossing genres in the publishing industry. Yet the publishing experts have always struggled to maintain a concrete idea of what is and is not appropriate content for children: Should young children be taught about birth and death? Should they be exposed to violence? How young is too young to learn about humanity's plights? Many children's authors and publishers have tried to censor certain concepts, while others try to publish a range of diverse topics and opinions. Engage Books, a small independent children's publisher based in Oliver, B.C., hopes to foster discussions and push boundaries with their children's books in order to help children become informed, participating citizens. Because children's books are a relatively new venture for Engage Books, many of their tactics are experimental, meaning there is a lot of freedom to test new ideas and concepts.

During my internship with Engage Books over the summer of 2020, I primarily focused on writing two environmental series, *Animals That Make a Difference (ATMAD)* and *I Can Help Save Earth (ICHSE)*, for a total of 23 books. The *ATMAD* books give an overview of a specific animal and describe how that animal helps Earth, other animals, and humans. The *ICHSE* books follow a similar structure, each describing a major world problem relating to issues such as water or energy and how pollution from or adding pollution to these things affects Earth, animals, and humans. The *ATMAD* series is divided into two different reader levels. Level 1 books are aimed at children aged 3-6 and level 2 books are aimed at children aged 4-8. The *ICHSE* books are all level 2 books.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the ways in which Engage Books discusses serious and occasionally controversial topics in children's books by taking an in-depth look at the thought process behind the content creation of their new children's books that make a difference. The report will begin by providing context for the main portion of the paper through a brief overview of the history of shifting attitudes in children's publishing in England, a major publishing hub during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, regarding what is and is not appropriate for children to read, and small presses' relationship with censorship. It will then describe how Engage Books originated and the new direction the company has chosen to take. The middle portion will delve into the specifics of the company's editorial decisions and how they analyze their audiences' needs. The final section will explore the future of Engage Books,

its potential to expand, and recommendations for the company moving forward.

It is important to note that several psychological studies are referenced throughout this report. This paper is by no means an authoritative voice on psychology or any other sciences involving the mind and behaviour. The studies referenced are used only as a guiding tool to better understand how the publishing industry can serve readers in the most effective way possible.

2. History Of Publishing



2.1 CHILDREN'S PUBLISHING

While children's stories have always been an important part of childhood, whether through oral narratives or the written word, they were not recognized as an official genre in the publishing industry until the eighteenth century. A growing consumer class in England at this time was willing and able to spend more money on luxury items than in previous centuries (Paul 2010, 14). Families were particularly interested in ensuring their children had the materials to be properly educated (Paul 2010, 14). This, along with the increasing population of England at the time, led to a booming children's publishing business (Paul 2010, 15-16). An emphasis was placed on teaching children how to be critical thinkers like many of the scholars of the Enlightenment period (Paul 2010, 22). Mary Wollstonecraft, a prominent writer of the time, expressed the views of many other authors and publishers when she said children's books should "teach young people how to begin to think" (Paul 2010, 22). This belief was reflected in the authors of many children's books. Lissa Paul explains that "[n]o one seemed to worry too much about authors crossing genre or age borders" (2010, 22). Politicians, philosophers, and historians were all encouraged to write for children, to teach them about the wider world (Paul 2010, 22).

With the coming of Romanticism in the nineteenth century, parents began to view childhood in a different light: "[t]he Rational thinking children of the eighteenth century were rapidly being replaced by the Romantic innocents of the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries" (Paul 2010, 22). Children were often thought of as being "immune to the corrupting influences of the adult world - but only to a point" and were thus no longer taught hard facts about life in an effort to keep them innocent (Wood 2012, 116). Instead, they were being taught how to be accepted into and accepting of society's class and gender norms (Wood 2012, 116). Aesthetics and the art of domesticity were the new dominant trend for children's literature (Paul 2010, 22).

The 1960s once again saw a reformation of children's literature. Protests against racism and sexism brought back a need for realism in children's books (Taxel 2002, 146). Book characters were now increasingly portrayed in real-world scenarios depicting drugs, sex, and violence—topics that were previously deemed taboo for children (Taxel 2002, 146). There was a shift away from books that focused on the individual development of a child towards ones that emphasized the betterment of society as a whole. This new realism, however, brought with it a burden for many children. While children's

literature in the years immediately following World War II seldom spoke about the war itself and instead focused on romanticising life before the war, children’s literature after the 1970s was largely authored by those who were children during the war and thus reflected their own experiences of childhood (Pinsent 2012, 221). With many World War II children having taken on an adult role at a young age, often because their parents were emotionally unavailable and/or abandoned their responsibilities, children’s book authors of the 1970s began to project their helplessness and sense of fear about the future into their books (Sands-O’Connor 2012, 226). Parents and society were increasingly depicted as “unstable and imperfect,” leaving an expectation that children “cope with the consequences as best they [could]” (Sands-O’Connor 2012, 236).

2.2 SMALL PRESS PUBLISHING

The North American publishing industry comprises a collection of independent publishers and a small number of multinational houses. The few large, multinational publishers with seemingly endless amounts of money dominate the market and “influence cultural output” (Ramdarshan Bold 84, 2016). The large number of small independent publishers “operate within the fringes of the industry” (Ramdarshan Bold 85, 2016). The publishing industry has been split in this manner since the creation of small presses in the late 1800s.

