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Education Studies

An Expansion on Ethnic Minorities and Women's Roles in Educational Media and the Theories Affecting Learners, Learning and Contemporary Society

Abstract

This paper explores the role and representation of ethnic minorities and women in educational mainstream media. Two key case studies are presented, namely Dora the Explorer and Black Panther as author discusses the impact of representation on young people. Social Constructivism and social learning theory are applied to consider theories affecting learners, learning and contemporary society. The author argues that society is beginning to see more programmes stepping away from gender and racial stereotypes. Further, the author concludes that theories such as social learning theory will continue to play a crucial part in children's social and cultural development.

Key words: Gender; Media; Race; Representation; Women

Introduction

In this paper, I discuss the role of ethnic minorities within mainstream media and how these minorities are represented within the media. The past year has been a hot bed of political and social movements, from Donald Trump's removal from office and the ongoing impeachment debate that rages around the 45th United States president, to the main reason for writing this paper; the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The importance of this issue cannot be understated, that in the year 2020, 155 years after the abolition of slavery within the United States,

the mistreatment, misrepresentation and vilification of ethnic minorities within media since 1885 has continued regardless of constitutional bills and changes to legislation. However, change is coming, society has changed, with users of social media being able to instantly stream and upload images and video, people are now taking a stand against this culture of injustice and bias calling individuals and corporations out when an act of injustice has been committed and forcing society to answer for its shortcomings. Society has also changed for the better, with stories and information being shared constantly, society has been given the opportunity to grow and learn from each other regardless of distance, social media is awash with stories of hope, positive interactions and videos of each other's pets. These factors are ensuring that many are standing up and taking notice of this theme of inequality. Alongside this, there has been a tidal wave of characters emerging, both in literature and media that are empowering, representing ethnic minorities and are spreading the message that not only are all people equal, gone are the days when Iron Man and Captain America™ (white rich middle aged super heroes) are needed to save the planet. Now both children and adults alike can look to Black Panther, Dora the Explorer and a collective of others that represent the rich diversity and culture that is reflected within society, on the big screen. This paper also offers an analysis of the learning theories that underpin children and young people's learning. This analysis is used to emphasise how important it is that children from all ethnic backgrounds see themselves represented on the screen and within the pages of their favourite book. The media examples selected are all aimed at children and young people in the early stages of their cognitive development, such as Dora The Explorer, Nell the Princess Knight and Doc McStuffin. However, there is also a focus upon the Black Panther and the impact this film and the actors in it has had upon young people; it has been argued that this is when children are most open to influential bias, stereotyping and also, potentially, developing undesirable characteristic behavioural traits (Oliver, 2001).

Firstly, this paper will examine Dora the Explorer and the impact she has had on children's media, whilst examining how her emergence in the early 2000's helped pave the way for an influx of multicultural characters within children's media. Within this case study is a consideration of the theory used to assist in the cognitive development of the watching audience, whilst also examining other media examples such as Doc McStuffin and Nell the Princess Knight. This paper will then go on to examine Black Panther; this example brought a Black superhero to the forefront and as he stood shoulder to shoulder with a collective of earth's greatest heroes, the character delivered an important message to society, that regardless of race, religion or background, each and every individual should stand shoulder to shoulder as equals. It is only right that as this special issue discusses the important of Black Lives Matter that Chadwick Boseman and his Black Panther are an integral part of this discussion when it comes to media.

Case Study 1: Dora the Explorer

"Dora the Explorer" (Dora) is a children's television (TV) show that was created by Nickelodeon in 2000 (Nickelodeon 2008). It features a multilingual child who, through the help of her audience, must complete a task or journey in each episode. Ryan (2010) states that Dora was a breakthrough for female role models when it came to educational programming as she was subjected to very few of the stereotypes that some roles associated with female characters can entail. Whilst Ryan (2010) also argues that educational television has been predominantly male led, Aubrey and Harrison (2004) further conclude that female TV role models have been generally subjected to sexism, gender bias and stereotype. Hence, an 8-year-old Latin American, without a male companion, whilst under duress, who is not rescued by a male, can be considered a monumental breakthrough for children's educational media. Dora has become a huge success; her program is shown in 75 countries worldwide and is broadcast in 32

different languages (Nickelodeon 2008). The boom caused by Dora prompted Nickelodeon to try to replicate the success that Dora was enjoying, this time with a male lead, in Go Diego Go. Although the show was another resounding success, it has not reached the heights hit by Dora (Schroeder-Arce, 2013).

With "Dora the Explorer" being a child's educational program, it has several learning and language theories embedded into each episode. For second language acquisition, it follows some aspects of Snow's (1977) theory of Child Directed Speech, for instance by breaking down language into small manageable chunks to make sure the younger portion of the audience are able to process the information given to them, whilst also fully immersing them in the program itself.

