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So Deeply Embedded: Using Inquiry to Understand the Influence of Popular Media in the Classroom

Christa Boske and Susan McCormack

Introduction

This inquiry originated with discussions among a group of colleagues' after viewing *Happy Feet*, a Warner Brothers film released in November 2006. This film, like many other animated films aimed at preschool and school-aged children, contained hidden messages.¹ Many of these hidden messages focused on social, political, and cultural issues that current and future educators face in schools and classrooms everyday.² Personal discussions and dialogues with current and future educators revealed that without critical analysis even adults are oblivious to hidden messages in popular films like *Happy Feet*.³ The authors concluded that while these messages were so deeply embedded in most media that many do not question how they shape personal values and daily interactions, collaborative dialogues can assist in uncovering messages related to significant social issues related to marginalization.

As former school leaders, the authors realized educators ostensibly recognize cultural difference. The reality, however, was that issues facing students from marginalized populations— inequities, cultural norms, inclusive practices, imbalance of power, and access to resources— were not addressed throughout the curriculum, including instruction through visual media. Administrators and teachers, those in power positions, did not seem to see or want to see these issues and, instead, chose to maintain the status quo by promoting diversity through celebrations rather than the lived experiences of those who felt isolated, abandoned, and unwelcome in schools.

Addressing this imbalance of power is one of the greatest challenges facing today's schools.⁴ Through our inquiry, we explored to what extent this distribution of power was embedded in media messages and to what extent these issues revealed themselves to young children, if given the opportunity for critical discourse. Popular media venues are not often associated with educational settings. However, when Dewey's experiential philosophies are considered— the idea that learning does not happen in the vacuum of school, but that children develop understanding of the world through societal influences— it is difficult to dispute media impact on what children learn.⁵ Popular media is the most powerful social phenomena in our world, especially visual media through film designed for young audiences.⁶

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The purpose of this critical inquiry was to examine the nature of popular media and its impact on children's social and cognitive development. The authors hope that, given the opportunity to participate in critical discourse related to media literacy, children's responses will contribute to building equitable learning communities.⁷ Building learning communities in diverse educational settings is achieved when educators encourage multiple perspectives in approaches to everyday pedagogical proceedings. In popular media, voices of marginalized populations are frequently silent or represented in negative ways. Beginning with the analysis of *Happy Feet*, the authors strived to better understand popular media's powerful hold on children's social development and to suggest critical ways educators can approach media within the context of constructing equitable learning communities.

Early Observations

As educators of preservice teachers and educational leaders interested in popular media's potential impact on children's learning, we began our inquiry when our small group eagerly lined up to see what we believed would be a light-hearted comedy with appealing animated characters starring popular voices. While several of us laughed out loud during the film, others left the theater seriously considering the moral implications of the messages portrayed. Our resulting collaborative discussions were the impetus for the second stage of this inquiry where we created and critically examined personal narratives about our immediate and subsequent reactions to the film. One of our group reflected:

I was first intrigued with the *Happy Feet* setting, Antarctica. From a purely instructional viewpoint, I wanted to examine different landscapes across the globe and to illustrate this through popular film. But the film was more than that. I was a little confused about the two different story lines: one story line dealing with a penguin that doesn't quite fit in, and the other story line dealing with environmental issues—and neither was completely sorted out. So, I immediately felt tension related to the plot, but nothing more.

After we regrouped to discuss the film, the critical discourse caused many of us to rethink our original reactions and to consider the film's powerful implications in greater depth. Mumble, a young penguin and the main character, was unique, although most of the other characters described him as "different." This level of analysis was important to one member, who presents media literacy lessons each semester where every discussion related to critically examining media messages, intended audience, and voice. The ensuing analytical discussion among the group, some of whom are versed in the specifics of cultural deficit theory, caused great concern for those versed in basic media literacy practices. Cultural deficit theory, in addition to established literature on racial minority identity development, uses a deficit-oriented perspective to explain physical, social, and emotional differences between historic racial minorities and white students.⁸ Analysis through a cultural deficit lens revealed that one member had overlooked culturally specific normative developmental perspectives by comparing her experiences to the normative developmental processes she observed as a white scholar.

