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Black Women Writing Autobiography

Autobiography in Multicultural Education

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Autobiographical Introduction

As a young Black woman coming of age and living in the Deep South during the civil rights movement, I had a deep concern for how Black people were perceived and judged, especially by people who knew nothing about us. My experiences during that time period fostered my fascination with writing autobiography. Historically, Black Americans have commonly employed the genre of autobiography to tell their stories (Harris, 2003). It was originally a means of appealing to White society for acceptance as human beings.

I find that writing autobiography gives me the opportunity not only to explore my history from a personal perspective, relative to the political happenings of the times, local happenings, Black community events, academic experiences, and other occurrences that somehow impinge on my life, but also to revisit those times from a “removed” perspective. I am able to visit my life as an “other.” I also examine my autobiographical writings in light of the many ways I identify myself. The impact of these facts also affects how I respond to my life events today, not only in my personal interactions but also in my interactions as an educator, with my colleagues, and with my students. Certainly each teacher’s identity and understanding thereof also impact his or her interactions with his or her colleagues and their students, depending on the backgrounds and the identities of those colleagues and students.

Autobiography can also be a means to share one’s history and culture with others. The production of autobiography opens avenues for individuals to examine how the things their parents taught them, their formal education, and

cultural and life experiences all impact who they are and how they perceive, react to, and interact with others. The sharing of insights gained from writing autobiography allows others to have a better understanding of the writer. Autobiography is therefore a valuable tool in multicultural education, where students and teachers both desire to learn about each other.

This chapter specifically examines Black women writing autobiography and how the use of autobiography writing by teachers as well as students can be employed in multicultural education to develop better interactions between the teachers and students and between diverse students in the classroom. Although this chapter is primarily based on research related to the autobiographical writings of Black women, this research is transferable and useful in the application of autobiographical writing in multicultural educational and in other multicultural settings.

Why Use Autobiography in Multicultural Education?

When I enter a new class of students, I always begin by introducing myself and asking them to tell the class and me about themselves. My effort in this exercise is to get the students to think about their classmates and to consider and realize that there are different cultural perspectives. As time passes in the conduct of the class, I provide the opportunity for the students to share more and more of themselves and their experiences that are relevant to how they perceive the concepts we are studying. I find this to be effective in getting the students to open up to each other and to me in the classroom, and I have discovered that it fosters more camaraderie among the students.

Autobiography by Black people in America, as indicated previously, originally took the form of slave narratives, produced to show White people that slaves were indeed human beings, with all the same human qualities attributed to White people. Slave narratives were written also to appeal to the mercy of their White readers. These narratives would eventually be useful beyond that, however, to help uncertain Black people, generations later, define their identities from the life stories of former slaves. The slave narratives would give 20th century Black Americans brief encounters with their past in the words of their ancestors.

Despite the fact that most Black people during slave-era America could not read or write, or even had the time or freedom to think in terms of “self-identity,” the importance of the slave narratives to the lives of 20th and 21st century Black Americans cannot be overestimated. The descriptions of Black women were particularly negative in the early literature about Black people, often presenting them as fat and doting mammies or as seductive temptresses and Jezebels, seducing and conquering with sex (Christian, 1985; Fox-Genovese, 1988). Still other stereotypical images of Black women include the submissive,

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unattractive, cooking-and-cleaning Aunt Jemima and the manipulative, controlling “Superwoman” (Bracks, 1998). The only way these images can be changed is for Black women to do it themselves, by writing their own stories about their lives (Christian, 1985; Harris, 2003). This simple act of penning one’s own stories is a way for Black women to create their own identities, rather than those formerly created and promoted by White authors, filmmakers, television producers, and other Whites with access to the media (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Gray, 1989).