Coinciding with the change of perspectives in children’s literature in the nineteenth century was an industry-changing revolution growing within the wider publishing world. The most popular authors in North America during the nineteenth century were all British (Ramdarshan Bold 85, 2016). American publishers only promoted books that were guaranteed to sell, and British authors had tried-and-true track records, even though without proper copyright laws in place at the time American publishers were printing British-authored books illegally (Ramdarshan Bold 85, 2016). In addition to this, American publishers focused most of their energies on books that reflected their white, middle-class, male viewpoints (Ramdarshan Bold 85, 2016). American authors, frustrated by the lack of representation of American values and working-class perspectives, began self-publishing in protest to the commercial publishers who refused to support them (Ramdarshan Bold 86, 2016). Small presses began to emerge during the 1890s to help promote these authors and subsequently, the ideals and beliefs of the common American people, which were considered by commercial publishers to be too radical (Ramdarshan Bold 86, 2016). These presses grew in popularity and although they never dominated the industry, many were able to support themselves and leave a lasting impression on the country.

The period between 1920 and 1940 has come to be known as the Golden Age of Publishing as many small presses began to create their own unique identities and grow reputations as legitimate publishers (Ramdarshan Bold 86, 2016). Books published during this time found a unique balance between commercial value and cultural significance (Ramdarshan Bold 86, 2016). By the 1960s, the market was still dominated by commercial publishers, with more and more emphasis being placed on selling large quantities of books, and therefore, finding bestsellers (Ramdarshan Bold 86, 2016). This led to the Age of Acquisitions, an important period between 1960 and 1990 when 573 mergers and acquisitions of small presses and international publishing houses took place in order to create larger companies with greater resources and more access to books for the public (Ramdarshan Bold 86-87, 2016). This was the beginning of “the publishing industry being subsumed into larger, mass media conglomerates,” (Ramdarshan Bold 87, 2016) leading to today’s oligopoly run by ‘the big 5’: Penguin Random House, Simon & Schuster, HarperCollins, Macmillan Publishers, and Hachette Book Group, although it should be noted that at the time of writing this paper, Penguin Random House is attempting to acquire Simon & Schuster—a move that would further decrease competition.

Being both a small press and a children’s publisher, the current state of Engage Books is a product of both these histories. The company is trying to break free from the still-lingering Romantic era ideal that children are and should remain in a state of innocence and be protected from the harsh realities of adulthood. Without small presses disseminating new perspectives and the push for realism in children’s literature in the 1960s, Engage Books might not have a place today as a publisher dedicated to making a difference.

3. Engage Books Ltd.



3.1 HISTORY

Engage Books was created in 2008 by Alexis Roumanis as an SFU Masters of Publishing project (Roumanis 2009, 1). Roumanis went to SFU with the intention of creating a science fiction publishing house. By the time the third semester rolled around, he had created a new plan (Roumanis 2009, 5-6). Every student in the masters program has to complete a project report (the very thing you are reading now) based on an aspect of the work they did during an internship. Alternatively, students can do a research paper, or come up with a project on their own. Roumanis chose this last option. He decided that for his project, he would create a small, independent press that published classic books that were already in the public domain, that is, books whose copyrights had expired (Roumanis 2009, 5-6). This cut down on initial in-house costs and allowed the company to publish books across an array of genres (Roumanis 2009, 5-6).

There was little competition for classic titles in the United States and Canada when Engage Books first started (Alexis Roumanis, in conversation with the author, October 5, 2020). After several years of running a successful business, more and more companies began following a similar strategy of publishing public domain titles, although many were not created to the same standard as Engage Books' (Alexis Roumanis, in conversation with the author, October 5, 2020). While most publishers used automatic software to layout their classic titles, Engage Books closely followed the design principles of Robert Bringhurst in *The Elements of Typographic Style*. Particular attention was placed on the harmony of all characters placed on the page, with the intention of creating a work of art that is unique in its own originality. With the market becoming flooded, Engage needed a way to stand out so they took the time to create well-designed books that would appeal to collectors. These were all published in hardcover formats at higher price points. (Alexis Roumanis, in conversation with the author, October 5, 2020). This results in a long tail business strategy whereby profits are made by selling a small number of high-priced items rather than a large number of low-priced items (Hayes 2019).

Since its creation, Engage Books has used a strong backlist of classic books to fund original titles. They have done this on a small scale throughout the years, publishing such series as *The Baby's Handbook*, *The Toddler's Handbook*, *The Preschooler's Handbook*, and *The Kindergarteners Handbook*, all by Dayna Martin, and translating them into 20 different languages. They have also created a list of bullet journals and

gratitude journals for children. The company has now implemented this on a larger scale.

3.2 A NEW DIRECTION

In the summer of 2020, Engage Books made the decision to switch the main focus of the company from republishing classic titles in the public domain to publishing original children's books. Their new mandate with this change is to publish 'books that make a difference.' In broad terms, this means publishing books that teach children valuable information about the world so they can become informed and engaged citizens who can help make the world a better place. These types of books go beyond reporting on typical facts. They teach children about the broader world and the impacts their individual actions can have. The company believes it is easier to help shape the minds of children than it is to change the minds of those who are already set in their ways. The children's titles the company had published previously do not fall under the umbrella of 'books that make a difference,' as they focus on teaching young children how to speak and read common words and phrases. While Engage plans to cover a range of topics under their new mandate, such as space travel and emotional regulation, this paper will focus primarily on environmentalism, the overarching theme in two of their first three 'books that make a difference' series.

3.3 CURRENT OPERATIONS

Understanding how Engage Books operates and the new changes they are making can be helpful in analyzing their creative processes. Until the summer of 2020, Engage Books was operated solely by Alexis Roumanis, with assistance from freelance creators in various fields. In April and May of 2020 Roumanis hired his first two employees: myself and fellow 2019/2020 MPub student Lauren Dick. This new venture with a small staff and large backlist gives the company the freedom to be innovative with ideas that make an impact on children's lives.

