Effects of Cultural Authenticity: A view of African American Literature

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Abstract

The written word is a critical part to how information is transferred today. The information that people receive through literature can help to shape their beliefs and ideals. In essence it takes up a role in helping to define who a person is. Societies sometimes fail to look critically at the origins of these texts. Does the origin of the writer of the text matter? Well for many minority groups in America there is a history of misrepresentation in literature, which can have drastic negative effects on distinct ethnic groups including their children. Perhaps the group that has suffered the most from misrepresentation is African Americans. Many of us have played the old Telephone game where the object was to pass information all the way around a room without losing any content. The game often does not work and the information comes out jumbled, However when you ask the original person about the information they are very easily able accurately relate the information back. This is a simple example of the importance of authentic literature. In order to break down some of the fallacies and stereotypes that have been inaccurately placed on African Americans one must take critical look at the effects literature of literature on this ethnic group.

Simple minded, Athletic, and unattractive are just some of the stereotypes placed on African Americans in the past centuries. How did these stereotypes come about? Were African Americans self-proclaiming themselves as possessing these characteristics? Or writing these stereotypes into their previously mentioned literature? The answer is a saddening no. To further understand the effects that literature has had on African Americans a closer look at the effects of literature on ethnic groups is needed. In considering this we will analyze certain aspects pertaining to African American literature, the cons of outsider literature, the pros of authentic/insider literature, the progress towards accurate representation in African American children’s literature and finally the application of critical literacy in determining accurate representation.

The advantages of authentic literature written from the perspective of someone inside an ethnic group are immense. Literature has a big impact on what we think about the world and as a result can affect how we treat people. Children are the most impressionable and as 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 the literature written for children represents African Americans (and ethnic groups in general) as equal. Literature written by an African American will help portray their distinct ethnic group more positively and will give the African American child a more positive view of where they come from. This literature will also contain social issues that their specific ethnic group experiences and help to explain the racism, they may be subject too, does not define who they are. 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 icons to look up to. For a child to have an icon they must be able to empathetically put themselves in that position. White children may look up to Bill Gates or Steve Jobs as people they desire to imitate and they will learn about these people in media and in literature. Similarly an African American child may look up to David Blackwell or Dorothy Vaughan two renowned African American mathematicians who (if written about from African American perspective) would also embody parts of African American Culture. This allows for as 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). If the literature does not allow the children to see themselves in the pages it can make them feel inferior simply do to their ethnic orientation. It is important that the authors of this literature come from within the ethnic group.

When composing literature about any given topic it is important to have extensive knowledge about the topic or to use information given by someone who does. Much of what one thinks about a group of people has to do with perspective. Literature that is written from this outside perspective will often times (sometimes unintentionally) contain ideas that are based on social status in respect to that group. For example a CEO of a company may have the idea that the jobs of their inferiors are easy and the only reason they are in that position is because of laziness. The literature that the CEO might compose, about their inferiors, would then have the underlying theme of laziness and would leave out any real in-depth study of the jobs they do. If the literature did contain an in-depth study, the ideas would be rooted in the idea that they are lazy and would not accurately represent their work. In much the same way as 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 but 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, musical inclined, superstitious, must 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). These are very depressing results; one might ask has there been any progress in this area?

The struggle to accurately represent African Americans in children’s books has very apparently been a large part of the United States history. Which begs the question; how is our society doing in regards to this issue today? If we truly understand the problem then the next logical step is solution. Thankfully the fight has not been in vane and studies are finding that there are more books that are being written to help mitigate this issue. 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. Thankfully there have been many changes in U.S. with respect to authentic “insider” literature that has helped represent people groups in more accurate ways, and they are more widely available (as cited in D.E Norton, 2013, p .19). This article is a pivotal point in history even in the 1960’s Larrick could see the positive effects of her hard work. 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 not over, even today the inaccurate representation 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 (sometimes 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 (1997) 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” (Ira Shor, 1997, 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 later talks about literature used “for honoring and using the students' community language while also studying Standard English” (Ira Shor, 1997, p.17). Dissecting texts that are written about African Americans helps to ensure that sub culture is not lost. If African Americans growing up in the United States can see their own language 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 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. Thankfully in the past years there has been improvement in 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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