It has become necessary, for many reasons, for Black women to dispose of these exaggerated, negative, and false images of themselves and to create their own self-images. One major reason is that the previous sources of these images were unreliable and based their constructions on stereotypical, prejudiced, and distorted representations and ideologies. This is particularly troublesome because, generally, society in America bases its interactions with, and opinions of, Black women and men on those false stereotypical images. The need to challenge and reinvent the images of Black people and other people of color, and particularly women of color, has led to the establishment of autobiography as an important primary way of creating new images and encountering old images in multicultural classrooms. The redefinition of the self through the writing of autobiography places power into the hands of the writer to define who she is and to share her self-identity with the readers. This is the initiation of the changing of global societal views of Black women.

The Autobiographical Process

Aside from the fact that previous sources were unreliable, another major reason for destroying these historically negative images is that they have resulted in Black women being neglected or treated as inferiors in American society. This has impacted how Black women perceive themselves, as well as how they interact with others. There is a need for Black women to write their lives, as much for the correcting of the history of their lives as for the personal benefits they gain from engaging in the process of developing autobiography. The autobiographical process permits the writer to think deeply about her life and to develop a positive self-identity. The creation of autobiography is, in these ways, a therapeutic process that is useful to all who write their lives.

When I first wrote my autobiography for sharing in a classroom setting, I was able to express my anger against the “boxes” to which I was confined by society, especially by people who knew nothing about me. It gave me an opportunity to vent my feelings. The descriptions and images that were identified with me simply because I am a Black woman impinged on my self-esteem, self-concept, and ultimately my self-identity. This came out in my autobiographical

writings. It was depressing, and it impacted all aspects of my life, but, in my writing, I was able to let go of some of the animosity that was keeping me from moving away from the unwarranted depictions that held me in a place that did not reflect who I really am.

Very often when I read the autobiographical writings of other Black women I am enthralled by their stories. I realize, however, that audiences who know no better may think that the story of one Black woman is the story of all or most Black women, including my story. This disturbs me because the continuing implication is the old, worn-out cliché that “all Black people are alike.” Although Black people are still judged as a group, we are not all the same, or even nearly so, and I see that the sharing of my story will add to the literature on Black people, and especially to that of Black women.

One of the things I consider it most important to do in my autobiography is to acknowledge my love and pride in Black people globally. However, I also find it necessary to inform readers that I am a Black American, not an African, and cannot claim any particular African heritage, as I have never traced my lineage. The act of tracing my ancestry beyond my great grandparents would be most difficult because of the rape of Black women by White men both during and after slavery, the absence of records documenting the family lineage of Black people in the South, and other circumstances that grossly impact the accuracy of such an effort. I also add in my writing that I know definitively that I am not *pure* anything and that my heritage is most certainly as mixed as it can possibly be, considering that I am definitely a descendent of slaves.

Until recently, self-ethnographic writing was considered suspect and largely ignored by the academic community because it was considered to be too personal and subjective to be of any real value in the world of scholarly research. Now, however, the self-ethnographic research tool is considered to be a primary resource for the scholarly investigation of peoples and cultures (Cobham & Collins, 1987; Stanley, 1993), which is why autobiography is an excellent tool for the study and discovery of other cultures.

Black women are beginning to experience the documentation of their lives as an important way to utilize their experiences and knowledge, for the expansion of their knowledge of self and others (Davies, 1999), as well as for sharing this self-discovery device with others. At the same time, the self-ethnographic process is a form of self-reflexivity that is at the core of methodological principles, “not in terms of self-absorption, but rather in order to use the interrelationships between researcher and other to inform and change social knowledge” (p. 3). This self-reflexivity is a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference (Davies, 1999) in which the writer considers deeply the content of her writing with the intent of answering questions that she has about her own life story and of anticipating the questions that readers might have. The following brief excerpt from my autobiography illustrates this point:

