

RACIAL MINORITIES IN U.S. HISTORY TEXTBOOKS: A CASE FOR A MORE SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO TEXTBOOK EVALUATION

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A few decades ago, textbook adoption proceedings were relatively dull affairs. Present at these meetings were political, business, and labor interest group representatives who were primarily concerned with the treatment their constituencies received in textbooks, especially social studies texts. Expressing common concerns, board members and traditional interest group representatives only occasionally debated what ought to be included in social studies texts. The dealings rarely bordered on the sensational and, in most cases, resulted in minimal discussion and acceptance of texts recommended for adoption by a board's textbook committee.

In the 1960's, the upsurge of activities by minorities led to confrontations with established societal agencies. The pattern flowed to educational agencies, particularly local school boards, which were identified as the critical link between community needs and public education. Minority group organizations identified school boards as the parties responsible for the perpetuation of distorted and biased portrayals of racial groups in U.S. history texts. To bring about a change for the better, these ad hoc organizations exerted pressure on school boards by identifying texts which negatively portrayed minorities. The groups' prime objective was to lobby for the removal of these texts from local and state adoption lists. Today many of these ad hoc organizations continue to exert considerable influence at textbook adoption board meetings.

Functioning differently from established groups, minority ad hoc organizations are perceived by school board members as counter-productive. Many of the grass-root organizations are composed of individuals far from the mainstream of middle-class America and who are unaccustomed to participating in a structured setting such as a school board meeting. Second, some members of these ethnic organizations are unfamiliar with board members. In exchanges, each party considers the other a stranger, and frequently issues are left unresolved. Third, the changes in textbooks demanded by these groups are often usually interpreted as excessive. Most importantly, many of these new pressure groups employ demonstrations, strikes, and other tactics board members consider to be inappropriate and dysfunctional. Negotiations with

these new groups have been characterized as difficult and, at times, futile.

These new pressure groups have been particularly visible during textbook adoption proceedings. Textbook adoption committees were charged to more effectively address the issue of "biased ethnic content." These community-wide committees have made use of instruments sponsored and designed by nationally known educational organizations. The major instruments cited in the literature that measure ethnic content include the following:

1. Lloyd Marcus, *The Treatment of Minorities in Secondary School Textbooks* (1961);
2. Michael B. Kane, *Minorities in Textbooks* (1970);
3. National Education Association, "Checklist for Selecting and Evaluating U.S. History Textbooks" (1975); and
4. Council on Interracial Books for Children, *Stereotypes, Distortions and Omissions in U.S. History Textbooks* (1977).

Unfortunately, these instruments have not met their stated objectives. They have been of little value in identifying flaws in the quality of information describing minorities. A major weakness in the instruments is the lack of interrater reliability. The absence of interrater reliability has resulted in a lack of consensus among raters as to what is distorted and biased ethnic content. At textbook adoption committee meetings, negotiations between board members and ethnic representatives have been heated verbal exchanges based on personal preference rather than reliable data. Moreover, the lack of agreement on what constitutes an objective portrayal of minority groups has apparently reinforced the perception some minority and school board members have of each other. In short, negotiations between the various interest groups have not improved. Below, to further demonstrate the apparent weaknesses in the guidelines and checklists employed by many textbook adoption committees, each instrument is described and evaluated.

The guidelines developed by Marcus and Kane are global in nature and designed to measure the quantity of information employed to describe a group and, in general, the quality of that information (because of the similarities between the guidelines, only the Kane guidelines are described). The Kane guidelines are a set of seven general guidelines applicable to all minority groups: (1) inclusion, (2), validity, (3) balance, (4) comprehensiveness, (5) concreteness, (6) unity, and (7) realism. A rater, employing the Kane guidelines, scans a textbook for information describing a particular minority group and rates the information accordingly. Conciseness and ease of use are the strengths of these guidelines. In a relatively short period, a classroom

teacher can be trained to employ the guidelines and to interpret the results.