Engage Books uses in-house writers for their books rather than acquiring books from outside sources. Much of the day-to-day editorial activities at Engage Books include writing and coming up with new books and series, which requires a thorough understanding of a book's potential audience. Writing a children's book may seem simple at first glance, but word complexity for different age groups, topic appropriateness, and the sensitivity of parents and teachers all need to be considered before and during the writing process. All of Engage Books' content creation strategies described in the following sections rely on a strong understanding of the audience of each of the books and how those reading the books may perceive them.

When the company's focus was on classic titles, Engage Books sold their books solely through Lightning Source as print-on-demand titles, with most sales coming from Amazon. This allowed the company to not have any returns on their titles. It also allowed them to market their books directly to consumers, monitor the ranking of their titles on Amazon's bestseller lists, and see feedback directly from consumers in the form of Amazon reviews. While Amazon is still a highly successful platform for selling children's titles, Engage Books wants to reach a larger audience. The company will continue to sell their books through Lightning Source and Amazon, but will also start selling to bookstores through their distributor Ingram's new Ignite program. While the start of this program is still in its infancy, it is a big step forward for the company and has the potential to change the daily operations of Engage Books in the coming months. This means the company now has to consider a bookseller point of view in the creation of their books, as well as the consumer's.

While the company's books are available in any country through Lightning Source, their books are the most successful in the United States and the United Kingdom, with most sales occurring on Amazon. *The Toddler's Handbook* is one of the company's best sellers, selling more than 40,000 copies in the United States between September 2019 and September 2020. Most of the translations for this book have sold between 1,000 and 7,000 copies in the United States during the same year.

4. Current Market



4.1 A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY

Engage Books is starting their new venture at a unique time: in the middle of a worldwide pandemic. While many businesses are struggling to stay afloat after a major loss of sales, children's publishing is doing remarkably well. Children's non-fiction unit sales in the United States in the first half of 2020 were up by 25.5% compared to the same time last year (Raugust 2020a). Engage Books saw an increase of more than 200% as Ingram was able to keep their supply chain operating while many traditional publishers experienced excessive printing and distribution delays. This is due in part to the closure of schools, prompting parents to take on homeschooling strategies to continue their children's education. Homeschooling or even partial homeschooling gives parents an opportunity to have a direct influence over what their children are learning. Many parents in the United States took this homeschooling opportunity to teach their children the language of their country of origin, resulting in a 98% increase in the sales of children's language arts books (Raugust 2020b). With twenty different translations of certain titles, and no supply chain issues, Engage Books was in a unique position at the start of the pandemic. With the eco-friendly movement on the rise in recent years, particularly with young adults who are beginning to start their own families (Evergreen Packaging 2020), this is a prime time for Engage to be releasing environmental books for children. Further, with the world in a state of unrest and many people frustrated by how the pandemic and information about the pandemic is being handled, it is a perfect time for Engage to broach the topic of misinformation and censorship in a broader sense.

4.2 TRENDS

The theme of acceptance seen in many children's books from the 1960s has yet to disappear. It is now accompanied, however, by books about kindness, rather than the imperfections of adults and society. Perhaps the children who read these books coped, to use Sands-O'Connor's words, with the world by learning to be accepting of and kind to one another, understanding that everyone has to deal with their own hardships, and are now passing those values onto the next generation. While finding information on trends in children's books is nearly impossible (thank you, BookNet), bestseller lists give valuable insight into popular contemporary themes. Seven of the ten books on *The New York Times'* children's books bestseller list for the week of September 19 to 26 of 2020 are about kindness and the acceptance of yourself and others. The same week the year

before featured similar numbers, with four out of the ten books preaching kindness and acceptance (*The New York Times*).

Interestingly, this theme of kindness has broadened to include being kind to the environment in what is now being called the ‘Greta Thunberg effect’ after the teenage climate activist (Ferguson 2019). Production and sales of environmental books for children doubled between 2018 and 2019 (Ferguson 2019), coinciding with the world’s introduction to Greta Thunberg. This is again a promising statistic that implies Engage Books’ first few series will fare well.

4.3 COMPETITION

The most similar comp titles to the *ATMAD* books are National Geographic’s animal readers, which are written for level 1, 2, and 3 readers. Each book highlights a particular animal and describes where they live, what they eat, and fun facts about them. While the first portion of each *ATMAD* book follows a similar format to this, the second half differs in that they delve into how the highlighted animal makes an impact on the world and what humans can do to help this animal thrive. Some but not all of National Geographic’s animal readers include a page at the end about how to help save a particular animal, but none appear to discuss the importance of each animal in a broader context (perhaps with the exception of *Bees* as their disappearance is a major topic right now).

Books on environmentalism for children are not especially unique. With more understanding about climate change and a push to prevent more environmental damage from being done, more and more authors and publishers are coming to the same conclusion as Roumain: children need to be informed about the world they are inheriting and how to take care of it. The major difference between Engage Books and other children’s environmental publishers is the targeted age group. Non-fiction environmental books for children are typically written for an older age group. Orca Book Publishers’ Orca Footprints series discusses topics such as the impacts of deforestation, ocean pollution, and zero-waste lifestyles. While these are all topics broached by Engage Books, Orca targets their books towards children ages 9-12. This is not to say that environmental books are not written for younger children. They are, however, written in the form of stories, using illustrations rather than photographs. A study by Gannea et al. found that children are able to better connect concepts to realistic photographs than illustrations (Muthukrishnan and Kelley 2017, 958). Kids Can Press offers an excellent example of this. *Join the No-Plastic Challenge* by Scot Ritchie tackles the same topic as the *ICHSE: Plastic* book, albeit in a distinct way. Using illustrations, the book follows a young boy who challenges his friends to go a whole day without using any plastic. The

book's description notes that "rather than focusing on the negative, however, the book takes a positive, proactive approach to the subject" (Kids Can Press). The issue with this is that only focusing on the positive runs the risk of sugar-coating these issues, therefore not getting across the message of how detrimental these problems are. Engage Books hopes to give a full picture of these issues to children of all ages, combining the positive and negative.

