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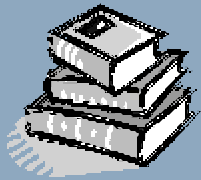
This issue...

What are children reading in school?

A look at textbooks and literature used in schools across the country

The Middle Matters -

A look at transformational education in middle schools



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What are students reading in school?

The new school year will be starting soon. Students of all ages will settle into their classes and receive textbooks and additional reading materials that will be the basis of their new learning. What do the textbooks and literature contain?

Textbooks

Textbook evaluators have found significant problems in almost every subject because “agendas, [sociopolitical] ideologies, and errors all too often trump balance, accuracy, and fairness.”¹ Renowned education historian Diane Ravitch contends that textbooks “are boring, dumbed down, uninteresting and most of all, not true.”² A look at history text evaluations, for example, reveals serious problems.

DUMBING DOWN – History texts contain less information to leave room for bright photographs, colorful charts, and larger type. Rigorous academic content is sacrificed in an attempt to make the books visually appealing to students and teachers.

DISTORTIONS – Historical facts are selected, rejected, and even changed to meet the demands of gender, ethnic, religious, and environmental special interest groups.

One very effective method of change is ***presentism***, when “present-day standards of behavior [are used] to evaluate people who lived in the distant past—when such standards would have been unthinkable.”³

Such distortions can be simple, such as purging information on Pierre Curie’s work on radioactivity so only his wife, Marie, is associated with their joint 1903 Nobel Prize. However, significant misrepresentations that affect the very underpinnings of the study of history also abound. For example, many “textbooks reflect the relativistic views that permeated higher education during the last decade: All cultures are equal; none is better than any other; we are not to judge other cultures’ ways of life.”⁴ Incorporating such

viewpoints demands a major re-writing of historical facts, events, and ideas.

Social justice, a term rooted in the civil rights movements of the past 40 years, is based on the belief that educational institutions must be change agents that will train children to work to end the “injustices” of oppression, bigotry, cultural imperialism, exploitation, etc. Historical “facts” and perspectives may therefore be distorted to deliver a predetermined message that will move students toward desired actions.⁵

Historian Dr. Sheldon Stern believes that American history has been re-written so that,

“Young Americans are being consciously taught to hate and be ashamed of their nation’s history and to believe that America is a uniquely evil and oppressive society.”⁶

Patriotism and appreciation of the vision and courage of the founding fathers has been replaced with the belief that America and its citizens are ruthless exploiters of women, non-whites, and Native Americans. This skewed history education denies our children the knowledge of the principles upon which our country was founded.

ERRORS – In 2003, a team of 16 academic reviewers in Texas found 533 factual and interpretive errors in 28 social studies texts. Publishers agreed to fix only 351 of the errors, claiming that the rest were merely “misunderstandings.” Schools across the country have nonetheless purchased these error-filled books.⁷

PUBLISHERS – The four large companies that produce almost all American texts must meet the demands of the Texas, California, and Florida statewide adoption committees. They therefore “cater to pressure groups for whom history textbook content is an extension of a broader political or cultural cause. They make books whose content is meant to suit the sensitivities of groups and causes more interested in self-promotion than in historical fact, scholarly

appraisal, or balance.”⁸ In an effort to offend no one, the texts are, as renowned historian David McCullough describes, sanitized and “deadly dull.”⁷

Literature

Students receive additional reading materials - short stories, novels, and non-fiction - in social studies, reading, and English classes. Educators must carefully select assigned literature because, to a student, a required book has the school and teacher “seal of approval.” It is therefore imperative for curricula to contain only appropriate, worthy literature. However, some books with problematic themes, characters, actions, or words are found on classroom reading lists. Consider the following books:

***Night* by Elie Wiesel** – A summer assignment for many students, *Night* is a powerful account of the author’s experiences as a young adolescent during the Holocaust. Parents have reported that their children have become fearful and anxious as they internalize the graphic descriptions of concentration camp horrors. Although this is a worthy book in the proper context, a ninth grade student, with little knowledge of WW II and the Nazi regime, does not have enough life perspective to read this book alone in their room during the summer. A parent who contacted the CEO office expressed concern that the darkness and hopelessness of the book could “push an at-risk, depressed, or suicidal student over the edge.”

