

What Educators Need to Do with Biased Children's Books on Religion, Gender and Race

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Abstract: Children's books have frequently portrayed groups holding power more favorably than marginalized people. In this essay, we show how such books support a theoretical framework based on the notion that education can either preserve the status quo or change it. We use primary sources consisting of passages from various children's books in addition to highlighting the findings of previous researchers. We examine gender misrepresentation as well as the biased depiction of religious and racial minority groups.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (2000) asserts that when education promotes oppressive attitudes, it dehumanizes people. He refers to this form of pedagogy as a "banking" approach of education and rejects it, urging for a liberating form of teaching. Freire's ideas are consistent with a theoretical framework based on the notion that education can either preserve the status quo or change it. In other words, education can either keep people with inferior societal status from making progress or help them resist inequalities to ameliorate their condition.

In this essay, we discuss how children's books about various groups of people support this framework by showing that teaching resources can indeed promote abysmal forms of bias, leading to the mistreatment of these groups. We use primary sources consisting of passages from different children's books in addition to highlighting the findings of previous researchers.

Background

Children's books about varied groups have frequently portrayed people holding power more favorably than marginalized groups. Fortunately, today these books are much improved and depict individuals with low societal status better than ever before. However, some recently published children's literature is still stereotypical. The depiction of various groups in literary material can be dehumanizing in a manner analogous to Freire's description of the "banking" form of education. To prevent this type of teaching, educators need to empower children from marginalized groups by avoiding these biased resources and replacing them with culturally authentic materials, or they can use these offensive resources with older students to create awareness about the oppressive ideas such materials promote, thus teaching pupils to resist racist and sexist practices.

On the following pages, we examine the biased depiction of religious and racial minority groups, and we also explore gender misrepresentation. In addition to exploring stereotypical descriptions of females, we focus on the ways biased children's books portray Africa and its people, the Aboriginals of Australia and Native Americans. To illustrate how offensive these resources can be, we first discuss children's books written during Nazi rule.

Religious Bias in Children's Books

Children's books published during Nazi Germany portrayed Jews in horrific ways. During the Holocaust, education was used as a means of encouraging anti-Semitic thinking, and one of the leading writers from this period, Johann von Leers, wrote books and essays that supported anti-Semitic attitudes (Wegner, 2007). Leers used storytelling to persuade elementary school children to adopt anti-Semitic values, and his writings were intended not only for children but also for academics, the general public and school teachers (Wegner, 2007). Other writers and educators attempted to influence children to accept Nazi ideology through instruction in school.

Books for children in Nazi Germany described Jews in a way that made them seem immoral and malicious (Mills, 2002). Some of the storybooks written during the 1930s and 1940s showed Jews stealing homes, taking advantage of people and belonging to an inferior race. Mills (2002) discussed one storybook entitled *Der Pudelmopsdackelpinscher* by Ernst Hiemer (1940). This book depicts Jews in an egregious manner. In this story, the author compares Jews to animals and describes the methods they use to take advantage of people, suggesting these methods are similar to hyenas that prey on animals. One of the abhorrent parts occurs when Jews are compared to bacteria that must be eradicated to save humankind.

Another book Mills (2002) mentioned, also written by Ernst Hiemer (1938), is *Der Giftpilz*. In the beginning of this book, Franz, a young boy, is walking to collect mushrooms with his mother who explains that good mushrooms are edible and similar to good people, and poisonous mushrooms are comparable to evil people. When Franz's mom asks him who the bad people are, his answer is the Jews:

Look, Franz, human beings in this world are like the mushrooms in the forest. There are good mushrooms and there are good people. There are poisonous bad mushrooms, and there are bad people. And we have to be on our guard against bad people just as we have against poisonous mushrooms. Do you understand that? Yes, mother, Franz replies. I understand that in dealing with bad people trouble may arise, just as when one eats a poisonous mushroom. One may even die! And do you know, too, who these bad men are, these poisonous mushrooms of mankind? The mother continued. Franz slaps his chest in pride: Of course I know, mother! They are the Jews! (Hiemer, 1938, paras. 3-6)

As the story continues, Franz's mother explains that there are different forms of poisonous Jews including Jewish cattle dealers, butchers and doctors. She explains that these Jews disguise themselves as people with good intentions and that they deceive many people. Thus, those who know that they are dangerous must warn others:

Tell me, mother, do all non Jews know that the Jew is as dangerous as a poisonous mushroom? Mother shakes her head. Unfortunately not, my child. There are millions of non Jews who do not yet know the Jews. So we have to enlighten people and warn them against the Jews. Our

young people, too, must be warned. Our boys and girls must learn to know the Jew. They must learn that the Jew is the most dangerous poison mushroom in existence. Just as poisonous mushrooms spring up everywhere, so the Jew is found in every country in the world. Just as poisonous mushrooms often lead to the most dreadful calamity, so the Jew is the cause of misery and distress, illness and death. (Hiemer, 1938, paras. 12–14)

Fortunately, shortly after it was published, *Der Giftpilz* was translated into English and used to fight anti-Semitism (Mills, 2002). Many educators today resist the use of children's books that degrade a particular group of people and raise awareness of the deleterious effects of such resources on children. Although biased children's books written after World War II may not be as demeaning as those published during the Holocaust, many contain illustrations and passages that can harm young children. The next examples focus on gender bias and involve stereotypical children's books published more recently.

