

Critical Multicultural Education and the Media

JULIA PETROZZA / D'YOUVILLE COLLEGE / JULY 5, 2002

In past decades, the American lifestyle existed as 'the melting pot'. This was due to the assimilation of diverse cultural, ethnic and racial populations. In this reality, American culture attempted to assume a single, homogeneous, modern culture, which demonstrated unequal relationship between the existing dominant culture and the myriad of subcultures. In finding a medium to overcome and somehow balance the unequal relationships established between the existing diverse cultures, multiculturalism along with multicultural education came into existence.

The first multicultural policy was set up in Canada. Spokespersons of different ethnic heritages that made up Canada argued in the late 1960's, that a new model of citizen participation in larger society had to be adopted. They argued that it should be one that addressed all the ethnic groups that were part of Canada as they too were part of the national war effort and felt that they should also reap the benefits of Canada's revival. Unlike the melting pot model of the United States, they preferred the idea of a 'cultural mosaic'—unique parts fitting together into a unified whole. The Royal Commission of Canada who was appointed by the federal government to deal with English and French relations in Canada at the time, began to be enlightened by the spokespersons of different ethnic heritages that were unhappy with their status in Canada. The Commission agreed with the spokespersons and presented their ideas along with recommendations to the federal government which would acknowledge the value of cultural pluralism to Canadian identity and encourage Canadian institutions to reflect this pluralism in their policies and programs. The policy was accepted in 1971. The policy was one of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework however, ethnic pluralism was only declared to be a positive feature of Canadian society worthy of preservation and development and not law. Only in 1982 did it become a law and later in 1988 Bill-C-93 was passed as the Multicultural Act (www.pch.gc.ca/cs-pec/english). The Multicultural Policy states that under Canadian law, these equalities are the rights and privileges of any person, and ensure that they may participate as a member of the society, regardless of racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious background.

In spite of these advancements in Canada's recent history, multiculturalism did not eliminate racism or the disparities encountered by the ethnic minorities in this country. Through media, racism is still perpetuated as will be demonstrated in this paper. Because of the failure of multiculturalism, critical multiculturalism has been pushed to the forefront. Stephan May points out in his book *Critical Multiculturalism*, the public sphere of the nation-state represents and is reflective of the particular cultural and linguistic habitus of the dominant (ethnic) group. These habitus, in turn, are accorded with cultural and linguistic capital while other (minority) habitus specifically are not. The principal consequence for many minorities—at both the individual and collective level - has been the enforced loss of their own ethnic, cultural and linguistic habitus as the necessary price of entry to the civic realm (May, 1999, Ch.1).

To make North American Society a more Democratic space, education in the twenty-first century must help all students regardless of race, ethnicity or gender to develop knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to participate in a multicultural society. Also, education must be structured to assist students in understanding and affirming their community cultures, freeing them from cultural boundaries and allowing them to create and maintain a civic community that works for the common good. However, a unified and cohesive democratic society can be created only when the rights of its diverse people are reflected in its institutions, educational environments and national culture. Paramount in achieving this is the recognition of the "importance of collaboration between students, parents, educators, and communities working toward social justice in the education system" (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1999).

Unfortunately, there are factors that hinder the advancement of multiculturalism and that especially tarnish the views and attitudes of our children whom we are trying to educate in multicultural settings. The media is one of these factors. Augie Fleras and Jean Lock Kunz critically dissect the media in their book *Media and Minorities*. In doing this they attest that, “no one should underestimate the possibility that mediacentric values may reinforce racism in the media through the one-sidedness of media messages in perpetuating a race-based status quo” (Fleras and Kunz, 2001). Mainstream media continue to endorse structures and values that have the systemic consequence of denying or excluding minority women and men (Fleras and Kunz, 2001).