***The Giver* by Lois Lowry** – A favorite reading assignment for middle school students, *The Giver* tells the story of a community led by an “anointed” group that decides who works, what they do, who bears children, who raises children, and who lives and dies. Frail and handicapped babies, children, and elderly are “released” by “thoughtful injection” at a warm send-off party. Murder of ‘inconvenient’ people by government directive is delivered to the 10-year-old mind wrapped in loving, kind, and compassionate rhetoric.

***How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* by Julia Alvarez** – Also found in middle schools, this book contains positive depictions of drug use, descriptions of sexual activity (including incest), sexually-charged dialogue, profanity, and disrespect for people of all ages. The story openly objectifies women and promotes negative stereotypes of Latinos. What impact does the following passage have on the impressionable 13-year-old mind?

He was nude...He was wore down with frustration, he said. I was cruel...didn't understand that unlike a girl it was physically painful for guys not to have sex... 'You know,' he said, 'I thought you'd be hot-blooded being Spanish and all, and that under all that Catholic bulls--t, you'd be really free, instead of all hung up like the cotillion chicks from prep schools. Jes-s, you're worse than a f---ing Puritan.' (p. 99)

(Words edited by CEO to be less offensive.)

Why do educators pick such disturbing books?

1. In an effort to bring “real” issues into the classroom, books that mirror disturbing daily headlines are assigned to students. Called “problem books,” this genre can erode a child’s optimism and innocence, and replace them with the desolate beliefs that life is hard, adults (even parents) are unreliable, and kids must settle for whatever they can get for themselves.⁹
2. Bibliotherapy – This is a psychological tool that clinicians use to change people at a very deep level by using reading materials. In the classroom, powerful books can actually “force children to think the unthinkable and reconsider the values they learned at home.”¹⁰ Teachers may not realize that books containing traumatic images and actions force children to deal with disturbing ideas that may be far beyond their maturity level. Students incapable of processing such literature can be thrown into psychological turmoil.¹¹
3. Multiculturalism forces school curricula to cut back on traditional classics to make room for literature from diverse cultures, even if it contains questionable dialogue, actions, and themes.

What parents can do

Parents need to review textbooks and assigned literature. If parents are unable to read all the materials, several websites ¹² offer evaluations of texts and literature that may help parents determine the following:

- ⇒ Do the textbooks tell the truth, presenting objective facts and perspectives?
- ⇒ Are assigned novels and short stories the best choices for my child’s age and maturity level? Do they uplift or destruct my child’s view of self, family, and the world? Do they affirm or erode the values I desire for my children? Do they promote distorted stereotypes of ethnic, religious, or cultural groups?

If parents find any book to be objectionable, they should ask the teacher some important questions, such as - *What are the goals and objectives of this assignment? Why is this an appropriate book?* After discussion with the teacher, if the parent still believes the book to be inappropriate for his or her child, an alternative assignment should be requested. Many school districts have policies that respect a parent’s concerns and ultimate authority over their child’s education.

Lastly, no matter what a child is reading, it is important for parents to discuss not only the ideas being presented, but also how these ideas compare with the beliefs and values of the family. ?

1 Gendar, Alison & Douglas Feiden. “Schoolbooks are flubbing facts.” *New York Daily News*. 21 Dec 2002.

2 Danahey, Mike. “Here’s what kids won’t see in texts.” *Chicago Sun-Times*. 3 Mar 2003.

The Middle Matters

Middle schools across the country are increasingly coming under fire for questionable educational practices and academic results. Middle schools have become the culmination of the “progressive” or “transformational” reforms instituted in the 1970s and 80s. At that time it was determined that the middle school years were a critical time in a child’s development for self-exploration and building self-esteem. Focus was often shifted away from rigorous academics to the student’s psychosocial development.