An obvious weakness with the Marcus and Kane guidelines is that they are general in nature. The seven categories are not defined, and examples describing each (e.g., realism, balance, unity) are conspicuously absent. What, for example, constitutes a balanced interpretation of history? The lack of decision rules places too great a responsibility on the rater, who must interpret whether the information describing a particular group is "accurate," "comprehensive," "balanced." More importantly, findings and recommendations place an even greater burden on individuals who would make use of them. In the end, it is the consumer--school boards, textbook adoption committees, and interest groups--who must interpret vague and general evaluations.

The National Education Association (NEA) "Checklist" is a compilation of eight basic principles with specific questions associated with each principle. The themes central to the NEA Checklist are cultural pluralism and ethnic interaction:

1. U.S. history textbooks should portray the cultural pluralism of our nation as a value to esteem and project; and
2. U.S. history textbooks should analyze intergroup tension fairly, objectively, and with emphasis upon resolving social problems.

Identified with each theme is a general statement and a series of specific questions. The questions are organized on the left side of a sheet with columns headed by "yes," "no," and "NA" (not applicable) on the right. Each rater takes the text in question and makes appropriate checkmarks in the columns on the right side of the checklist. The checklist does not include a minimum level for textbook acceptance or rejection, however. Supposedly, this is an arbitrary decision left to the interested parties. A strength of the NEA Checklist is its ease of use. Little training is needed.

The NEA Checklist is more sophisticated than the Marcus and Kane guidelines; however, limitations are apparent. First, the Checklist is too general to effectively evaluate for all groups. The instrument is structured to serve all groups; it assumes that the experiences of racial and religious groups and women are similar enough to be outlined in eight principles. Principle 11 states: "U.S. history textbooks should present the sexual, racial, religious, and ethnic groups in our society in such a way as to build mutual understanding and respect." By striking "for common experiences," the Checklist emphasizes the similarities among the groups and apparently ignores the important distinctions that exist among the groups, especially concerning the differences between white and non-white groups.

Second, the absence of definitive rules places in jeopardy the reliability of the NEA Checklist. These rules would include statements as to the number of questions under each principle that must be addressed if a textbook is to be labeled "acceptable." From a qualitative posture, if the assumption is made that all of the questions need not be answered with a "yes," what information should writers include when describing a particular group? If certain information is considered crucial, how is it to be weighed? Is the topic "1960 Civil Rights Movement" more important than the topic "slavery" when describing blacks?

Last, the NEA Checklist favors the portrayal of a particular brand of history. Principle V gives priority to the negative experiences of groups: "In examining the interactions among groups, U.S. history textbooks should describe the historical forces and conditions that have operated to the disadvantage of minority groups and women." Principle VII suggests that intergroup tension experiences are essential if groups are to be depicted objectively: "U.S. history textbooks should analyze intergroup tension and conflict fairly, objectively and with emphasis upon resolving social problems." A biased instrument is unfair to all groups. Textbook writers are penalized when they employ a brand of history that does not stress "disadvantages" and "intergroup tension." The students are unfairly influenced when they are subjected to simplistic analyses of complex historical events. Equally unfair is the constant depiction of racial minorities as "abused souls habitually involved in violent episodes."

A more reasonable approach is to describe minorities in a variety of roles and settings, including more than one interpretation to events and issues, and concluding with up-to-date analyses of the groups' present status. Such depictions are more apt to provide students the motivation to use their research and intellectual skills in weighing information and interpreting historical events and issues. Writers who provide variety are also more likely to strike for a balance in selecting "favorable and unfavorable" events and issues when describing the groups. (Writers who depict blacks in the 1960's attempting to resolve social ills by rioting will also depict blacks working within the system to achieve the same objective.)

In 1977, the widely publicized Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) guidelines became available. These guidelines evaluate books for the treatment of the following groups: women, African Americans, Asian Americans, Chicanos, Native Americans, and Puerto Ricans. The instrument favors a singular interpretation of U.S. history (colonial model) and stresses the inclusion of "facts" that illustrate white/non-white interaction. These "facts" reflect content frequently thought to be absent in textbooks. They are arranged on the left-hand side of the guideline pages. The rater is charged with looking through a textbook of interest with a view to determining whether each "fact" listed is