5. Introducing World Crises To Children



5.1 IMPORTANCE

Part of educating children to become informed citizens means making them aware of global crises to help them understand the world they are set to inherit. Engage Books takes a similar approach to that of children’s publishing during the Enlightenment period, speaking to children “as individuals becoming acclimatized to the world into which they are maturing— rather than... as children who [need] to have every real thing encased in a sugar coating and labeled as fun” (Paul 2010, 50). The company believes that informing children about global issues can help inspire them to a) cut back on activities that contribute to these crises and b) use critical thinking to come up with solutions to these problems as they grow older.

Many people make the argument that topics such as global warming, species extinction, and water shortages are too complex for young children to understand. However, a 2014 study found that “many five-year-olds and most seven-year-olds grasped the concept of natural selection, a topic usually reserved for teenagers” (Rathey n.d.). Natural selection is a far more advanced concept than any of the global crises presented in Engage’s books. If children can understand that living organisms adapt to their environments through selective breeding designed to pass on only the best survival traits, they can understand that when humans cut down large amounts of trees they take away animal habitats, which in turn causes those animals to die off.

In order to properly prepare them to deal with global crises, children need a complete understanding of each crisis, which means explaining more than just what these crises are. Though their section titles differ in the books themselves, Engage uses three main categories to fully explain these concepts in both the *ATMAD* and *ICHSE* series: causes, which will be addressed in the next section in relation to misinformation; effects on everyday lives; and solutions. Explaining the full scope of these crises can help combat a major problem in today’s society where children grow up without fully comprehending certain subjects. As one researcher observes:

students graduate without knowing how to think in whole systems, how to find connections, how to ask big questions, and how to separate the trivial from the important. Now more than ever, however, we need people who think broadly and who understand systems, connections, patterns and root causes (Orr 2004, quoted in Muthukrishnan and Kelley 2016, 967).

By giving children all the information about a subject, rather than just bits and pieces that have been delicately selected, Engage can help better prepare the next generation for the world they will soon take over.

5.2 EFFECTS ON EVERYDAY LIFE

The discussion of such large-scale problems can leave some children feeling indifferent if they are only presented with the effects these problems have on the broader world. In order to make a greater impact, Engage Books connects environmental issues to individual lives and the impact they can have on people's daily activities. Take, for example, species extinction. Simply telling a child that some animals are endangered and may soon disappear forever can lead to questions like 'so what?' and 'why should I care?'. This is not to say that all children would react this way, but many may not understand the full implications when first presented with the topic. The *ATMAD: Bats* level 1 book illustrates the connection between species extinction and the impact on individual lives quite simply. After describing what pollination is and bats' role in the growth of new plants via pollination and insect consumption, the text notes that certain fruits and vegetables like bananas and avocados would no longer be readily available, if available at all, if bats went extinct (Lee 2021, 24). Though this seems like a small impact, these are fruits and vegetables that children interact with on a regular basis, so they can imagine not having a diverse range of foods in their diets. This fact can also prompt questions about what other foods rely on animals to grow, leading to even broader discussions about species extinction.

Another example of the impact of individual actions comes from *ICHSE: Goods*. The book illustrates how some of the things people buy are made with strong materials that last a long time and how others are made with cheap materials that break easily. It describes how broken goods or goods that are no longer needed typically end up at landfills, which pollute Earth in a variety of ways. The book goes on to describe how garbage from the United States and Canada is shipped to the Philippines, which now contains so much garbage that many towns have garbage lining every street. Many Philipinos are now afraid to drink their own water for fear it may contain leachate, the chemical runoff of garbage. This book makes it easy for children to see how their seemingly insignificant choices can have a big impact. Taking time to consider if a product is well made and if it will last a long time can prevent garbage from piling up and polluting drinking water.

To further relay the importance of environmental topics, Engage Books accompanies their text with real-life images. Research done by Muthukrishnan and

Kelley on the importance of images in children’s environmental books found that pictures in children’s books can have a major impact on how the reader interprets the message of the book (2017, 957). Their research found that “few images [in children’s environmental books] depicted pollution” and those that did focused solely on pollution caused by transportation rather than industries or individual actions (2017, 966). Both the *ATMAD* and *ICHSE* series discuss pollution as a cause for global warming or animal extinction in every book. Engage Books thus finds it necessary to show pollutants contaminating Earth in real-world situations. Figure 1 from *ICHSE: Energy* shows plumes of chemicals entering the air as a result of fossil fuels being burned, chemicals that are then breathed in by all living beings in the surrounding area.



Figure 1: *ICHSE: Energy* Air Pollution



Figure 2: *ICHSE: Water* Landfill Runoff

Figure 2 from *ICHSE: Water* shows a similar situation, with polluted water from a landfill running into a freshwater source. Rather than simply telling children how their lives can be affected by pollution, the inclusion of photographs from real-world scenarios can help them see how their lives can be affected, further emphasizing the importance of addressing these issues.