Dora the Explorer, it could be argued, was the first of a major step in the breaking through of ethnic minorities within the mainstream children's media. Other characters have since followed and slowly children's media is becoming a hub for equality; a place where skin colour, religion and gender have no hierarchy, everyone can be the superhero of their own story. Most significant for this paper is the implementation of Skinner's (1938) theory of operant conditioning. Dora's ideal demographic is children in the Preoperational stage of their cognitive development. At this age, children have started to develop what Piaget (1963) called 'magical beliefs'. Thus, as Dora embarks on her journey, when she pauses to interact with the audience, the children believe that they are interacting with her and without them, she cannot complete her journey. Therefore, the use of operant conditioning in Dora the Explorer could be considered a positive learning tool; one of the main aspects of the theory is to develop desirable behavioural traits. As McBain (2014) theorised, children can learn many desirable traits from these types of programs such as honesty, perseverance and bravery. Dora cements this reinforcement by always giving a positive reaction after a timed pause. This gives the audience time to put forward an answer and even if they

cannot repeat the chosen word, there is always positive feedback given. This, paired with the constant repetition of words and actions, concretes a solid basis for learning through reinforcement (Terry-Short et al., 1995).

As argued above, women portraying role models in children's educational media can be a very positive tool in the educators' arsenal. Espejo and Glaubke (2002) state that children who see people of their own gender and race on television will feel more socially important, they will feel included in their social environment and it paves the way for providing role models for the audience. Technology is becoming an ever-increasing part of our day-to-day lives, as access to the internet becomes easier and educational institutes find new and exciting ways to integrate technology into young children's learning (Young, 2001). Current research aims to assess whether this technology actually has a positive effect on young children's learning or whether young children be better off learning in a less technology dependent setting (see Christakis and Garrison, 2010).

Early Piagetian theory put forward a notion that children could learn by imitation and that drama, play and creativity come naturally to them and could serve an important role in their construction of meaning (Piaget 1962). Tommasello (2000) maintains that imitation is a key process in a child's cultural learning; this could suggest that Dora might also help develop cultural learning as she consistently asks her audience to imitate her actions. Thus, by utilising a child's imagination and the 'magical beliefs' that develop at this stage of cognition, programmes such as Dora the Explorer and Doc McStuffin (a show centred around a young girl who treats various ailments of her toys in the hopes of becoming a doctor like her mother), can educate a child on how socially important they are and help ensure that children of all races, cultures and genders have positive role models with a strong moral compass (Schroeder-Arce, 2013).

Bandura (1977) identified a theory of social learning in which children learn behavioural and cognitive traits through three means of stimuli, active, verbal and symbolic. He conducted experiments to see if young children would copy violent behaviour carried out by an adult on a Bobo doll (Bandura, 1977). This theory has been integrated into many forms of children's media, for example in Doc McStuffin children are encouraged to imitate the lead character's actions in order to find the cure for the toys and teddies that have visited her practise. Although imitation is usually visible, Bandura (1977) stated that social learning does not always result in a behavioural change and that it may change how a child sees an object/person or how they think in terms of forming opinions. Doc McStuffin portrays the four elements that are crucial for social learning to take place: attention, retention, reproduction and motivation (Bandura 1977). The higher the motivation for the audience, the higher the quality of learning.

Case study 2: Black Panther

This paper was designed to cover media aimed at younger children and the considerations of Dora the Explorer, Nell and Doc McStuffin have fulfilled this discussion. Yet, as this special issue is focused on the Black Lives Matter Movement, it would be remiss not to mention the release of Black Panther in 2018 and Black Panther's subsequent inclusion in the following Avengers films, which could be considered a major breakthrough within cinema. This further highlights the equality this movement seeks within society. The superhero genre is littered with rich white men swooping down to save the day, whilst defeating the bad guy (usually of a different ethnicity) (Hunt, 2019). For example, Superman, Batman, Captain America and Spiderman all are white men. Captain America is a superhero who is supposed to encompass the whole nation and in the original comics lead them to victory over the Nazis. His description, as a tall blonde hair blue eyed white man, is suspiciously similar to Adolf Hitler's description of his perfect Aaryan race (Stevens, 2015). However, when the lights went down, Black

Panther stepped onto the screen now not only a Black Superhero, but also defeating a white bad guy. This could also be considered as a significant moment in not only cinematic history but also a breakthrough for society as the fight for equality continues (Eckhardt, 2018). Black Panther's impact on young people cannot be understated; for so many this was their first superhero film on the big screen, a hero who not only represented them but their heritage as well. Young children worldwide all of a sudden had a host of games they could play on the playground in which they could be the hero and save the day. Merchandise became available so they could themselves wear Black Panther's mask and his costume, have action figures in his likeness so that in bedrooms and playrooms around the world children of all ages and races could play together and have characters of their own to inspire them.