present. On the right-hand side of the page, columns of a checklist are provided. The rater, responding to each "fact" provided, is asked to place a check mark indicating whether the text (1) provided limited incorrect information, (2) provided no information, (3) failed to deal even with the historical period from which the "fact" was derived, (4) provided limited information, and (5) provided full information. A scoring system is provided according to which a -2 is assigned to each "provide incorrect information" checked, a -1 to each "provided no information" checked, a 0 to each "failed to deal with historical period" checked, a +1 to each "limited information" checked, and a +2 to each "full information" checked. A total of points for each textbook reviewed can be computed. Texts with higher positive totals are thought to provide a more balanced treatment of the targeted group. A strength of the CIBC guidelines is the use of a numerical system to evaluate content. Such a technique provides the rater with a qualitative analysis of the target group; it indicates the kind of information used by the writer to describe a group.

Though a great deal of work has gone into the CIBC instrument and it can provide some useful information, the procedure does have some limitations. Clear decision rules are lacking that would assist raters to distinguish between such categories as "provided limited information" and "provided full information." Consequently, interrater reliability may well be a problem.

Second, the CIBC procedure presumes a rather prescriptive deterministic view according to which history, properly, can only be viewed through what might be termed a "colonial model." According to this view, whites always oppress blacks, men always oppress women, and so forth. Certainly there is no intention to suggest that an intelligent reading of history does not reveal that in many (perhaps even most) instances, whites have oppressed blacks, and men have oppressed women. The point to be made, however, is that the "colonial model" of history suggests an appealing, but rather simplistic, interpretation of events according to which no alternative explanations for plights of given ethnic and other minority groups can be seriously entertained. For example, one of the "facts" in the CIBC procedure states that "Chicano poverty is the result of past and present racism." Clearly flowing from the "colonial model," this "fact" suggests that racism, alone, contributed to "Chicano poverty." Surely a social problem as complex as poverty cannot be assumed to be the result of a single causative factor. The CIBC framework would have users believe that historians are at a consensus with regard to issues that are complex and that the "facts" flowing from this "colonial model" are to be taken as irrefutable. While motives of those responsible for developing the CIBC procedure surely cannot be faulted, in their zeal to redress unbalanced textual treatment they have developed criteria that flows from as rigid and as slanted a historical perspective as that which they propose to redress.

Another major weakness of the CIBC instrument is the tendency to evaluate for information which writers have omitted. Apparently, writers who utilize an interpretation of history other than the "colonial model" and do not cite the "facts" outlined in the instrument are guilty of the "sin of omission." Omission, an obvious weakness, is not the most appropriate method of evaluating textbooks. The decision to omit specific information should be the responsibility of the writer and not of the rater. Evaluation, to be effective, should focus on a textbook's content and not on information that the rater feels has been omitted by the writer. A more reasonable approach is to include, as part of an instrument, a pool of information--events, issues, dates--considered by ethnic specialists as crucial in gaining an understanding of racial minorities. This pool of information would provide writers with some direction but not infringe on their right to select and present history in a manner they feel best describes the targeted groups. A goal may be to present a balanced description of the groups.

Finally, the CIBC instrument is too cumbersome to be employed by classroom teachers and parents. CIBC includes criteria for eight groups. The lists contain 152 items. Additionally, documented evidence is provided beside each evaluation list to suggest the importance of certain historical events cited in each criterion list. Obviously, to evaluate a textbook adequately, the compilation of lists must be in the rater's possession. Given other issues of concern--whites, European groups, ecology, labor, business--the evaluation of textbooks could become a time consuming and disconcerting process.

Adoption committee members experience extreme pressures as they review and select texts. Lobbyists--ad hoc organizations and traditional groups--are constantly attempting to sway opinion. Recently, groups representing the concerns of ethnic groups have surfaced and exerted additional pressure on school boards.

The scenarios common in the 1960's and early 1970's are no longer part of textbook adoption meetings. Although flare-ups are newsworthy, today they are the exception rather than the case. Progress in those once difficult areas is providing ethnic representatives the opportunity for greater input into the decision-making process. Board members and ethnic representatives are reassessing the merits of instruments once considered reliable at measuring ethnic content. These efforts, it is anticipated, will lead to efficient and productive meetings where board members and minority group representatives are sensitive to each other's needs and obligations and where there is a consensus on goals in the pursuance of quality textbooks.