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Before I started school at six years old, I had experienced riding in the back of the city buses, and sitting in front with my aunt or my mother when they were taking the White children in their care some place. I realised that I was Black and lived in a society where the White majority hated me because of the colour of my skin, that my family was poor, and that I would have to work like mad to get myself out of poverty. I think that I must have started working hard from the day I realised these things, and I've been working hard ever since, to rise above the racism in America. This was not the way childhood should have been and it made for some pretty tough kids. Some of us would survive the marginalisation, while others would surely perish. Many of us have perished. (Harris, 2003, pp. 122–123)

Although autobiography as ethnographic research has been criticized as a self-indulgent and narcissistic literary genre (Davies, 1999), wherein a linear and goal-oriented description of the individual achievements of a significant person, usually a White man, is given, the autobiographies of these men are usually widely accepted and highly respected documents. By the same token, the autobiographical writings of the nonfamous—women, and especially Black women—are usually criticized and afforded very little purposeful relevance (see Butterfield, 1974).¹ The writing of these autobiographies as self-ethnographic, cultural, and self-reflexive processes can offer the implementation of a new and different approach to both the interrogation of the personal experiences of Black women and the exchange of cultural knowledge in multicultural educational settings and in other settings.

The Parameters of Autobiography

Autobiography theorists and analysts have only recently begun to consider the importance of Black women's autobiographies in any scenario (Jelinek, 1980). Thus, the relevance of this genre in the multicultural educational setting is in dire need of significant scholarly research and further interrogation and examination. Aside from recognition of the importance of Black women's autobiographies, the past several years have seen considerable debate among theorists about the definition of autobiography. Stanley describes it as "ideological accounts of 'lives,' which in turn feed back into everyday understandings of how 'common lives' and 'extraordinary lives' can be recognised" (1992, p. 3). According to Stanley, the writer essentially tells the reader the story that she wants them to have and writes with that purpose, and not from the perspective of simply revealing her story to the world. Bearing this in mind, the autobiography writer may or may not decide to write a "true" story. That is, the writer may decide to present her story using fictional details and characters that for her may more fully convey the important themes of her life.

Autobiography is a genre of writing that is encompassed in the term *auto/biography*, which has over the past decade become representative of the

many ways an individual can tell her life story (Stanley, 1992). Auto/biography includes fictional writing as well as “biography, autobiography, diaries, letters, social science productions, and uses of written lives or all forms of life writing and also the ontological and epistemological links between them” (p. 3). The practice of auto/biography involves the compilation of the history of a life, as perceived in memory and depicted by the person who lives or lived it (Harris, 2003).

Comprehensive auto/biography includes information from interviews with the writer (Smith, 1954), the words of acquaintances of the writer, any written documentation about the life of the writer, spoken communications, video and photographic data, fictive literary devices, and even other writing genres such as memoirs, diaries, journals, poetry, and novels based on the life of the person being documented (Stanley, 1992; Stein, 1933/1971, 1937/1985. See also Emecheta, 1972/1994, 1974; Jabavu, 1963). This opens incredible vistas for the creation of auto/biography and for increased accessibility to people wanting to create auto/biography. It also allows the opportunity for making life stories and life choices more understandable, both to those creating the auto/biography and to those reading and observing these auto/biographies. This interpretation of auto/biography is empowering to those who want to exercise the right to determine their self-identities and how their life stories will ultimately be told.

Initially, autobiographies such as the slave narratives were historical treatises that documented the lives of the people associated with the writer, as well as the life of the writer. Black writers of autobiography were especially rooted in this historical format and often left out any information that might be a clue to the reader about the writer’s personal life. They wrote strictly about the general lifestyles of their time and place (Prince, 1831/1993, 1856/1990; Truth, 1850/1968) or about their professional accomplishments or their travels (Seacole, 1857/1988). More personal works came out of the religious testimonials of the times. Recently, Black women have started writing more personal autobiographies that pay attention to the personal details of their lives, such as how they handle different kinds of relationship situations, family issues, financial problems, and personal events that could affect their acceptance in their communities (Harris, 2003), their workplaces, and society in general.