Gender Bias in Children's Literature

Gender misrepresentation in children's books can manifest itself in various forms, including the roles women hold and the number of times they appear in comparison to men. Some research on award-winning books found that females were likely to appear less often than males (Czaplinski, 1972; Davis & McDaniel, 1999). Other research indicates that females too often fulfill roles as submissive and dependent people (Jacklin & Mischel, 1973; Purcell & Stewart, 1990) and that even award-winning children's books represent them in this manner (Crisp & Hiller, 2011).

One example of such a book is Margaret Hodges' (1986) *Saint George and the Dragon*, a Caldecott Medal award winner. In this story about Saint George—a hero who defeats a formidable dragon—many gender stereotypes prevail. Saint George is portrayed as a courageous and powerful conqueror, a traditional masculine stereotype:

Quickly the knight [Saint George] rose. He drew his sharp sword and struck the dragon's head so fiercely that it seemed nothing could withstand the blow. The dragon's crest was too hard to take a cut, but he wanted no more such blows. He tried to fly away and could not because of his wounded wing. (Hodges, 1984, p. 19)

Una—a lovely princess accompanying Saint George on his journey to defeat the dragon—also fulfills a stereotypical role as she is depicted as a gentle, passive and fearful female who refrains from involvement in the battle between the dragon and Saint George:

Now from the furnace inside himself, the dragon threw huge flames that covered all the heavens with smoke and brimstone so that the knight was forced to retreat to save his body from the scorching fire. Again, weary and wounded with his long fight, he fell. When gentle Una saw him lying motionless, she trembled with fear and prayed for his safety. (Hodges, 1984, p. 23)

In addition to award-winning books, researchers have criticized other children's books for gender bias. *Moss Gown* (Hooks & Carrick, 1987), a Cinderella-type tale from the American South, is one such example. When Candace's father decides to divide his land among his three daughters based on how much they love him, they must kowtow to him and persuade him of the depth of their daughterly love.

Candace's simple response of "Father, I love you more than meat loves salt" (Hooks & Carrick, 1987, p. 11) angers him, and she is compelled to leave the house. Candace flees and finds her way to a plantation home, where she is given a job as a kitchen hand. Aided by a magical gown given to her by a witch woman, Candace soon captures the heart of the plantation master, and they marry. Multiple gender stereotypes are presented in this story. Candace is passive and submissive; she accepts her bad fortune and never exercises agency to change her situation. Additionally, the male characters are the ones who wield power in the story: The father has the power to distribute the family fortune, and the plantation master has the power to save Candace from her position as a lowly kitchen hand by making her his wife. The only female character with power in *Moss Gown* is the "beautiful black witch woman" with "green cat's eyes" (Hooks & Carrick, 1987, p. 18) who represents a racial stereotype in her otherness.

Gender bias in children's literature goes beyond folktales like *Saint George and the Dragon* and *Moss Gown*; it also exists in contemporary stories. In *Ten Rules of Being a Superhero* (Pilutti, 2014), male characters are positioned as saviors while female characters are portrayed as those in need of help. For example, the first page spread of the book depicts a female doll tied to the leg of a table while a young boy dressed as a superhero swoops over to save her. Later in the book, the boy is shown helping an elderly female neighbor with a chore. Such portrayals serve two functions: 1) to normalize the position of females as the "weaker sex" in need of help from males, and 2) to reinforce the position of males as dominant and powerful. Instead of reinforcing these gender stereotypes, teachers are advised to seek children's literature offering more balanced portrayals of male and female characters as well as books that upend these stereotypes. One example of the latter is *Shadows of Sherwood* (Magoon, 2015), a modern take on the Robin Hood tale in which Robyn, an adolescent female, risks her own safety to save a community from an oppressive government while searching for her missing parents. Teachers must also find children's books that depict various racial groups authentically.

Racial Bias in Children's Books

Although Australians of non-English-speaking background constitute almost half of the Australian population, many picture books have represented them unfairly (Bradford, 1995). Some picture books suggest that non-white characters are less important because illustrators placed images of people of color in the margins. Although this problem has subsided in modern times, it continued to occur, in part, as a result of the conservatism of Australian publishers (Bradford, 1995). Most authors have written Australian picture books through the perspective of the dominant culture, leaving a skewed view of the cultural realities of minority groups. This problem happened because book publishers selected few authors and illustrators of non-European backgrounds to write books.

