Effects of Cultural Authenticity: A View of African American Literature

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Abstract

Most individuals have played the telephone game at some point growing up. The object is to pass information all the way around a room without losing any content. The game often fails and the information comes out jumbled, however when asked, the original person very easily and accurately relates the information back. This is an illustration of the importance of authentic literature. The written word is a critical part to how information is transmitted today. Literature often shapes the reader’s beliefs and ideals in some way. The more influential pieces may even play a defining role in the reader’s identity. One would have to understand all aspects of the text in order to understand why it is so influential. The origins of these defining texts are often not looked at critically enough. Does the origin of its writer matter? Many minority groups in America would have something to say, considering there is a history of misrepresentation of these groups in literature. One group that has suffered from these falsifications is African Americans. African American children in particular have been negatively impacted. In order to analyze certain fallacies and stereotypes African Americans face, the impact of literature on this ethnic group must be looked at critically.

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A few of the stereotypes placed on African Americans in the past centuries include simplemindedness, athleticism, and unattractiveness. Where did these stereotypes originate from? Were African Americans identifying themselves with these characteristics, or writing these stereotypes into their previously mentioned literature? Despairingly, the answer to these questions is no. To further understand the impact that literature has had on African Americans, a closer look at the effects of literature on all ethnic groups is needed. Through this process, we will evaluate aspects pertaining to African American literature specifically, the drawbacks of “outsider” literature and benefits of authentic/ “insider” literature, the progress towards accurate representation of African Americans in children’s literature, and the application of critical literacy in determining accurate representation.

The advantages of authentic literature are immense. Literature has an impact on the reader’s perception of the world which can affect how individuals treat other people. Children in particular are very impressionable. Madsen stated that “Children’s literature conveys powerful messages about social and moral behaviors and ideas thus are powerful tool for multicultural teaching and learning” (Madsen, 2012, p. 1).It is very important that children’s literature represents equality between African Americans and all other ethnic groups. Literature written by African Americans themselves often portrays their ethnicity more positively and provides their children with a more positive view of where they come from. This literature may also contain social issues specific to their ethnic group and help to explain the racism that they endure. Lobron and Selman (2007) explain that books that contain real social problems help children to form their own ideas about many modern issues such as racism, prejudice, and social justice. These same texts also give a teacher the opportunity to improve the child’s evaluative skills (as Cited in Madsen, 2012, p. 1). All children need role models. A child must be able to empathetically put themselves in their role model’s position. A white child may learn about Bill Gates or Steve Jobs from literature or the media, revere them, and desire to imitate them. Similarly, an African American child may look up to David Blackwell or Dorothy Vaughan, two renowned African American mathematicians who embody part of African American Culture. Davis (1998) states that giving children the opportunity to find themselves in the pages of the books they read helps them in their journey to uncover who they are and to identify people from their ethnic group who they can look up to and imitate (as cited in M.D. Collier, 2000). Literature must allow children to see themselves in its pages, to prevent them from feeling inferior simply due to their ethnic orientation. For this reason, it is important that authors come from within the ethnic group they are referring to in their literature.

When composing literature about any given topic it is important to have thorough knowledge about that topic. Literature that is written from an outside perspective will often, whether intentional or not, contain ideas that are based on social status of that group. For example, a CEO of a company may view the jobs of their inferiors as not difficult and think that they are in those positions due to unwillingness to work harder. If the CEO were to compose literature about their inferiors, perhaps with an underlying theme of laziness; it would probably leave out any real, in-depth evaluation of the jobs they do. If the literature did contain an in-depth analysis, the ideas would be influenced by the prejudice of the worker’s being lazy, and would not accurately represent their work. In much the same way, Hamilton (1981) argues that it is extremely challenging for European Americans to compose literature from an African American’s perspective because their experiences and worldviews, which often contain racism, do not line up (as cited in W. Brooks and J.C. McNair, 2009). The Literature composed by these European people could be passed down to naive readers who would then start building ideas about African Americans based on these racist ideas. The literature written by outside perspectives may not be as detrimental if there is an equal amount of literature from within the group. However, Broderick (1971) found in a study of African American literature that the majority of literature written between the years 1827 and 1967 contained books that suggested that African American people were unattractive, musically inclined, and superstitious, have life goals that specifically benefit their race and are dependent on white people. Also African American children would find little to enhance their pride in their culture and contrarily white children would see themselves as superior (as cited in D.E Norton, 2013, p. 16).Due to the troubling nature of these findings, one might ask, has there been any progress in this area?

The crusade to accurately represent African Americans in children’s books has been a large part of the United States history. This prompts the question: how is our society doing in regards to this issue today? If we come to a point that we truly understand the problem, the next logical step is the solution. Fortunately, the battle has not been in vain and studies are finding that more and more books are being written to mitigate the issue of misrepresentation. Nancy Larrick in her article, “The All-White World of Children’s Books” (1965), found that there were few books about minority groups and those few books contained stereotypes rather than facts about the people group in question. Larrick’s article was at a pivotal point in history, and even in the 1960s she could see the positive impact of her hard work. However, this issue required much further effort. Thankfully, since then there have been innovations in the U.S. with respect to authentic “insider” literature that has helped represent people groups in more accurate ways, and these are more widely available (as cited in D.E Norton, 2013, p .19). Later on Howard (1991b, p. 98) discusses the increased attention, within the past thirty years, given to research about the creation, authentication, production, and literary merit of African American children’s literature (as cited in W. Brooks and J.C. McNair, 2009). More books written from the “insiders” perspective are continuing to appear in the pages of children’s stories. But the battle is in no way over. Even today the inaccurate representation of ethnic minorities continues to plague the United States. To fully understand how to decipher whether or not authentic literature is on the rise one must look at critical literacy and its application in determining this.

This brings us to our final point; the application of critical literacy. Freire and Macedo (1987) state that literacy is not simply the art of understanding a language but rather a way to “read the world” for African American children (as cited in M.D. Collier, 2000). The critical analysis of children’s literature helps to identify (often subtle) racism and is a method for teachers to distinguish between “good” and “bad” literature. When the pages of a book inaccurately represent African Americans it inaccurately conveys what people do. Ira Shor (1999) says “We are what we say and do. The way we speak and are spoken to help shape us into the people we become. Through words and other actions, we build ourselves in a world that is building us” (p. 1). Critical literacy can be applied to books to determine if a book is appropriate for children. In other words does it help the African American child do what Ira Shor so eloquently stated? Ira Shor (1999) later talks about literature used “for honoring and using the students' community language while also studying Standard English” (p.17). Analyzing texts written about African Americans helps ensure that their sub culture is not lost. If African Americans growing up in the United States can see their own terminology being used alongside traditional English it helps to create a positive image of their creativity. Critical literacy helps to examine and promote texts that may otherwise seem to have a lesser syntactical language when in reality, they embody well what African American generations say and do.

In conclusion authentic literature written from the “insider” perspective helps African American children to see themselves in the pages of a book. Unauthentic or “outsider” literature can create oppressive misrepresentations of African Americans. Fortunately, in past years there has been improvement in regards to the accurate representation of African Americans in children’s books. Critical literacy helps teachers and scholars to identify books that can help promote equality amongst different races.

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