Black women are expected to focus their autobiographical writing on political issues instead of personal lifestyle issues (Smith, 1984), which is sometimes problematic for them. Sometimes Black women want to tell their stories from personal perspectives. Although political issues are important, there is a great deal of knowledge to be garnered from the autobiographical writings that depict personal lifestyle issues as well. This is not saying that it is necessary to omit the political aspects of the writer’s life, but rather it is necessary to iterate the importance of other aspects of life. The discussion of personal lifestyle issues can undoubtedly reveal how the writer copes with everyday hardships

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that rarely, if ever, come up when autobiography is written from a primarily political or historical perspective.

When writing my autobiography I found it difficult to write from a strictly personal perspective, because it was just as important for me to write about political issues that were happening at certain times in my life that also affected me personally. I could not have written my autobiography without writing about the civil rights movement or about moving from the segregated South to the home of my White foster parents in the northeast. I therefore intertwined the two perspectives to tell what I feel is a comprehensive story.

Although I have written quite openly about particular issues that I consider personal to me, I have been reluctant to write explicitly about my sex life and intimate relationships. Those experiences and relationships have deeply impacted the quality of my life and have made the difference in many of the decisions I have made in my life. My reluctance to make them a part of my autobiographical record comes from the exposure that writing and publishing would give to these personal aspects of my life. It also comes from my attempts at exercising discretion and my desire to protect myself and others from unwelcome scrutiny by unknown readers who might not have my best interest in mind when scrutinizing me closely, from my own revelations.

In my close reading and analysis of the majority of the autobiographical writings in this research, I found that the authors often do not give their physical descriptions to the reader. Many Black women writers, including myself, give more details of surroundings when describing events than they give of self-descriptions. The reader will rarely find information in these autobiographies such as height, weight, face or body descriptions, or other indicators of appearance. Self-descriptions are strong indicators of the writer's self-esteem and self-identity and are important pieces of information for the reader in developing accurate perceptions of the autobiography writer. This is true for me as well. I do not describe my perceptions of my physical attributes or what I feel about how I look. I do, however, include photos of myself and of my family.

Many Black women writers of autobiography are now including more personal photographs in their books, in lieu of the previously absent, written descriptions of their physical appearances. The avoidance of physical descriptions also points to the deeply personal nature of autobiography. Most Black women autobiography writers are reluctant to reveal information that their families or communities might consider to be too personal and an invasion of the privacy of the writer or the privacy of others who might be mentioned in the autobiography. Ultimately, the inclusion of personal information in autobiography presents a more rounded and complete picture of who the person really is, even though it may leave the writer open to attack from the reader:

Bracks suggests that when producing autobiography, the author must be open to the revelation of things that are usually kept secret, and that may even be so buried

that they are nearly completely forgotten. However, the choice to fully reveal themselves and admit their vulnerabilities to an openly hostile world requires lack of shame, as well as pride in who they are. (Harris, 2003, p. 56)

Some Black women theorists believe that the writing of autobiography is a way of creating self and community (Harris, 2003; Kolawole, 1997), as much as of sharing it. The creation of self and community are as much sociological explorations of the writer's environment as an examination of the individual's life. It is also accepted by feminist theorists that the social and individual are symbiotically linked (Davies, 1999; Stanley, 1993), therefore making the use of autobiography as ethnographic social research acceptable as a reflection of the communal values informing the writer's unconscious as expressed in the autobiographical writings (Harris, 2003). The Black woman who writes autobiography thus becomes a historian of her Black community.

Black Women Sharing Their Lives in Multicultural Settings

My autobiographical writing expresses my perception that certain things, both positive and negative, that happened in my Black community affected my self-identity as much as the positive and negative things that I encountered outside that community. Certainly, the fact that I am a child of the civil rights era significantly impacted my identity. My writing reflects those themes most important to me—equality for Black people and my self-identity, gender, personal challenges, and family issues. I think, write, and speak from as the perspective of a Black woman living in a significantly racist society, where the majority of the people have some sort of bigotry toward Black women.