Discussion: The impact representation has on young people

Richert, Robb and Smith (2011) maintain that children seeing others receiving reinforcement and punishment can be just as powerful as personal experience. Bearing this in mind, as class sizes rise, teachers may find it increasingly difficult to ensure each child receives the required level of motivation for social learning to take place (Blatchford et al., 2003). This could be a good starting point for early technology integration in the classroom. There are now virtual reality applications available that can place the teacher, or child, directly into the subject/story that they are learning. This would give the teacher the ability to provide the children with the correct level of motivation, whilst using tools, such as imitation and repetition, to ensure that social learning takes place. As technology advances, it may become possible for students to intermingle together in an interactive online learning environment and theories, such as Bandura's social learning theory (1977), will be built upon. Social learning theory indicates that, through

repetition and reproduction, the child can be given the opportunity to place him/herself in the environment of the characters in the media, they can begin to grasp the importance of positive role models, whilst explaining the destructive nature of negative ones.

Vygotsky (1978) put forward his theory on Social Constructivism. This has been encompassed into primary age children's media, for example, Dora and Doc McStuffin, furthermore, more recently, Nella the Princess Knight offers children's media a program that aims to step away from stereotypes aimed at women. Yes, Nella is a princess, however, she is also a knight - something that in mainstream media is not typically conveyed simply because of gender. The emphasis here is on Vygotsky's argument that knowledge is not simply constructed, it is co-constructed (Vygotsky, 1978). When looking at all three examples of children's media Dora, Doc McStuffin and Nella; the importance is not placed on individual problem solving, as it is accepted that the target audience can solve problems themselves.

Moreover, the impact of representation can be understood using Vygotsky's idea of a Zone of Proximal Development where a more knowledgeable other, in this case Nella, develops teamwork using the audience to solve problems that may be outside of their cognitive development stage. This would contradict Piaget's theory of Cognitive Development as he believed that children would be unable to process or digest any information that was outside of their development stage (Piaget, 1964). Vygotsky placed significant emphasis on language development in children. However, it was in this aspect that he argued other constructivists, such as Piaget, had failed to understand that learning is not just an individual acquiring knowledge through experience, but through the social nature of language knowledge acquisition, it is a collaborative effort (Vygotsky, 1978).

Nella, Dora and Doc McStuffin provide an ideal learning environment for Social Constructivism to take place. Using scenarios and objects that the audience may be unfamiliar with, the media encourages social interaction with both the on screen character and the child's parent/caregiver, resulting in the construction of knowledge between them (Vygotsky, 1978). Nella has a range of other characters that appear throughout her episodes and these characters also pose questions or give tasks to the audience that widen the social pool of interaction. This gives the viewers more people to interact with and form personal relationships with. Hence, the problems that the characters face become just as important to the audience as to Nella.

In memorandum: Chadwick Boseman

This paper has discussed the powerful impact that Black Panther has had on the Black community. The man behind the mask, Chadwick Boseman, sadly passed away in August 2020. Chadwick was an inspiration to children worldwide regardless of race, and his passing and the media coverage that followed was filled with stricken children visibly shocked that one of their heroes had passed. It is only fitting that a section of this paper if not the entirety is dedicated to a man who shouldered the burden of inequality within cinema. Marching his way forward to stand shoulder to shoulder with the very best superheroes in the galaxy, Chadwick inspired generations to be the hero of their own story and that they can save the day. At the same time, Chadwick instilled a sense of pride and passion in heritage as well as powerful lessons such as the importance of family, fighting for what is right and true and that regardless of who you are or where you come from, you have the ability to become the superhero you need and save the day. These lessons will never be forgotten, and the silver screen will never be the same without Black Panther and Chadwick.

Conclusion

To conclude, race and gender roles in children's media have changed dramatically in the last 15-20 years. Gone are the days when the heroic male character, usually white, would swoop in to save the 'damsel in distress'. Now, in one of the most socially aware periods of our generation, one would, perhaps, be more likely to find a male being rescued by Dora the Explorer or the tide of battle being turned by the arrival of Black Panther. The positive effect of having strong role models that represent both sexes are apparent and all races and backgrounds are represented fairly and most importantly equally. Whilst all of the media examples discussed in this paper stress the importance of working together no matter your gender or race, they all have lead role models of different ethnic backgrounds and are placed in roles that would have, stereotypically, been male dominated.

Theories like Bandura's social learning will continue to play a crucial part in children's social and cultural development. Operant conditioning can help children understand that their actions in the real world have similar consequences to those on screen, and that being a strong individual with a good moral compass is something to be desired. The media presented is a great example of how children's programs reflect changes in society. Society is now beginning to see more programmes stepping away from gender and racial stereotypes, they are able to include more viewers from different social and ethnic backgrounds. Thus, allowing children to use their imagination to learn, as well as delivering a more diverse and accurate perspective on equality and inclusion. However, the Black Lives Matter Movement and the importance of teaching equality within the classroom whilst delivering the same message in the programs that are aimed at young people from the media cannot be understated. The conversation has to continue until society achieves true equality, not just race equality but also gender and sexuality. Society has started the ball rolling and the following generations need to ensure it continues to roll. This paper

has highlighted several areas in which the media has begun to realise that the tone and message of toxic masculinity and the White man saving the day will no longer be tolerated as it does not reflect the true tone of today's society. These programs and actors that shoulder this burden should be championed and every programme aired and book published is surely a step in the right direction for equality and a victory for movements like Black Lives Matter.

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