Australia has historically dealt with its Aboriginal communities very poorly. This dreadful relationship manifests itself in distorted children's books. For example, In *The Land in which We Live* (Smiles, 1968), the author suggests that the Aboriginals are less civilized than other groups:

The tragedy of the aboriginal is that of any primitive people faced with a higher civilisation. The breaking down of the tribal structure of their society leaves these people in a kind of vacuum, between two worlds, and unless we make greater efforts to help them, they will soon disappear. (Smiles, 1968, p. 26)

Another children's book that lacks the perspective of the Aboriginal people is *Aborigines of Australia* (Hoyt, 1969). In the beginning of the book, rather than express favorable aspects of their way of life, the author describes the first European encounter with the Aboriginal people the following way:

A Dutchman was one of the first to see the aborigines. When he arrived at the Gulf of Carepentaria in 1623 he called them "utter barbarians." A little over half a century later an Englishman named William Dampier traveled to the west coast of Australia and said they were "the miserablest people in the whole world." (Hoyt, 1969, p. 12)

In response to concern toward the treatment of the Aboriginal people, a government agency launched a study in 1973 to investigate the extent to which children's resources were biased. This study found ample evidence of inaccurate and negative material. In 1974, researchers evaluating school content for young children on the way Aboriginal people are depicted found "a disturbing amount of poor quality and/or racist material" (Lippman, 1981, p. 64.) In the recent past, Aboriginal writers and illustrators have published much improved children's books; however, before the 1970s, it was not unusual for a reader to pick up an ethnocentric children's book that disregarded the lifestyles or values of the Aboriginal communities (Bradford, 1995). Before the 1970s, mainstream authors wrote these books and homogenized the culture of the Aboriginal people, portraying them similarly, although they can vary considerably.

Many children's resources examined in the 1970s suggest that Aboriginal people are unintelligent, ugly and uncivilized (Lippman, 1981). Furthermore, authors overlooked positive aspects of their culture. The Australian government funded a study in 1975 evaluating 600 teaching resources that found that well over half of this material could not be recommended (Lippman, 1981).

In the United States, authors have portrayed many racial minority groups including African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans and Asian Americans inaccurately in children's literature (Harris, 1997; Norton, 2009). In the 1940s, for instance, Robert Lawson's (1940) *They Were Strong and Good* won the Caldecott Medal, although it contained demeaning content about Native American people:

When my mother was a little girl there were Indians in Minnesota—tame ones. My mother did not like them. They would stalk into the kitchen without knocking and sit on the floor. Then they would rub their stomachs and point to their mouths to show that they were hungry. They would not leave until my mother's mother gave them something to eat. (Lawson, 1940, n.p.)

Little House on the Prairie by Laura Ingalls Wilder (1935) was published a few years earlier than *They Were Strong and Good*. Like Lawson's book, Wilder's contains content that does not represent the Native American perspective:

She said she hoped to goodness they would have no trouble with Indians. Mr. Scott had heard rumors of trouble. She said, "Land knows, they'd never do anything with this country themselves. All they do is roam around over it like wild animals. Treaties or no treaties, the land belongs to folks that'll farm it. That's only common sense and justice." She did not know why the government made treaties with Indians. The only good Indian was a dead Indian. The very thought of Indians made her blood run cold. (Wilder, 1935, p. 211)

Overall, most American minority groups receive better coverage today, but some problems concerning their portrayal persist, including a shortage of children's books featuring certain subgroups. Laotian American children, for example, will likely not find characters showing their cultural group (Norton, 2009).

Although the availability of authentic children's books has improved for most groups, some researchers still express concern about Native American portrayal. Common stereotypical books about Native Americans portray them as savage, inferior and cruel (Norton, 2009). Researchers tend to criticize more children's books about Native Americans than on other groups due to the lack of Native authors. Reese (1997) explained that although many minority authors write children's books about their group, Native American authors rarely write children's books about theirs, resulting in content based on popular perceptions rather than genuine perspectives.

Educators need to avoid prejudiced children's books about Native Americans for several reasons. First, the population of Native Americans has increased at a fast rate and is comparatively younger than the overall population in the United States (Heller, Cunningham, & Heller, 2003). Second, many Americans have negative views and incorrect knowledge about Native Americans (Fleming, 2006). Many misconceptions about Native Americans exist because they populate isolated locations, leading outsiders to gain much of their knowledge about them from secondary sources instead of direct experience (Fleming, 2006). Young children learn misconceptions about Native Americans from the popular media and also from biased children's books. Some researchers (e.g., Roberts, Dean, & Holland, 2005) suggest that Native Americans are one of the most misunderstood groups in the United States.