Sometimes, people who are familiar with me and who have read my autobiography will express to me that our memories of the same events are slightly or even grossly different. This is one of the reasons why autobiography is sometimes considered to be unreliable for research purposes. It is usually based entirely on memory, which is always subjective, and more often than not, on faulty memories. Autobiography is nonetheless a useful tool for learning the attitudes and beliefs of the writer and can provide a wealth of information about his or her culture and environment.

The sharing of autobiographical information with my students, and between the students, has positively affected the dynamics in my classrooms. When the students learn about their teacher, and about each other, and perceive that they can trust their environment, they become more open to participating in class and to sharing and learning. In a recent sociology class that I taught, there was a Gullah² student from South Carolina, who expressed to

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me that she was often not comfortable in her classes because she spoke in a different dialect from the other students, both Black and White. At the beginning of the class I had the students introduce themselves, as I always do, and because many of the students had been in my classes in the past, they were very open and spoke about their lives and goals quite easily. When the Gullah student heard the stories of the other students, she decided that she would be comfortable speaking in this environment and felt that she could tell her classmates about her discomfort in expressing herself in class. She was well received by the other students and became one of the most outspoken students in the class. This initial self-revealing act of sharing autobiographical information made a significant difference in how this young woman was able to become a viable part of the class and in how her peers were able to accept her and show her the respect she needed, so that she was able to freely and willingly participate in class discussions.

Readers' and listeners' reactions to personal autobiographies often prevent Black women from revealing important personal and cultural information. This almost always happens in the classroom as well. The concern with reader responses calls attention to the fact that the readers impact the interpretation of the autobiography, based on the readers' cultural backgrounds, personal idiosyncrasies, and other factors, such as geographic location. Therefore, it is important that the readers (or consumers) of the autobiographical products engage with the stories from culturally sensitive positions. This means that the reader has to be willing to hear what the writer is saying, without prejudging the writer's perspective.

The reader has the responsibility of giving the writer the opportunity to be heard, to be safe to write, and to speak freely. The reader should engage with the autobiography with an open mind rather than an overly critical attitude, paying attention to whether, and how, the writer moves from a childlike position to one of empowerment, this is a more appropriate critique of the life story than for the reader to engage with the work with the attitude that he or she is going to try to find holes in the story and to figure out whether or not the writer is being truthful. An effort to find the message in the text, not search for problems in it, will afford the reader a deeper understanding of the writer's world and of her real story.

The reader needs to keep in mind that the Black woman writing her life story is probably writing her autobiography in order to free herself from the stereotypical and derogatory images that have been inflicted on her historically (Bracks, 1998; Davies, 1994). The reader should also be mindful that the writer is sharing her intimate details, such as how she defines or identifies herself, the things that are important to her, and her beliefs and desires (Harris, 2003). The stories presented are in the words, voices, and artistic crafts of the women creating them and are their ways of obliterating the notions that previously

hindered them, keeping them in the margins. These autobiographies challenge the readers to know the writers and to see how they live.

Carole Boyce Davies (1994) advises readers that

Black women's writing . . . should be read as a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing. In cross-cultural, transnational, translocal, diasporic perspectives, this reworking of the grounds of "Black women's writing" redefines identity away from exclusion and marginality. (p. 4)

The readers' consideration of these factors is a way of constructively listening to what the writers are saying about the condition of their lives relative to their feelings of belonging or not and their prospects of dealing with and overcoming their feelings of alienation (Harris, 2003). These writings require a reading that incorporates the examination of the layers of meaning incorporated into the texts, which lose their meaning when read simplistically. The reader who wants to gain something from the reading of the Black woman's text must read it with an understanding of the struggle of the author and while making a linguistic interrogation beyond the language on the pages. Bracks (1998) suggests that the readers explore the writings, keeping in mind the "multidimensionality they express in language choice while being sensitive to the risks they [the writers] are taking making community knowledge available to an outside audience" (p. 21). Still, in any critical examination of the autobiographical writings of Black women, certain aspects of the writing must be highlighted and even deconstructed (Bracks, 1998). This examination should not be a hostile act, but one in which the reader engages with the text and accepts the possibility that the examination will yield useful information for better understanding the writer, her community of origin, and especially how she self-identifies. The same holds true when the writer of an autobiography shares his or her work with a group of people, such as in a multicultural education environment. This sharing can be between teachers of different cultures, between teachers and their students, or between students and their classmates.