Mainstream media continue to be accused of racial discrimination against minority women and men by way of images that deny, demean, or exclude (Fleras, 1994). These accusations are not unwarranted and children are at the receiving end of the undesirable values of and presented by the media producers. This is why it carries on into the classrooms because this is what children know from watching television and movies. Critically discussing the representations of minorities in the media as misrepresentations can guide children in the right path of respecting and celebrating the differences in people including their own. This critical discussion can lead to media literacy. “Media literacy seeks to empower citizenship, to transform citizens’ passive relationship to media into an active, critical engagement capable of challenging the traditions and structures of a privatized, commercial media culture, and thereby find new avenues of citizen speech and discourse” (Bowen, 1996).

Media is a major contributor to the propagation of racism, sexism and stereotypes in our pluralistic society. Media racism acknowledges the pervasive influence of both structures and agendas that have an unintended yet negative effect—both systemic and subliminal—of misrepresenting minority women and men (Fleras and Kunz, 2001). Critical awareness of how the media propagates these notions in children has to be brought to the forefront. Creating awareness in our children of the racism embedded in media and in turn in our classrooms’ is a positive step in preparing our children for a multicultural society via critical multicultural education. In this paper I will critically dissect Pocahontas, a children’s film that although attempting to be a representation of a different culture has been proven to be inaccurate and as a result a brutal misrepresentation of the culture it attempts to represent.

In the preface to his book, *The Children Are Watching: How the Media Teach About Diversity*, Carlos Cortes presents a strong argument that school education about diversity will always be self-limiting in its effectiveness if school educators do not seriously engage the reality—the inevitability—of students learning about “otherness” through the media (Cortes, 2000). In saying this Cortes opens up the topic of “othering”. This action broadly refers to where the media places minorities in relation to the dominant “ethnic” population of the western world (Fleras and Kunz, 2001). According to Fleras, Kunz and Cortes in the media, minorities are represented as the “other”. They are not the people who make the decisions. They are not the people who run the show. They are the people who in the media are represented in their stereotypical roles of outsiders, Ebonics speakers, athletes, criminals, terrorists and any of the other roles that are typically known to be filled by those who carry the minority status title.

Misrepresentations of minorities are strongly prevalent in children’s television and films which is only naming two of many types of media that misrepresent minorities. “It is entertainment. But it is also education, because when they watch a video—or *Mr. Rogers* or *Sesame Street* or *Barney and Friends* or the Teletubbies or Saturday morning cartoons—children are also learning about many things, including diversity” (Cortes, 2000). Through these programs children learn about good and evil, right and wrong, life and death, villainy and heroism. The next paragraph will critically dissect a children’s animation by Disney in which a western representation of a very diverse culture is presented. Racism and stereotypes propagated by this animation will also be discussed in order to provide evidence that media is guilty of perpetuating negative view of minorities.

Pocahontas

Pocahontas has been accused of inaccurately depicting Native-American life. By doing this it miseducates children to believe that Native American's led a certain life and behaved in certain ways. This causes the forming of stereotypes and misinformed judgments on the parts of these children. The movie Pocahontas deviates from the true historical story in many ways. The most significant deviation is Pocahontas' age and the nature of her relationship with John Smith. In the movie, Pocahontas is portrayed as a twenty-year-old woman who falls in love with John Smith, and he with her. "From what we know of the historical record, she [Pocahontas] was a child when they met, probably between 12 and 14, and Smith was about 27," says Thomasina Jordan, the head of the Virginia Council on Indians, and herself a Wampanoag Native-American (Rickey, 1995). Their relationship was that of a young girl and an older man. The relationship that the two share in the movie is totally fictitious and completely inaccurate (Rickey, 1995). Another deviation is John Smith's attitude towards the Native Americans. In the movie, Smith defends the Native-Americans and says that the land belongs to them and that the English are the intruders. In reality, Smith believed that the English had a right to the land and he was not an advocate for the Native-Americans. Disney also distorts the facts about Governor James Ratcliffe. In the movie they portray him as a villainous character. At the end of the movie he tries to shoot Chief Powhatan, but shoots John Smith instead. After he does this, his own men make him a prisoner and send him back to England. "According to the history books, none of these events occurred" (Rickey, 1995). The Governor was never a prisoner and he went back to England on his own because there was no gold in Virginia. Through these inaccuracies Disney altered the true history.