5.3 SOLUTIONS

While the inclusion of solutions to global crises may not seem like an innovative strategy at first glance, Muthukrishnan and Kelley observed in a study on children’s environmental books that many of these books poorly represented eco-friendly behaviours (2017, 966). They found that the books they examined often “depicted postconsumer behaviour, such as recycling rather than the connection with nature, or as creators [of environmental problems]” (2017, 966). The problem with this is that these solutions are not getting to the root of the problem. They are merely showing how to deal with a problem once it has been created, but not how to stop it. While Muthukrishnan and

Kelley are discussing the depiction of images, it is safe to conclude the text was lacking in representations of eco-friendly behaviour as well, as images typically reflect the content of the text.

Engage Books illustrates to children two kinds of solutions that can help prevent world crises from getting worse, rather than solutions that only deal with the aftermath of these crises: those that children can contribute to, and those that need to be implemented on a larger scale. An example of the former comes from *ICHSE: Plastics*, which describes how single-use plastics create a large amount of waste that can harm wildlife when it enters their environments. The book goes on to explain that because plastic can take more than 400 years to break down, humans are creating plastic at a faster rate than we can dispose of it. This makes a strong connection for children about how their buying behaviour can impact the environment. To illustrate how simple eco-friendly behaviours can be, the book contains a simple list (figure 3) of single-use swaps that are easy for children to implement into their lives, such as using a reusable container instead of a plastic sandwich bag. In terms of large-scale solutions, the same book discusses the creation of plant-based plastics that biodegrade within a reasonable amount of time without leaching harmful chemicals into the ground. It also describes how some countries and cities around the world are banning single-use plastics to slow the growth of landfills and environmental pollution. Including a full range of information in the way Engage Books does is important in helping children fully understand the severity of these problems and that fixing them is not as complex as we sometimes make it out to be. It will also hopefully inspire them to create new solutions and technologies as they grow up that will positively impact the world.

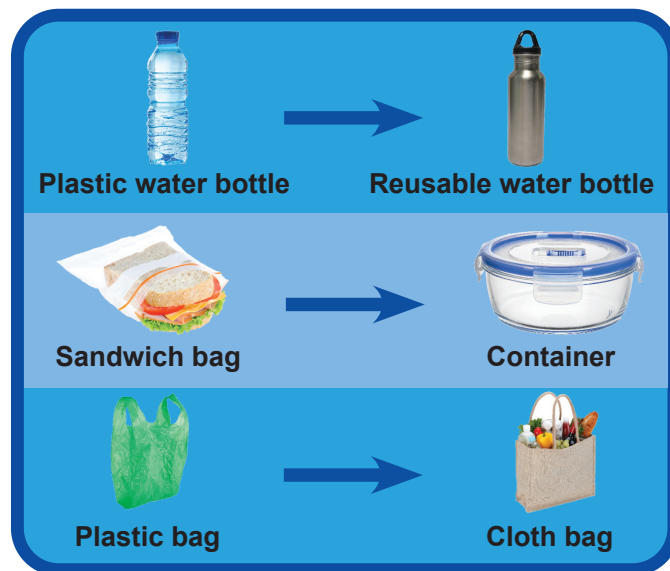


Figure 3: ICHSE: *Plastics* Single Use Swaps

6. Misinformation



6.1 THE PROBLEM

A major concern in today's political climate is rapidly spreading misinformation. Thus, one of the major ways Engage Books is trying to make a difference is by addressing issues that are increasingly misrepresented. For the *ATMAD* and *ICHSE* books, this means addressing how human activity contributes to climate change. A report on the public's understanding of science found that less than 20% of Americans could understand scientific and ecology-related language (Miller 2004, 273). Another study came to a similar conclusion, noting that many Americans cannot understand "common ecological and science concepts [e.g., water flow patterns, cause-and-effect relationships]" (Coyle 2004, via Muthukrishnan and Kelley 2017, 966). This is supported by the statistic that 1 in 6 Americans are not convinced the world is round (Picheta 2019). Another 18% of Americans are unsure if human activity is contributing to climate change, or if climate change is even real (Milman and Harvey 2019). Muthukrishnan and Kelley explained that, as a way to combat this lack of understanding, some ecologists recommend presenting humans as "dynamic contributors to the ecosystems" rather than showcasing ecosystems as being separate from and independent of humans (Muthukrishnan and Kelley 2017, 966). This is precisely what Engage Books is trying to do with their *ATMAD* and *ICHSE* series.

6.2 THE SOLUTION

While the topic of human contribution to global crises was briefly touched on in section 5, there is more to be said about Engage Books' approach to presenting these topics to children. The statistics surrounding the average American's understanding of science and ecology show a clear need to not only teach the next generation that human activity has major impacts on Earth, but exactly how certain activities make the impacts they do.

While other environmental books for children may briefly mention the cause of pollution, they focus more on how people can stop pollution from getting worse, and fail to recognize how pollution became such a major issue in the first place. The *Huffington Post's* list of 25 environmental books for children only features one book that describes how pollution builds up over time: *One Plastic Bag* by Miranda Paul (Bologna 2020). The book follows Isatou as day after day she and her fellow townspeople drop plastic bags on the ground until they make a pile as long as a house. Soon animals begin to eat the plastic and die as a result, thus making a clear connection between human activity,

waste buildup, and the environmental impacts of this. The book does an excellent job of explaining this cause and effect relationship, but it is clear there needs to be more books on this topic available to children: books like those in the *ATMAD* and *ICHSE* series.