In a recent class that I taught on Black women writers, I engaged my students by having them write about specific events in their lives that impacted them greatly as children. Although the students were all Black women, in the sharing of their writings we learned very important differences in lifestyles, backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs. The sharing of their stories allowed these students to see their classmates in a more personal light, which helped them to bond in the class and feel safe to share their lives with each other.

In another more multicultural and diverse class setting it was harder to establish a sense of togetherness among the students. The number of students was significantly higher as well, which is always a hindrance to the establishment of feelings of safety and camaraderie. However, when the students were

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requested to share personal experiences related to the social sciences concepts that they were learning, the students became eager to participate once the sharing started, and often the discussions had to be cut short so that the class could move on, because so many of the students wanted to share their life experiences. The discussions were even more involved and participatory when the students were sharing written autobiographical pieces on the topic of discussion.

As a writer of autobiography, I deliberately attempt to read my own writing in ways in which I think most readers will read my work. I try to be aware of the reader's impact on the text itself. I pay particular attention to the "hostile" reader. Although some of my writings are okay for me to read privately, the same text must be reconsidered and revised with the hostile reader in mind. I sometimes decide to change my text to prevent negative repercussions resulting from my revealing too much of my beliefs, my feelings about myself, and my feelings about others in my life. Ultimately, I often determine that the privacy rights of others in my life deserve the highest consideration. Even though I may alter the details of my text, I write to express what life has been like for me, as well as to release some of my anger and pain over perceived mistreatment and marginalization that I experience as a Black woman in the often hostile society in which I live.

Unfortunately, Black women writers of autobiography often fail to discuss feelings of anger and rage that may accompany their experiences of marginalization, harassment, and hostility associated with racial bigotry. Instead, the writer will usually focus on diplomacy, forgiveness, and humility. The writing of autobiography is a means of harnessing the negativity that these women encounter and survive. Audre Lorde writes,

Women of Color in America have grown up within a symphony of anger, at being silenced, at being un-chosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service. And I say symphony rather than cacophony because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart. We have had to learn to move through them and use them for strength and force and insight within our daily lives. Those of us who did not learn this difficult lesson did not survive. And part of my anger is always libation for my fallen sisters. (Lorde, 1984, p. 129)

When students in the classroom write about anger in their lives, they tend to express their anger in frustrated or muted voices and seem okay with the fact that they are only beginning to be comfortable enough to write about their anger. The "muted voices" refers to the lack of development in their writings on the topic of anger. The students might express that they are mad or angry, without giving any details about the extent of their anger, how it is expressed, or how they deal with it.

The issue of validation of the autobiographical text is another common concern for Black women autobiography writers and may very well be a concern of students in writing their lives for the first time. Proving the truth of the autobiographical work can sometimes keep students from writing “true” documents and others from giving their full consideration to what the author is saying in her autobiography.

Some theorists say that all autobiography is fiction or that the retelling of past events inherently employs the use of fictive devices (e.g., Eakin, 1990; Stanley, 1993; Stein, 1937/1985). The fictive devices are many and virtually impossible to delimit and categorize because they are limited only by the mind of the imaginative writer. Students should be encouraged to make use of fictive devices to convey their stories. The autobiographical work should not only be a retelling of the facts as the author sees them but also be a way that the author conveys a sense of something that has deeply impacted her life and who she is and that she wants to share with others because of its great importance to her.