The group agreed that the media literacy approach needed to move beyond basic analysis of the film to consideration of racial and social implications. After re-viewing the film, we compared its surface story to those of traditional fables that focus on social, political, and cultural

issues. However, there was deeper footage to explore. We perceived hegemonic practices through hidden messages embedded in the film and hypothesized their presence and societal significance often went unchallenged by audiences—children and adults alike. Most significant to the story line, Mumble communicated differently than other Emperor penguins. In the film, the most important lesson for young penguins to learn on the first day of school was, “Every penguin has a heart song. Why, if you have no heart song, you’re no penguin at all.” Mumble’s inability to sing was ridiculed by all, as was his true talent—tap dancing. The dialogue strongly implied that his inability to sing heart songs threatened the legacy of the Emperor penguin colony, and the exaggerated characterization of Mumble’s difference suggested that something was innately wrong with him.

The Automated Teller

Happy Feet resembles many stories which portray the main character as out of sync with others in the community.⁹ In previous generations, childhood favorites were repeated by someone old enough to interpret and transmit the “moral of the story” (from a dominant cultural perspective) so that children absorb the cultural lesson within. In contemporary storytelling through the media, the teller is often automated and embodies the power and privilege associated with the dominant culture such that children are still likely to construct meaning from a dominant cultural perspective. Because the automated teller reinvents the process by which the story is shared, the main character’s “weaknesses” are intricately woven into a deficit perspective. This approach perpetuates the subordination of marginalized groups, with implications for race and racism.¹⁰

Mumble’s differences were perceived as unredeemable. They were frowned upon by his family, schoolmates, teachers, colony elders, and Emperor penguin community. His father, embarrassed by Mumble’s awkward appearance (fluffy, slow-to-mature feathers, and blue eyes) and behavior (tap dancing), declared, “It just ain’t penguin, son. It just ain’t penguin.” His father attempted to hide Mumble from his mother and prevent him from speaking out in public. In school, classmates laughed and teased Mumble when they heard of his inability to sing a heart song. They were stunned when he danced his song, and they stared at him. They ridiculed his appearance and called him “Fuzzball.” The elders, who represented the powerful dominant culture, called Mumble an abomination and ultimately banished him from the colony. How often does this scenario play out with asynchronous children in schools? ¹¹ Combined, Mumble’s differences emphasized that he did not fit the expected cultural norms within the Emperor penguin community. Educators who use cultural deficit theory lens easily recognize the process of marginalization. Can children also see the inequities portrayed in *Happy Feet*?

After being banished from his colony, Mumble discovered another colony of penguins and was immediately drawn to a group who identified themselves as “misfits.” One of them informed Mumble that his father thought he was a “loser” too. The misfits accepted Mumble into their penguin community and considered his differences strengths. Mumble’s dancing, which was similar to the misfits’ preferred behavior, was considered an asset for attracting a mate. Through a critical media lens, educators can compare Mumble’s journey to the plight of students who do not fit into the mainstream.¹²

Critical Inquiry through Media

The assumptions behind this critical inquiry were shaped by the work of critical observers like Marshall and Rossman.¹³ In a manner similar to that of McClare and Apple, the authors argue that popular media reflects dominant societal values and, as such, involved power issues.¹⁴ More specifically, media reflect a white male viewpoint. As a result, other social groups are often portrayed negatively. Unfortunately, dominant cultural values are indoctrinated through film leaving some students feeling marginalized, which in turn prevents the development of a real sense of community in the learning environment. It is imperative for current and future educator to understand the complexity of children’s knowing through popular media.¹⁵