ICHSE: Energy describes how almost everything people use in their daily lives uses energy to work. The book describes how energy made from fossil fuels pollutes the air and that this is one of the causes of global warming (Lee 2021). The book then goes on to describe in simple terms what global warming is. This kind of explanation draws a clear connection between human activity and climate change. The more energy society uses, the more fossil fuels we burn, and the more the air is polluted. A similar connection is made in *ICHSE: Water*, which explains how water is cleansed of pollutants by the water cycle during evaporation. Nowadays, with so much pollution from human sewage and industrial waste, most water can no longer be cleaned during the water process (Lee 2020, 15). These explanations can help children recognize for themselves that these processes are real, and that human activity is a major contributing factor.

Some kinds of misinformation can directly lead to the serious harm or even death of humans and animals. These kinds of false information are incredibly important to combat as early as possible to prevent any kind of serious injury. The *ATMAD: Elephants* level 2 book discusses the ivory trade as a cause for the endangerment of elephants. This inevitably leads to a discussion of the use of ivory in Chinese medicine, which is proven to not be effective in treating any illnesses. While this normally would not be a topic presented in a children's book, Engage Books believes *ATMAD: Elephants* presents a perfect opportunity to address this misconception. In a comment on the first draft of the book, Roumanis described why many publishers would avoid this topic, and why his company wants to confront it:

Let's try and break boundaries with these books. Most publishers will shy away from the words "Chinese Medicine" because they think it could be culturally insensitive. Having kids understand that this is not only destructive, but that there is no evidence that elephant parts used in Chinese Medicine works, is the only way the younger generation can grow up actively fighting the norms of the older generation.

Rather than merely pointing out that elephants are disappearing, or simply saying they are hunted by humans, Engage shows that the problem of species extinction goes far beyond those doing the hunting. Demand for a product like ivory causes poachers to go out and hunt elephants, so while many people might not be directly responsible for the death of

elephants, their habits lead to the deaths of more elephants. Presenting the topic in this way can help combat the notion that poachers are the only ones responsible for species extinction.

While large-scale operations are the biggest contributors to many global crises (deforestation from logging contributes to species extinction, burning fossil fuels for energy contributes to global warming, etc.) individual actions can build up and create a large impact, which means children need to understand how they or the people they know contribute to these problems. Perhaps the best example of this comes from *ICHSE: Plastics*, which explains that single-use plastics generate a lot of waste. The book goes on to state that “the average person uses about 540 plastic sandwich bags every year” and later suggests using a reusable container as an alternative (Lee 2021, 15). Plastic sandwich bags are used by most children in North America and Europe (where most of Engage’s sales are from) to pack lunches for school. This is an object that children are familiar with and kids are often the ones throwing the bags in the trash after their use. Children can see exactly how their use of these bags leads to the creation of waste. While throwing one or two bags in the trash at a time may seem insignificant, presenting the waste created by these bags in terms of amount used per person per year gives children a broader understanding of how this waste builds up, making landfills bigger and contributing to the pollution of animal habitats and water sources.

ATMAD: Octopuses level 2 presents a similar situation. The book explains how chemical household cleaners and soaps end up in the ocean when washed down the drain, and that these chemicals are harmful to octopuses and other sea creatures (Lee 2020, 28). This again presents the topic using a product children use daily. Children frequently wash their hands and are often introduced to chores such as washing the dishes. The hope with using an object children see on a daily or near-daily basis is that they will remember the effects of their actions each time they use said object. It may also prompt children to ask their parents or teachers to buy products that are environmentally friendly.

By addressing important issues in this way, the company can not only combat misinformation, but teach children how to think critically and see a connection between cause and effect. This in turn will help stop the spread of misinformation by giving children the tools to recognize false information.

7. Rejecting Censorship



7.1 IMPORTANCE

Censorship in children’s literature has been the subject of debate since the genre was formally recognized in the eighteenth century. In the ten-year period between 1990 and 2000, 6,364 challenges were made to books in American public schools and libraries (Censorship 2020). However, censorship does not only refer to the steps taken after a book has been published. A large portion of censorship in children’s literature takes place behind the scenes with authors, editors, and marketers. Large publishing companies typically censor materials out of fear that a certain subject matter will negatively affect sales (Censorship 2020). Though the decisions to include topics that are typically censored for children in their books may not always be conscious, their inclusion is a major part of Engage’s work and helps to normalize previously unspoken subjects.

Many scholars conclude that censorship is ineffective in protecting young people from social issues and can even stunt a child’s intellectual growth (Censorship, 2020). Perhaps the most prevalent example of the ineffectiveness of censorship comes from North America’s sex-education classes. The Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management conducted a study on the effectiveness of abstinence-only sex-education, which refrains from teaching young people how to protect themselves and lead healthy sex lives, and found that the number of sexually active teens in abstinence-only sex education programs is no different than the number of sexually active teens in more comprehensive sex education programs (Trenholm et al. 2008). A similar study done at the University of Washington found that teens who receive abstinence-only education, or no sex education at all, are significantly more likely to become pregnant than those in more comprehensive sex education programs (Bright 2008). These studies show that not only is censorship ineffective, but it may do more harm than good. In the information age we live in today, many young people have access to information on virtually any topic they can think of. While this does have benefits, it can also be harmful to young people who stumble upon sexually-explicit or violent content, or those who are unaware of how to find reliable sources and who may be exposed to vast amounts of misinformation.