The use of autobiography in multicultural education is a concept that is rapidly taking hold in teacher education. It is one that should be actively promoted by educators for its value to multicultural education, as well as in helping teachers and students to identify where they can improve their interactions with people who are different from them. Autobiography is a way of introducing students to different cultures when the students are required to write about themselves and to share those writings with their teachers and classmates.

The art of writing is an important form of self-expression in modern culture. It can be extremely helpful in the formation of self-identity. However, the absence of good writing skills does not mean that those who lack them are lacking in the only acceptable form to express their self-identity. People who do not have good writing skills have other ways of developing and expressing their self-identities. The tradition of passing along history and life stories orally has been significant for centuries across many cultures, but the use of other artistic forms such as painting, drawing, sculpture, quilting, weaving, dance, music, and other activities are also effective ways of expressing self-identity.

The writing of autobiography for the purpose of sharing with others who are different and who want to learn about the writer is significant in the multicultural education setting because the writer is challenged to write about himself or herself as an individual and as part of the community. When writers are challenged to recognize their connection to their community, their birth families, and their separateness as individuals, they are apt to learn something about themselves and their communities. In this respect, I had to view myself beyond my identity as a Black person, or as a woman, and even as a member of my particular family and to see myself as who I am, separate and individual, a human being who happens to be a Black woman. The presentation of my knowledge of my “self” to others through the writing of autobiography is

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significant because it provides the readers or listeners with personal perceptions that determine my self-identity, which is necessarily reliant on my culture, environment, upbringing, and general background, as well as on my sex, sexual preference, and other factors that impact my life.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the misperceptions and stereotypes about Black women not only are historical concepts but also still pose problems, as indicated earlier, with how Black women are perceived today. The current generations of youths are buying into stereotypes about young Black women that persist even when they are disproved and shown to be irrelevant. For instance, some young Black men will refuse to date young Black women with dark complexions because they claim that these young women have “attitudes” that make them undesirable. These young men thus choose to date only light-complexioned Black women or White women for their supposed better attitudes (Golden, 2004). The sad reality is that most of the dark-complexioned young women that these young men allude to are really in a defensive mode because they “have to work harder to be seen, heard, valued, accepted” (p. 59) than their lighter-complexioned counterparts. These Black women are often seen as unlovable and in many cases unsuitable for long-term relationships. They are considered to be the new “Sapphires,”³ now called “Sheniquas” (p. 61). They are marginalized, “humourized,” and considered “dark and ugly” rather than “dark and lovely” (p. 62).

The negative attributes with which these young Black women are labeled are perpetuated by youths who may have learned this attitude in their families, schools, or society in general. What are the personal experience stories of these women? How do they handle the challenges of being Black in societies that devalue them because of the color of their skin? These are the questions that can be answered by these young women and shared with their peers in their classes. How do other students relate to these young women, and what are their experiences in dealing with dark-skinned Black girls and women? When people are required to write about such issues from their own perspectives, they are challenged to confront their own prejudices. In the sharing of their ideas, feelings, and perceptions, they are displaying a willingness to be confronted about their attitudes as well as presenting the opportunity for others to challenge them to reform their misconceptions.

Educators must take responsibility for becoming actively involved in dispelling these negative images. Very often this will require that the educators start with themselves. One of the very viable and positive leads that educators can take in this effort is to encourage the writing and sharing of autobiographical writings by both faculty and students in the multicultural setting.

We can address specific themes for the focus of these writings, as well as allow the students to decide on the particular aspects of their lives that they want to address in their writings. We can direct how these writings will be shared within the classes and groups where they are discussed.