The known is socially constructed through popular media’s stories. Children interact with media, subconsciously developing a sense of self and values. Negative images aimed at marginal groups can become self-images for school-aged children who do not possess the tools to confront or challenge the status quo. To comprehend media’s tendency to further marginalize students, educators must critically examine their own suppositions regarding race, gender, and ethnicity in order to recognize their representation in mainstream media. To build a sense of community in classrooms, one that seeks equitable practice, educators must ask student inquirers to construct new, critical interpretations of media’s influence, ones they may not have previously considered.¹⁶ Only then will they have the moral impetus to construct more critical methods for media analysis. As Darling-Hammond noted, anything less is counter to teaching equity.¹⁷

Understanding Difference

Schools, universities, and schools of education have undergone dramatic changes due to educational reform efforts. Increases in the number of children from historic racial minority groups, children living in poverty, and English language learners are changing the composition of schools in the United States.¹⁸ With this in mind, two camps of educators have evolved—geneticists and multiculturalists/reconstructionists. Educators adhering to the multiculturalist/reconstructionist ideology believe that specific knowledge and skills are necessary to work with culturally diverse groups of students.¹⁹ Multiculturalists assert that understanding cultural variables is of primary importance in the education of aspiring teachers and school leaders. Multiculturalists contend that children absorb beliefs about superiority from sources embedded in the social, political and economic structures.²⁰ This assertion leads to the belief that preparation programs must promote cultural responsiveness by considering how race, gender, sexual orientation, language, and other variables influence student learning.

As researchers, the authors recognize the need to adapt our curriculum and pedagogical practices to the culturally diverse needs of students. As Ladson-Billings stated, anything else is unacceptable.²¹ However, even though the United States is experiencing increases in the number of marginalized populations, multiculturalists and reconstructionists still represent a small number of educators nationwide. Despite the enormous amount of theory and research focusing on marginalized student populations, preparation programs remain unchanged.²² If multiple cultural perspectives are not studied by future educators, then traditional monocultural practices will perpetuate the marginalization of some children.²³

Critical examination of embedded beliefs helps educators to better interpret difference or social characteristics outside of the cultural majority.²⁴ Without critical reflection, educators may overlook hidden messages regarding the influence of difference from the cultural majority. Overlooking these has far-reaching consequences for children served in schools. These messages constitute important parameters for ethnic identity development, social cognition, ego identity, gender, and race.²⁵ According to Lewis, when culturally biased messages are hidden, their impact is far more resilient.²⁶ Marginalized children are likely to perceive their differences as obstacles rather than strengths.²⁷ These negative attitudes toward difference might perpetuate a "why try" attitude. As children continue to experience their world, they construct their realities about the world in which they live. These realities are constructed by the beliefs, social contexts and values of those around them.²⁸ As children's identities evolve, they not only imitate what they see around them, but they also actively process images and patterns of behaviors which include families, friends, and specifically, the media.²⁹ Nurturing the abilities of children to foster images and behaviors of care and understanding for others is critical. Children are not only taught prejudices, but they are also taught how to accept or reject others,³⁰ which was illustrated by the colony's rejection of Mumble.

Culturally responsive educators are responsible for facilitating learning communities in which unconscious assumptions about difference are challenged. Educators might begin by examining their assumptions about marginalized populations. In order to unlearn these assumptions, they might examine how unconscious assumptions impact their educational approaches, specifically in relationship to working with children who do not resemble the cultural majority. Culturally biased assumptions were apparent in *Happy Feet*: Mumble's differences—methods of expression and physical appearance—were perceived negatively by his teachers, peers, parents, and community. Mumble's teachers described him as hopeless and lamented their "failure" to teach him to be like the majority. These biases are evident when educators blame children from marginalized populations for low-performing schools rather than examine the impact of social, political, and economic systems—as well as their own assumptions—on student learning.

Critical Media Literacy

Combating the problems associated with deficit thinking requires a paradigmatic shift in thinking. According to Kincheloe, educators' focus should be grounded in justice and equality.³¹ This shift requires all stakeholders to be involved in collaborative discussions about the purpose of schooling and who is served by the process. Educators must closely examine current practice to ask difficult questions about curricula and the level of inclusiveness. The systemic occurrence of punitive learning environments that exclude children who fall outside the cultural majority must be recognized and transformed. Educators can develop alternative practices that empower all students to participate in curricula designed to reflect the entire learning community's interests.