Sexism is also evident in this animation through its representation of Native-American women in a demeaning manner (Cortes, 2000). It portrayed the Native-American heroine as cute and curvaceous (Fleras and Kunz, 2001). Pocahontas is depicted not as an innocent child, but as a woman of 20, clad in form-fitting buckskin. According to Helen Roundtree, anthropologist and expert on Native-Americans in Virginia, "She didn't have long, flowing, black hair. She sported a shaved head, with a single rat-tail-like strand, like all of the other Powhatan Native-American girls of her time" (Di Vincenzo, 1995). Roundtree also asserted that Pocahontas was not tall, slender, and sexy, but that she resembled a short, stubby, male figure (Di Vincenzo, 1995). Disney changed the appearance of Pocahontas to make her look attractive, but why does a character in a children's movie need to be sexy?

Because of the embedded racism, sexism and stereotyping in the Disney animation described, if not properly guided when watching these films, children can approach life with misinformed ideas without even being aware of it. This is why it is important for parents and teachers to pose questions about the media, clarify and provide context and try to mitigate deleterious messages that they think young people may be receiving (Cortes, 2000). Awareness that the media including but not limited to children's animated films have powerful impacts on children is the first step in the process of breaking down these misrepresentations, but this is not enough, action must follow! Children have to be guided to critically acknowledge and dissect these misrepresentations so that they cease to exist. People of minority status, as a result of their gender, race, class or colour do not all act a certain way or talk a certain way or perform criminal acts as portrayed in all forms of media. In conclusion, the classroom is the perfect place to discuss and breakdown these stereotypes. "Schools should be model communities that mirror the kind of democratic society we envision. In democratic schools the curriculum reflects the cultures of the diverse groups within society, the languages and dialects that students speak are respected and valued" (Banks, 1997). Critical to making this happen is developing media literacy in our children. "Media literacy is an attempt to make each of us more comfortable, more critical, and more conversant in various methods of communication" (www.media-awareness.ca/eng/med/bigpict/billwal2.htm). Children need this to become aware of the inaccuracies and misrepresentations in the media. This will guide them to a greater and more accurate understanding of different cultures that make up our cultural mosaic of North America.

References

- Banks, J.A. (1995). Multicultural education: Historical development, dimensions, and practice. In J.A. Banks & C.A.M. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp.3-24). New York: Macmillan.
- Banks, J.A. (1997). *Educating Citizens in a Multicultural Society*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Bowen, W. (1996). *Citizens for Media Literacy*. [online]. Available: www.media-awareness.ca/eng/med/bigpict/mlwhat.htm (April 25, 2002).
- British Columbia Ministry of Education.(1999). www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/te11_12/apcmul.htm Canadian Heritage. Multiculturalism in Canada. [online]. Available: www.cpa.ca/cjbsnew/1996/ful_edito.html (April 25, 2002).
- Canadian Psychological Association. *Multiculturalism In Canada*. [online]. Available: www.pch.gc.ca/csp-pec/english/about/multi/index.htm (April 25, 2002).
- Cortes, C.E. (2000). *The Children Are Watching: How the Media Teach About Diversity*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- DiVincenzo, M. (1996). Pocahontas spotlight: ODU anthropologist considered top expert on Virginia's Indians. *Daily Press* 11 July 1995. CD NewBank
- Fleras, A. & Kunz J.L. (2001). *Media and Minorities: Representing Diversity in a Multicultural Canada*. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- May, S. (1999). *Critical Multiculturalism: Rethinking Multicultural and Antiracist Education*. Philadelphia: Falmer Press.
- Rickey, C. (1996). Filmmakers, historians, and Native Americans talk about "Pocahontas". *Philadelphia Inquirer* 19 June 1995. CD NewsBank.
- Walsh, B. *Expanding the definition of Media Literacy*. [online]. Available: www.media-awareness.ca/eng/med/bigpict/billwal2.htm (April 25, 2002).