As indicated earlier, the educator must first address the topic from his or her own perspective. The discussion begins with each of us. This means that as educators we have to question ourselves about our own backgrounds and attitudes. We have to go through our own quest for the truth about ourselves as individuals. We have to be willing to get together and objectively discuss our attitudes about people who are different from us. We have to examine our own cultural experiences, how and what we were taught as children, and how our upbringings have made us who we are today. Furthermore, we have to determine whether our attitudes are being negatively imposed on the students and colleagues that we teach and encounter. The knowledge that this yields would set the stage to determine how we may need to make changes in our interactions to create more equity in our classrooms, better ways of interacting with students who are being negatively affected by our classroom behaviors, and better relations with and between our students and between our students and colleagues, thereby creating a more comfortable atmosphere.

We can initiate these discussions by creating an atmosphere of trust and safety in our classrooms. This is no small task. Most people are able to discern discriminatory attitudes and are more likely to be unresponsive when asked to reveal information about themselves and their communities in the face of them. In order to initiate such discussions in the classroom, students should not feel threatened, even if there is known discrimination in the attitudes of some of the class members.

The creation of a trusting environment might require that the teacher be willing to be the first to take the step of sharing a personal event that has impacted who she or he is and discussing the impact of that event. The creation of a trusting environment that leads to understanding also requires that those in the position of authority—the teachers and professors—be receptive to all students, and not just the ones like themselves. When the educators in charge are able to display receptivity to all students in their classes, the classroom environment becomes open, and the atmosphere becomes one in which the students will feel safe to express themselves, without the fear that they will be disregarded because of their lives and their cultural heritage.

It all comes down to finding avenues to understand and accepting people who are different from ourselves. Aside from helping race relations, autobiography can also help with gender relations, the relationships between persons with different sexual preferences, and even religious differences. Educators who are willing to challenge themselves by practicing autobiography as a way of tackling their own attitudes will find that they can become enlightened in their

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classrooms, and they will be able to encourage the same enlightenment among their students.

Recommended Readings

Black women writing autobiography and its use in multicultural education are concepts that continue to be explored by educators. The literature on the use of autobiography in multicultural education is extremely limited, but it is currently being more fully developed. I have relied heavily on Carole Boyce Davies's *Black Women, Writing and Identity- Migrations of the Subject* (1994) as a valuable analytical tool for examining the autobiographical works of Black women globally who live in societies where they find themselves marginalized.

I found that reading the autobiographical works of Buchi Emecheta provides useful illustrations of how the autobiographical writings of a Black woman can open the doors to greater understanding of her culture and how she is able to forge her self-identity, despite travails. It captures how Buchi coped with her marginalization both at home and in the geographical and cultural places that she migrated into. These works give the reader a glimpse into the bravery of the writer and the great skill that she must master in order to survive.

Marita Golden's work *Don't Play in the Sun* (2004) is another autobiographical work that permits the reader to enter the world and culture of the writer and expresses deep feelings about something rarely spoken of to those who are not part of the Black community. This work, at the same time, illustrates how autobiography is capable of unraveling the people of the culture, in the sense that it allows outsiders to get to know those people better.

The importance of Black women writing autobiography, and of it being useful in multicultural venues, cannot be overemphasized. Black women are recognizing their responsibility for telling their stories so that others can gain firsthand, invaluable information about the individuals as well as the communities from which they come.

Reflective Questions

1. What does a Black woman writing autobiography have to do with multicultural education?
2. What are the advantages to having the students write autobiography in the multicultural classroom?
3. How can school administrators incorporate the use of autobiography by teachers in multicultural classrooms and among their faculty to create more receptive multicultural environments in their school systems?

Notes

1. Butterfield even disputes the authenticity of the slave narratives as products of the slaves themselves, calling them “pseudo-narratives” and attributing them to white women (Butterfield, 1974, p. 201).
2. Gullah people are Black people who primarily reside on the barrier islands along the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia, whose ancestors retained much of their African culture, including a distinctive language dialect, until recent times.
3. “Sapphire” is the name of the character who was the wife of King Fish in the old “Amos and Andy” radio and television show, who was depicted as an argumentative, overbearing, and demanding Black woman who was always trying to control her husband.

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