Children are exposed to media's influence at young ages without benefiting from a systematic analysis of the content or its purpose.³² Engaging in media literacy strategies may counter this phenomenon. Ten years ago, Megee proposed that media literacy be taught in every classroom at every level—an educational strategy already practiced by educators in many countries, but one that has gained little

ground in American schools. Imagine the improvements that could be underway. In a media literate society, film-makers would likely be more aware of and sensitive to stereotypical, negative representations of marginalized populations. For example, in *Happy Feet*—a film deemed suitable for young children—the Macaroni penguins, referred to as "misfits," reflected a marginalized community, specifically a Latino/a population.

Media literacy introduces cultural consciousness and understanding of the relationship between media and culture. Critical media inquiry moves beyond this examination to introduce a critical vocabulary. Horn argued that critical vocabulary delves deeply into tough concepts like hegemony, hierarchy, privilege, resistance, oppression, and marginalization.³³ When these concepts are used to expose the inherent power of popular media's representations, positive learning opportunities result.³⁴ Instead of allowing students to passively watch films like *Happy Feet*, educators can encourage children to critically discuss and challenge embedded messages and concepts that limit social efficacy.

Conclusion

Educators can serve as a positive force when they encourage students to develop their strengths by recognizing how their identities are shaped by social, cultural, and political forces, and how these are represented in media. Like students, educators also make sense of their surroundings through interactions with these forces. As a result, media's subtle hegemony also penetrates educators' belief systems. These experiences educators' shape attitudes and beliefs about schooling marginalized children.

How can educators shift their thinking from a deficit perspective to a strengths perspective, thereby empowering students to participate in their own learning process? Implementing critical inquiry into media provides educators with a means to tailor to the needs of children who are marginalized, which is critical to eliminating inequity. Continuing to promote the status quo rather than challenging negative portrayals of students who differ from the norm is detrimental to students' progress and the development of equitable learning communities. Schools must improve the experiences of children from historic minority groups, children living in poverty, English Language Learners, children in special education, and children who share other differences. Recognizing media's powerful impact on students, educators must assess school practices, including the use of media that equates difference with dysfunction.

Based upon this inquiry, the authors recommend a series of reflective inquiries for current and future educator to assist them in critically analyzing mainstream media in public school settings. (See the Appendix for suggested activities.) Also recommended is the introduction of critical inquiry (as it relates to media literacy) into all educational settings, especially K-12 levels of public schools, thereby equipping students with the skills needed to dissect this media-driven society.

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Appendix

Suggested Activities for Current and Future Educators: Inquiry Related to Societal Issues

- I. Suggested questions to stimulate critical discussion regarding the influence of media messages.
 - A. What are the demographics of the school community?
 - B. How do we understand difference?
 - C. How did we develop this understanding?
 - D. What are the needs of children with difference?
 - E. How is our school attempting to address these issues?
 - F. How is the state, nation or world confronting these issues?
 - G. What historical events influence the experiences of children with differences?
 - H. What are the current cultural, social, political, economic contexts that influence this issue?
 - I. What do we believe are the most effective approaches to create positive change for children with difference?

- II. Suggested questions to guide critical analysis of media's potential impact on the school community.
 - A. What roles do media play in providing a foundation for our beliefs and attitudes toward difference?
 - B. How does this understanding influence how we design curriculum and deliver instruction?
 - C. What is the role of media in curriculum?
 - D. What school policies influence the use of media?
 - E. What tools do we use to analyze media and its influence on student learning?
 - F. What steps will we take to assure that we help students learn to critically examine the influence of film?
 - G. How will we measure whether or not we understand the influence of media on student learning?
 - H. What new knowledge have we learned about the influence of media on student learning?
 - I. How will decisions be made regarding the use of media in schools?