Consciousness raising literature, heavily laden with social issues and adult moral dilemmas, was introduced. Today’s middle school students read materials that focus on the underbelly of human existence - irresolvable social dilemmas that have plagued humans throughout history. Selections that explore themes such as racism, homelessness, extreme environmentalism, slavery, the Holocaust, Japanese interment, and other troubling issues are over-represented. Such readings often contain graphic violence, profanity, gratuitous and explicit sexuality, all of which serve to challenge social norms and personal beliefs. Although classic literature also addresses life’s difficult issues, it often has a redeeming slant that leaves the young reader with optimism and hope for the future.

The implementation of the “transformational” model has also redefined the role of the teacher from authoritative classroom leader to a facilitator, coach, or guide in a “values neutral” classroom. Direct instruction has often been abandoned while students are encouraged to “construct their own meaning.” All opinions and interpretations take on a moral equivalency – there is no right or wrong, only competing opinions in the arena of ideas.

This classroom climate has made learning for these young adolescents far different from what their parents experienced. Peer pressure and “group think” about social issues are normal as young adolescents struggle to be accepted and fit in. However, themes that evoke powerful emotional responses in a closed, captive, classroom environment can be used to manipulate young minds, making them willing to modify or abandon beliefs and principles brought from home.

Thus the “transformational” education elements – readings with powerful psychosocial themes, distanced teachers, and impressionable kids – coalesce in middle schools to produce life-altering learning. That is why it is called “transformational” education – it transforms the child.

Parents who believe that such classroom practices are being used for social engineering rather than for educational purposes not only have the right but also the obligation to intervene. However, before parents take a stand against inappropriate literature, they must become convinced that they:

- have the ultimate responsibility for the rearing of their children;
- have a right to insure that their children are using curricula that does not undermine values taught at home;
- have the right to ask the question: *What are the goals and objectives in choosing this book over the other available selections?*
- have the right to expect that their children will not suffer academically or socially for their challenge;
- have the right to have the school provide alternative assignments.

After internalizing these truths, parents must “count the cost” of taking up such issues. Parents must be prepared to go through prescribed school channels, which can take time. They may find themselves in an adversarial position with teachers and school administrators, labeled as “censors,” and possibly ignite a community firestorm. However, with all this in mind, parents must understand they have the inalienable right to direct the education of their children and make decisions for their family accordingly. Federal law supports this fact:

“...parents have the primary responsibility for the education of their children, the States, localities, and private institutions have the primary responsibility for supporting that parental role.” ?

(Department of Education Organization Act, Pub. L. 96-88, Title 1, §101, Oct. 17, 1979, 93 Stat. 669, codified in 20 U.S.C. §3401[3])



Citations for “What are students reading in school?”, continued from page 2.

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- 4 “Time for Truth in Textbooks: Q & A with Diane Ravitch.” *Hoover Digest*. No. 3, 2003.
- 5 *Social Justice Education at University of Massachusetts*. www.umass.edu/sje/overview.html.
- 6 Stern, Sheldon M. “Effective State Standards for U.S. History.” *Thomas B. Fordham Institute*. Sept 2003. p. 15.
- 7 Archibald, George. “Textbooks flunk test.” *The Washington Times*. 28 Mar 2004.
- 8 Sewall, Gilbert T. “Senate Testimony.” 24 Sept 2003. www.historytextbooks.org
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- 10 Kjos, Berit. “Serving a Greater Whole.” *Media Bypass Magazine*. June 1995.
- 11 Landell, Dr. Ann. “Shifting Roles.” *CEO Publication*. 1998.
- 12 Internet sites that may help parents gather information: PABBIS.org (Parents Against Bad Books in School) historytextbooks.org (American Textbook Council) textbookreviews.org (Education Research Analysts)

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**Is a steady diet of pessimistic,
depressing, nihilistic reading,
in the name of "realism,"
good for young, adolescent minds?**