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ABSTRACT

Gross stereotypes, subtle distortions, and omissions in references to ethnic groups in children's literature play a direct part in forming children's attitudes at an early age. One of the requirements for elementary education teacher certification at Penn State University is a course in children's literature with an emphasis on guiding students into a discovery (via content analysis) of the racism and sexism which exists in children's literature. Students are made aware of stereotypes of the "savage" Indian, the all brawn, no brains portrait of John Henry, the author-created stereotypical dialects, the subtle distortions of inherent ability, suggestions of white supremacy, the mockery of other cultural characteristics, distortions of historical realities, and derogatory words. Sexism in children's literature can be observed in the same forms: gross stereotypes, subtle distortions, and omissions. It is hoped that prospective teachers, through their own education and through their knowledge of teaching critical reading to children, can effect the needed change in children's literature. (HOD)

Language Education and Ethnic Children's Literature at Penn State University

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One of the basic language education requirements for elementary education teacher certification at Penn State University is a course in children's literature. Penn State leaders emphasize that such a course be based in ethnic children's literature. Why? The answer is really quite simple.

Research confirms the hypothesis that attitudes about one's self and others, both positive and negative, are formed at an early age. Books, one of the major mediae of education in our public schools, are believed by children to be absolutes. Research also confirms another hypothesis--that those formed attitudes, whether held by student or teacher, play a direct part in academic achievement.

Gross, stark stereotypes, subtle distortions, and omissions in reference to ethnic groups play their part well in children's literature. It is an overview of this situation, with documentation, that first startles Penn State students into the reality of what is. Then, guided into discovery on their own, students work with a content analysis form for racism and sexism which was prepared as a direct result of a co-sponsored Pennsylvania State University-Council on Interracial Books for Children workshop on racism and sexism in classroom literature. It is with this approach that Penn State University hopes to bring about a conscious awareness of the problems which exist and an attempt to use them, not avoid them, to educate in what is in the real book world and how to cope with it.

A synopsis of the overview of the two ethnic groups, the Native American and the African American, which is presented to the students, will bring this into focus.

The gross, stark stereotype of the "savage" Indian in the Newbery Award winner, The Matchlock Gun, description reads:

> There were five of them, dark shapes on the road, coming from the brick house. They hardly looked like men, the way they moved. They were trotting, stooped over, first one and then another coming up, like dogs sifting up to the scent of food. (1:39).

Likewise, Robert McCloskey's (two-time Caldecott Award winner so we know his skill in portraying in illustrations the written word) all braun, no brains portrait of John Henry in the American tall tale of "John Henry" contributed by Guy Johnson in Ann Malcolmson's Yankee Doodle Cousins written in author-created stereotypical dialect:

> Ol' JOHN HENRY, the steel-drivin' man, was as big as an oak, as strong as a bull, and as black as a skillet. Some people say that he was a roustabout on the Mississippi steamboat. But the real John Henry was a railroad man. His story has been told over and over in ballads sung by negroes and railroad men from Roanoke to Altoona.
>
> As a pickaninny, he sat on his old pappy's knee in East Virginny. And his old pappy said to him, 'John Henry, son, yo're gonna be a steel-drivin' man.'
>
> The little black boy smiled up into his pappy's eyes and nodded. Then he looked ahead into the Years to Come and said, 'The Big Ben' Tunnel on the C. & O. Road gonna be the end o' me (2:101).'

The danger of such stereotypes is that they are untrue to reality and dangerously simplify thinking. The negative subliminal influence of such portrayals are indeed frightening when one stops to realize that books may serve as the only means some children may have of knowing what individual members of groups are really like.

The subtle distortion of inherent ability such as the description of Tecumseh, an outstanding Indian Chief, in an otherwise fairly good documentation of history, smacks of the white supremacy which is prevalent in children's literature:

> The reputation of Tecumseh was growing fast. The good-looking boy had turned into 'one of the finest looking men I have ever seen,' as an American army officer said. Exceptional intelligence glowed in his unusual eyes, hazel-colored, deep-set, and abnormally quick to observe. These were strange eyes

> in an Indian face. Could it be that somehwere in the background in the generations there had been a drop of white blood? His skin was pale copper, not the mahogany color of many of his braves. His foster-brothers said that he had unusually, strong, even, white teeth, an his flash of a smile was as frequent as the terrible frown that could reduce a brave to terror (3:47).