More important than the ineffectiveness of censorship, however, is the conclusion that censorship can negatively affect how a child develops. Dr. Thomas Armstrong compares the censorship of sexuality for children to “stopping tourists at the state line and taking away all the maps and books they have about the state that they are just about to enter” (2012). He argues that the censorship of sexuality leads to children being “lost”

as they do not fully understand the biological changes that are happening to them or the emotions that go along with those changes (2012). Furthermore, censorship can create a stigma around certain topics. While discussing the ban of Susan Patron's *The Higher Power of Lucky* by some schools due to the use of the word "scrotum," Dr. Armstrong notes that "[b]anning a book because of the word scrotum sends a message that there is something shameful, bad, embarrassing, or wrong with the word, and by association, with male genitalia" (2012). Presenting difficult subjects to children through uncensored books can help them learn the correct information, help them better understand these subjects, give them the tools to deal with these topics in a healthy and productive manner, and prevent unnecessary stigmas from flourishing and damaging young peoples' development.

7.2 BODILY FUNCTIONS

One of the earliest books to raise the discussion of what children should and should not be exposed to was Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, published in 1726. Publishers deleted several scenes they deemed inappropriate for children, including one where "Gulliver urinates on a fire in the Lilliputian palace" (Censorship 2020). Even today, bodily functions are one of the most widely censored topics for children (Censorship 2020). The primary reason behind this censorship today is the socially constructed idea that many bodily functions are inappropriate. In her study *Bums, Poops, and Pees: A Scholarly Examination of Why Children Love and Adults Censor the Scatological in Children's Books*, Ann Curry spoke with librarians who regularly interact with children and their parents (2012). These librarians reported that many older-generation parents dislike their children being exposed to bodily functions due to the impropriety of the subject, specifically when it comes to young girls (Curry 2012). Some librarians noted that a few parents who believe in censorship thought exposure to bodily functions promoted "animalistic" behaviours in young children, as opposed to proper, appropriate behaviours (Curry 2012).

There are, of course, plenty of books that help with potty training, but these books cater to a very specific time in a child's life and discussions of such topics are promptly left behind as children grow older. A lack of discussion around bodily functions can cause children to feel that their normal human behaviours are abnormal and shameful (Breines 2012). This can become especially problematic if they are dealing with issues like irritable bowel syndrome and are afraid to seek help. The BBC wrote an article on the normalization of taboo subjects titled *The Powerful Way That 'Normalisation' Shapes Our World*. In the article, they discuss how showing recycling behaviours as a normal

activity, rather than one that is niche, helped increase recycling behaviours across the UK (Brown 2017). The article also discusses the normalization of mental health and how discussions about mental health have led to a decrease in stigmatizations of the topic (Brown 2017). By discussing bodily functions in their books, Engage Books is helping to normalize the subject, which in turn may help children seek help if and when they need it.

Although the *ATMAD* and *ICHSE* books offer no opportunity to discuss bodily functions as they relate to humans, they do discuss bodily functions as they relate to animals, similar to Taro Gomi's *Everyone Poops*, which discusses how everything from insects to animals poops. Engage Books is not the first children's publisher to approach the subject of bodily functions, nor will they be the last. They do differ, however, in their approach to the subject. Many authors and publishers tackle this topic by creating entire books dedicated to specific bodily functions. The problem with taking a direct approach like this is that there is more likely to be backlash from parents, teachers, and librarians. Taro Gomi's *Everyone Poops* was banned from some school libraries (Cakir 2014) and bashed by *Publishers Weekly* for its "unsuitable" subject matter (*Publishers Weekly*, n.d.). While Gomi should be applauded for confronting such an issue, a more indirect approach has the potential to reach a wider audience. Rather than tackling such subjects head-on, Engage Books includes them in a more subtle way. The *ICHSE: Food* book discusses how "cows, sheep, and goats all burp methane gas" (Lee 2021, 13) and how organic farms use manure as fertilizer for their crops (Lee 2021, 15). The *ATMAD: Llamas* level 2 book takes this one step further, showing an image of llama poop beside a fact noting that llama poop has very little smell (Lee and Siemens 2020, 16). Including one or two sentences about taboo or controversial topics in books about related subjects can help further their reach, which in turn can help normalize these topics moving forward.

7.3 DEATH

A first draft of *ATMAD: Elephants* level 2 included a fact about death in its "Curious Facts" section that could have been seen as controversial. The fact stated that "elephants mourn the loss of other elephants," which can lead children to ask questions about what mourning and loss are. A freelance editor looking at the text noted that we should consider replacing the fact with something "sunnier." Roumanis responded with an explanation of his decision to keep the fact in the book:

It's definitely a sensitive culture we are living in, and it provides us with an opportunity to talk about this issue. No, we are okay keeping [this fact] here. My philosophy with Engage is to teach kids about the things that their parents

are unwilling, unable, or waiting to teach them. The goal is to teach these kids to be smarter than the previous generation. If we think back to the way that books were edited 50 to 100 years ago, many valuable facts would have been withheld because of the sensitivities of society. I'm okay getting backlash from these groups of people.

As Roumanis points out, topics such as death were previously censored within the industry. Even today, in our so-called progressive society, many adults are uncomfortable with the idea of discussing death with children, fear discussions of death may cause their children emotional distress, or simply believe children will not understand the concept (Paul 2019, Saltman 1998). Many scholars have noted that the lack of conversation around death, specifically as it relates to children, has led to limited educational and supportive resources on the subject (Paul 2019). As one scholar notes, “if a 6-year old wants to know how her grandmother died, developmental psychology might suggest that she is too young to understand, thus contributing to a death-taboo by prohibiting conversation about death with younger children” (Paul 2019). This taboo, however, can be dangerous, as a lack of understanding about death can “foster confusion, ignorance, and a lack of trust” and “negatively [impact]... their bereavement experiences” (Paul 2019).