Literary material on Africa and its people intended for children has historically covered this continent very poorly. For example, In South Africa, children's literature has been filled with racist attitudes. Much of this literature reinforced the ideology of white supremacy (MacCann & Maddy, 2001). Many books that white children in South Africa read prior to World War II were published in Britain, and one of these was *Jock of the Bushveld* (Fitzpatrick, 1907). As the following passage shows, Sir Percy Fitzpatrick, the author of the book, uses stereotypical writing when describing Jim Makokel, one of the black people in the story:

He was simply a great passionate fighting savage, and, instead of wearing the cast-off clothing of the white man and peacefully driving bullock waggons along a transport road, should have been decked in his savage finery of leopard skin and black ostrich-feathers, showing off the powerful bronzed limbs and body all alive with muscle, and sharing in some wild war-dance; or equipped with shield and assegais, leading in some murderous fight. (Fitzpatrick, 1907, p. 192.)

A study on South African English-language children's literature published between 1947 and 1982 concluded that blacks were likely to be portrayed as nomadic, uncivilized and inferior (Lehman, 2006). For many years, in this area of the world, literary materials served the purpose of continuing the domination of the black population. Only books representing the ideals of those in power were chosen for use in schools (Lehman, 2006; Naidoo, 2007). These books emphasized that history in South Africa began in 1652 after the first Dutch settlers arrived.

After the end of the apartheid government, children's literature in South Africa improved in several ways; publishers began to create books that reflected the backgrounds of black children. In addition, books written in many languages other than English and Afrikaans began to be published. After the first

democratic election in 1994, 11 official languages had been declared equal in status (Heale, 2009). In previous years, there were two official languages: Afrikaans, a language derived from Dutch, and English. Before apartheid, there was a rich oral tradition that included the many languages spoken in South Africa, but few authors wrote books in these languages (Lehman, 2006). Newer books encouraged readers to develop accurate information about populations that previously endured the racist regime (Petzold, 2005).

Although numerous improvements have been made in South African children's literature, many problems remain. Even after the democratic elections of 1994, a pro-apartheid attitude persisted, influencing the publication of one-sided children's books (MacCann & Maddy, 2001). Although publishers urged new books to be written in the many languages spoken in South Africa, those written in English and Afrikaans remained dominant. Even though authors included more accurate and authentic experiences of blacks, a shortage of black authors persisted, and as a result, the black perspective is often missing (Lehman, 2006).

Examples of more recent skewed children's books on Africa and its people include *Papa Tembo* (Campbell, 1998). Although some journals praised this book for various reasons, it depicted Africa as an ancient and static place. As the following excerpt shows, the author uses stereotypical words when describing this region:

The fire danced deep shadows on the long, red-robed figures of the Masai, and their features, transformed by shifting light, suddenly seemed more savage, more primevally alien than before. For a split second he felt a jolt of fear as the knowledge took root that they were in a very different world. A world that had changed little in thousands of years. A world of magic and ancient savagery where life meant little. (Campbell, 1998, pp. 90–91)

West African children's literature differs from other African children's literature primarily because the dominant language in West Africa has been French for many years, rather than English or Afrikaans. As a result, many children's books published there are in French. Although many people in this area, especially those in urban areas, speak French as a result of interracial marriages, those in rural areas usually have problems learning in this language, since most grow up speaking their native language. Each country differs. In some cases, only a few members of the population can read and write in French (Tadjo, 2008). As a result, problems occur when children are sent to school to learn in a language other than their native language.

Although children's books in West Africa frequently depict the culture of the local people, many are written in French. After the period of colonization, many black authors wished to express their culture through literature, but did not do so using their native language. In the 21st century in most of the countries in this region, with the exception of Niger and Mauritania, most children's books are in French, and there is a shortage of books written in indigenous languages (Tadjo, 2008).

Conclusion

Children need to see, hear and read positive aspects about their group in order to develop self-esteem (Morgan, 2009). It will be difficult for young learners to feel good about themselves if their group is left out of school materials and other groups are included or if they are not offered books in their native language.

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©2012/2018 International Assembly Journal of International Social Studies

Website: <http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

Culturally authentic children's books representing *all* groups are important for these reasons. Such books develop pride in children from minority groups and encourage pupils belonging to the dominant culture to learn accurate information about minority groups. Understanding the reasons distorted books could hurt children and using the appropriate criteria to determine whether a book is biased will help teachers avoid these resources. Gaining this knowledge is crucial because outdated books with one-sided, skewed content can be found in most schools and libraries (Morgan, 2009). Teachers need to refrain from exposing young children to this stereotypical material. However, they can use this content with older students, as we did in this essay, to help these pupils gain awareness of inequalities in society in order to fight them. Children's books are a powerful resource; they can empower, but they can also dehumanize.

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