Another subtle distortion of a warm, sincere gesture on the part of a member of one ethnic group sharing the pride of his own through a gift which was mocked by the author of the book is Caddie Woodlawn, another Newbery Award winner, by using such descriptors as "oddly" and "funny":

> ...., but it was at Caddie and her red-gold curls that the big Indian looked when he came to the farm, and it was for Caddie that he left bits of oddly carved wood and once a doll--such a funny doll with a tiny head made of a pebble covered with calico, black horsehair braids, calico arms and legs, and a buckskin dress! John's dog knew his master's friends. Caddie had been kind to him and he accepted her as a friend (4:7).

What of historical realities and omissions? Who thrust the first American flag into the crust of the earth at the North Pole? The books in our schools have led at least two generations of children to believe that Robert E. Peary did so. The first edition, 1953, and the second edition, 1962, of Robert Peary, Boy of the North Pole, of the well-read, popular Childhood of Famous Americans biography series said so on both its jacket:

> In 1886 Peary made his first trip to Greenland and afterwards headed a number of expeditions to the Far North. When he reached a point four hundred miles farther north than any other explorer had ever gone before, he was determined to keep on trying. Finally, on April 6, 1909, he achieved success by unfurling an American flag at the North Pole (5).

and between its covers:

> "Hurry!" an Eskimo exclaimed.
> "Not now," Peary said. Weariness lined his weather-beaten face. "I'm eager to reach the Pole, too, but we've traveled hard for many hours. Now we'll rest awhile."
>
> They stopped for a short time and then went on over the three miles between them and the Pole. ... He reached into a canvas bag and took out an American flag. He attached it to a pole and thrust it firmly into the ice. The five men standing around him cheered. Peary shook hands with them and beamed.

He had tried again and this time he had won (5:191, 192)!

The truth is that Matthew Henson was the only one who was able to go on the last three miles of the expedition. He, not Admiral Peary, planted the American flag at the North Pole and received the civil Congressional Medal of Honor for this great feat as is documented in The ABC's of Black History:

> . . . on April 6, 1909, Matthew was the only one able to go on with the expedition. He was the first man to reach the North Pole where he placed an American flag.
>
> Matthew Alexander Henson was awarded the civil Congressional Medal of Honor for his achievement (6:unpaged).

RACIALLY POTENT WORDS

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Raymond S. Ross, SPEECH COMMUNICATION: Fundamentals and Practice, © 1965, Reprinted by permission of Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey (7:xvi).

How do you suppose that the word Sambo made this list of derogatory words? It is my opinion that it was because for more than 50 years a little book entitled, The Story of Little Black Sambo by Helen Bannerman published in

1900, the only popular children's book portraying a Black family, was read by thousands of white children and adults all over the world (8). Note that the story has its setting in India, not Africa:

> And they still ran faster and faster and faster, till they all just melted away, and there was nothing left but a great pool of melted butter (or "ghi," as it is called in India) round the foot of the tree (8:48).

Had the illustrations, even though done in caricature form, authentically portrayed the text, (the hallmark of good children's literature) perhaps Sambo would not be on this list of racially potent words.

An attempt was made by the Platt Munk Company in 1925 (9) to "right the situation" but instead an even more ridiculous setting was illustrated, portraying simpletons in a happy plantation life. In the late '40's Simon and Shuster (10) made another attempt to correct the situation. They almost made it--in clothing at least, but not in facial features. This version was yet another distortion of authenticity. Finally, 50 years after the original edition, the Whitman Book Company (11) did authentically illustrate the story, based in its original setting. Had this version, instead of Bannerman's original, been on the world market all of these years, perhaps Sambo would not be on the Ross list at all.

What about sexism? It is also in children's literature and in the same forms as racism--gross, stark stereotypes, subtle distortions, and omissions. In Mothers, Mothers, Mothers we have an illustration with a mother holding a cup of coffee in one hand and talking on the telephone in the other with a large caption that reads, "They like to talk on the telephone. They sometimes like to drink lots of coffee (12:20)."

We have in another picture book, I'm Glad I'm a Boy, I'm Glad I'm a Girl, "Boys invent things." "Girls use what boys invent (13:unpaged)." These are

are only two out of many such children's books but the one that takes the blue ribbon in both racism and sexism is The Country Bunny and the Little Gold Shoes:

Often a mother bunny says to her child, "Now if you learn

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liking themselves very much (14:unpaged).

There is a sincere attempt at The Pennsylvania State University to bring into focus a conscious awareness of racism and sexism in children's literature to our pre-service and in-service teachers. We hope our students will help bring about a much needed change in children's literature by means of their own education and using their knowledge to teach critical reading to children as it should be taught--critically!

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