Engage Books is again not alone in broaching this topic. Many publishers have begun creating books designed to help children understand and process death and grief, a sentimental approach similar to that of the nineteenth century where the death of children or parents was commonly discussed in children's books, but which quickly grew out of favour by the twentieth century due to the fear that discussing death on a personal level may be too “harrowing” for children (MacLeod 1983). Little, Brown Books' *The Invisible String* by Patrice Karst explains how everyone you love is connected to you by an invisible string, no matter where they are, and has sold over half a million copies (Amazon). There are even books such as Hans Wilhelm's *I'll Always Love You*, which addresses grief after the loss of a pet. These books, however, are meant to open up conversations about death only after a child has been exposed to it.

One PhD study on children's understanding of death concluded that the young participants found it easier to talk about death when it was not personal (Paul 2019). While the participants believed it was important to talk about death when it is personal, conversations that are not personal allow children to ask questions and process new information without being overwhelmed by emotions, thus contributing to a better understanding of the subject and therefore allowing them to process their thoughts and

emotions in a more productive manner when they do experience death (Paul 2019). Confrontations of death in the *ATMAD* and *ICHSE* books can open up these healthy discussions as well as provide further understanding of the effects of global crises.

ICHSE: Water describes how human activities cause water pollution, and that about 1.8 million people died in 2015 from drinking polluted water (Lee 2021, 20). Likewise, *ATMAD: Bats* level 1 explains that the endangered Mauritian flying fox bat is considered a pest by the Mauritian government, which has led to mass huntings of the bats and, in turn, a decline in their numbers (Lee 2021, 27). Not all *ATMAD* and *ICHSE* books connect death as a result of global crises to direct human action, however. *ATMAD: Ladybugs* level 1 explains that the nine-spotted ladybug is becoming extinct because the Asian ladybug, an invasive species, is eating all of its food. Beyond preparing children for dealing with these issues in the future, discussions of death in children's books such as these can a) help children realize how important these world crises are, b) further impress how small actions can have large consequences, and c) prompt discussions between parents and children that can further enhance their understanding of the topics.

8. The Future of Engage Books



8.1 EXPANSION

Engage Books is a big believer in the philosophy that you should practice what you preach. As such, the company has not pulped a single book since its creation in 2008. The company has recently decided to list their books in catalogues available to brick and mortar bookstores to try to reach a new market. The only issue with this is that the distribution company Ingram is based in the United States, meaning the most cost-efficient method of dealing with returns is to have Ingram pulp them. Not wanting to do this, the company has begun looking into charity organizations they can donate returned books to. These are places like children's hospitals and after-school programs. Merely telling children how to make the world a better place simply will not do. Engage Books wants to lead by example. Not only would this benefit the environment, but would allow their messages to be spread to more children who may not otherwise have seen these books.

8.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

Engage Books is off to a great start with their new children's publishing venture. Publishing 'books that make a difference' is a wonderful way to encourage children to change the world for the better. Along with continuing the progressive work they are doing, the following recommendations can help the company grow and reach a larger audience.

Updating the Engage Books website could be incredibly beneficial to the company's sales. Most of Engage's books are available for preorder on Amazon before their release. Including a 'coming soon' section on the website could help generate more interest for upcoming titles. Categorizing their books could also help with discoverability. Engage has many classic titles, journals, and now children's books that are listed together on one page. Separating these under category headings could make titles easier to find for buyers and possibly result in more sales. Once the company has enough books published they could create collections of their series. This would allow buyers to purchase an entire series at once without the hassle of having to purchase each individual book. They could also be priced at a slightly lower price point, which may encourage more sales of the full collections, rather than individual titles, resulting in more profits overall.

My time with Engage Books has been such a positive experience, it would be wonderful to see more MPub students doing their internships with the company in the

future. This would not only benefit the students, but the company as well. The publishing industry changes so frequently and new MPub students often have innovative ideas that could help the company become more widely recognized, therefore expanding the reach of their ‘books that make a difference.’

Conclusion



As discussed in part 2, children's and small press publishing have long, complex histories that have shaped the industry as we know it in a very specific way. Discussions of the appropriateness of certain topics for children have been around since the genre was officially recognized in the eighteenth century, and likely even before then. Rejections of the norms of international publishers have time and time again provided rich cultural value to the industry. Engage Books embraces these histories and continues to push for change.

Despite having limited resources, Engage has started their new 'books that make a difference' venture smoothly. They are able to provide their books to the public through multiple platforms and have created an impressive number of books within a short period of time. Pushing boundaries is not an easy task for a small independent publisher. The risks are not only financial, but the company's reputation could be at stake if parents or teachers take issue with the content of the book. Yet the company is willing to take this risk if it means helping to create a better world. This is the beauty of independent publishers in general. They are greatly concerned with the messages they are sending out and do not focus solely on profits.

Understanding their audience plays a large part in Engage's creation process. Many of the company's creative decisions are made by understanding how readers will interact with a book. While other publishers certainly take their audience into account when creating new books, not every element is analysed in the same way or to the same degree as Engage Books does. Recognizing that children are not as frail as society sometimes perceives them allows the company to provide children with information they may otherwise not have access to.

Engage Books is by no means the first publisher to approach children's books as a way to improve the future of society, and hopefully they will not be the last. They do differ, however, in their strategies and the ways they think about their approaches. Unfortunately, the success of these tactics will not be known for another few months when the books are scheduled for release. While it is difficult to project just how well the books will do, the research backing up Engage's approaches provide a hopeful outlook.

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