



Conclusion: In Need of a Curricular Revolution

Abstract In the previous chapters, the textbook analysis showed what little progress US history textbooks have made in the last seventy years. White stories of victory and domination continue to disproportionately fill textbooks. While representation of non-White perspectives and more accurate information about BIPOC groups does increase in more recent textbooks, the same limited and narrow-minded tropes, events, and passivity still persist. So, what can be done? In the conclusion, I reiterate the link between culturally relevant curricula and youth wellbeing. Curricular reform is a beginning step that educators, policy-makers, and school districts could make to ensure their BIPOC students feel seen, heard, and valued as students and as people. Such a proposition is deeply political, but is necessary to correct past wrongs when it comes to misrepresentation in school curricula. Such reforms will move us toward providing a more inclusive environment for all students.

Keywords Textbooks • Victory • White • Colonization • BIPOC • Curricula • Curricular reform • Misrepresentation • Wellbeing

Socially dominant groups have a monopoly on crafting the historical record. History's victors ingrain specific narratives in social consciousness. In the US high school history curricula, this means that the recounting of history is mostly through a lens of White settler glorification that supports

the colonization of land and people, and the drawing of borders to keep others out. Such practices are standard in contexts of nation-building and nationalism, but the long-term effects are corrosive on pluriethnic, multi-cultural democratic coexistence.

In this book, I have investigated how representation of Native American and Mexican-origin people takes place in high school history textbooks. I have presented findings from an original textbook analysis surveying US history textbooks from the 1950s to 2020s. I especially focused on the US History and Advanced Placement US History books currently used in several regional public high schools in far Northern California, where I have also carried out ethnographic fieldwork.

By manually coding the textbooks based on keywords, historical incidents, and vivid labels, I documented the ways in which different social groups are represented, drawing on direct quotes, images, and maps, and analyzed what the impact on youth identity might be based on the content of the curricular material. In my coding, I conceptualized information as existing along a spectrum of both accuracy and visibility, as opposed to misrepresentation and silencing. I logged textual excerpts and then placed them on this spectrum through in-depth analysis, reading, and coding the textbooks myself cover-to-cover. I sampled a wider range of textbooks than I include here, and the selected examples are meant to be representative but not exhaustive. I focus on Native American and Mexican immigrant-origin representation, but also code widely enough to see that the generalizable findings pertain to representations of other minority groups as well.

I combined the textbook analysis with qualitative data from ethnographic work in far Northern California high schools to paint a more holistic picture about the impact of the textbook content on youth from a range of demographic backgrounds. The experiences young people have with educational media in their K–12 schooling contribute to shaping their identity as they move into adulthood. Such identity-formation processes also contribute to both youth and adult civic, cultural, and political behavior, and therefore play significant roles in practices of democratic coexistence.

My findings from this textbook study are straightforward. I have shown that White stories of victory and domination continue to disproportionately fill US history textbooks. While representation of non-White perspectives and accurate information about non-White groups does increase in more recent textbooks, the same limited repertoire of events and tropes

tends to be recycled from one book to the next, leaving a need to innovatively rethink which stories are told within educational media. Why are these same stories being told, by whom and for whom?

Many textbooks like the ones I analyze here contribute to culture-icide—the killing of culture—stripping Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students of stories that are meaningful to their communities. While I coded the textbooks, I imagined what it would be like to read them from non-White perspectives. Would Native American students feel connected to a student thanking God for the existence of the US? Would Black students whose ancestors were enslaved? Translated into US history textbooks, many BIPOC groups are presented as passive recipients of White power. Although more recent textbooks do include diverse perspectives about non-White actors, they tend to be brief addendums to otherwise dominant White histories. In this way, neocolonialism plays out in public schools through White-centric curricula that only perpetuate more harm on BIPOC students.

WHAT WE CAN DO

Discussion around race and ethnicity is under attack in the US. In the two years it took me to research and write this book, dozens of teachers at the high school and college level have gone public about having been fired for teaching about race and ethnicity, more than a thousand books have been censored in schools, and diverse curricula are under attack. Organizations like the African American Policy Forum have built interactive maps to keep track of all the censorship occurring across the US, and they are calling on people to fight back (AAPF 2023). A significant number of firings have been in southern states controlled by ultra-conservative elected officials, but they span the US (Johnson et al. 2022; Zahneis 2023). Florida has been the most noticeable state taking aim at teachers, with Governor Ron DeSantis pushing legislation to shut down conversations around diversity, equality, and justice (Roberts-Grmela 2023). But this is not a new fight. It has been an ongoing debate since historical facts became translated into public records. Political hotspots like California have also seen controversial educational legislation by pushing English-only education (California Department of Education 2000), and Arizona's criminalization of teaching ethnic studies (Cintli Rodriguez 2009) preceded Florida as a stage for debate about what can and should be taught in

school. The assault on Critical Race Theory and ethnic studies casts a pallor over teachers' ability to engage BIPOC stories in the classroom.

Misrepresentation and silence in educational media harms BIPOC youth's positive self-identity, which has long-term implications for a pluri-ethnic, multicultural democracy. Vetting and editing educational media with White-biased content would not only improve BIPOC youth wellbeing at school, but it would also address the cycles of misinformation that White youth, and all youth, receive in schools about White domination. The implementation of culturally relevant curricula, including through replacing textbooks that perpetuate these harmful narratives, is one way to intervene in the damage wrought by past textbooks and could promote the wellbeing and accurate education of all students. Such changes will necessitate substantial curricular revision to how many versions of history are told.

Ignoring this identified need for curricular change would come at great cost. Overwhelming evidence from both my textual and ethnographic work shows that schools are set up to facilitate White achievement and reproduce White narratives of historical success. Textbooks are only one of many spaces that do the work of maintaining White supremacy in schools. But they are an eminently revisable one, as tangible products directly under the purview of district curriculum committees. Frequently, curriculum committees at the district level directly control which textbooks teachers are or are not allowed to use in the classroom. Yet, such committees are often staffed by people with little expertise in things like implicit bias; rather, they are educators or administrators who have been made to serve on committees as part of their jobs. Combined with teachers who may be repeating the same lessons they themselves learned decades previously, formal educational content can be rife with harmful bias (Supahan n.d.).

It is worth persevering on curricular reform efforts. Costing districts a significant portion of their materials budgets, textbooks are one of the most direct spaces of representation over which educators and policy-makers have immediate jurisdiction. Other variables—teacher training, teacher-student congruence, school and community climate—which also considerably impact student wellness—may be beyond the scope of what educators or administrators are able to influence. But textbook reform, and educational media more broadly, can move US history courses toward versions of the past that factually validate the identities of Native American

and Mexican im/migrant-origin students in ways that undo White supremacist narratives while also contributing to BIPOC student success.

If we want to find ways to better close educational achievement gaps and increase the success of minority students, offering a culturally relevant and accurate curriculum that is not simply a victor's history is one of many ways to do it. Such a proposition is deeply political, as it questions the stories and histories we tell about ourselves. It also questions how schools serve to further the perpetuation of White-dominant views. Decolonization of curricula is one small but significant step that schools and their districts can undertake to provide an inclusive environment for all students. Such changes will necessitate substantial curricular revision to how many versions of history are told. Schools need to proactively revise their curricula, including required textbooks that youth in US schools are subjected to daily. Textbooks that take a decolonizing approach to historical content will interrupt patterns of misinformation that continue to shape the educational content imparted to youth from all backgrounds.

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