

History Texts: A Potential Vehicle for Social Justice

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Abstract

This article approaches social justice as a potential outcome from the social studies or history instruction. While the narrative offered through history or civics education is fundamental to the building of national character, the attention paid to national and other borders between different groups of people can have consequences that do not serve the needs of a particular nation or an increasingly globalized and interdependent world. This article will present an analysis with examples from history curriculums around the world and argue for a re-examination of national borders as they are depicted through the history texts. The use of examples here does not comprise an exhaustive analysis as that would be impractical, but it does provide an indicator for the orientation of historical depiction. The consequences of particularized or single dimensional depiction, be they intentional or unintentional, carry repercussions that readily thwart the progress and greater understanding between various populations around the world. The history curriculum has the potential to serve as a vehicle for understanding social justice in ways that more accurately reflect the interactions between groups of people. It would compel the closer examinations of the strengths of nations and also their contradictions. Through this, the larger patterns of human behavior would be better understood and change across nations would be complimentary and cohesive.

Keywords: *Social Studies, History, Civics, Transnational, Social Justice, Bias*

1. Introduction

The public school history curriculum does not account for students' entire view of the world, but it does determine, to differing degrees, how people view their own culture or group, and the culture of other groups or nations following their experiences in school. A fundamental component to any worldview is that there is an inherent degree of legitimacy in the depiction of certain areas of history when it occurs in school. The connection that this shares with social justice lies not strictly in educational equity, but in a mutual exploration of true events that are as free from propaganda as is possible. This requires a very special commitment on the part of many people and institutions, but it is one worth making.

For purposes of this analysis, we shall refer to the primary components of Johnston's (2009) definition of social justice in that the two primary dimensions comprising it are that of distribution and redress. The relevant dimension of this analysis is that of redress. The process of authoring and developing any text for use in schools presents a multilayered process before the actual history textbook arrives in the classroom. That process will be part of the discussion in this article. Redress of this process and the nature of the facts and other claims to be included by the authors through textual and symbolic representation comprise the focus for what needs to be re-examined.

Students are groomed to learn and believe that what schools offer them. In terms of history, this represents a set of unquestionable truths to the young mind. Lee Heller (1998) writes that “the key assumption that any challenge to the conflation of nation and culture needs to address is that cultural production and consumption (of texts, but also of experience and ideology) happen within national boundaries and replicate those [same] boundaries in their content” (p. 348). Thus, the legitimacy inherent in any historical account lies in the power of its depiction through text and the teaching of that text. In this, schools and the history content that they teach occupy a very unique and influential position. Quoting Fred Inglis, Michael Apple argues that “texts are really messages to and about the future. As part of a curriculum, they participate in no less than the organized knowledge system of society. They participate in creating what a society has recognized as legitimate and truthful” (1991, p. 4).

History texts within the school curriculum begin the creation of a larger cultural and historic narrative and lens through which students will view and interpret further information about the world. This lens is oriented toward the distinctiveness and legitimacy of the particular culture that teaches through it. Crotty (1998) and Patton (2001) refer to this as [social] constructionism. Within this context, it is the collective effort of various individuals and/or groups in generating the knowledge that legitimizes a particular point of view so that it is accepted as the legitimate worldview. It is the generation of this worldview that calls for a periodic re-evaluation of its intent (Lee, 2000).

The cultural and historic lens through which the text of canonized history books within public or other schools is presented serves to shape a particular contextual and civic orientation. Though this particular orientation is not a cut-and-dried framework, nevertheless, it presents a framework of assumption through a body of facts from which to begin. The subsequent interpretation of history reinforces the dominant forms of knowledge, culture, beliefs, and morality of national or cultural groups.

That history is centered on the nation-state model is self-evident. Otherwise, it would not be called national history. It can also be said that it often compliments the experiences of particular groups of people. Because a canonized approach to history education does not present alternative sets of experiences to challenge these assertion(s), the information contained in history books is presented as the de facto set of facts and truths. As James Axtell (1979) writes, “What we have gained in national depth, we have lost in historical breadth” (p. 550). Thus, the centering of history on the national level does not lend itself fully to the cause-effect relationships that exist between different nations or groups.

2. Data and Methods

The methodology used for this study is a mixed methods approach that utilizes discourse analysis and triangulation in order to address reliability. The various national examples of history depiction are also drawn from existing research in the field. The primary purpose for this analysis is to illustrate patterns of depiction that occur across numerous national contexts.

Some National Examples

Virtually every country depicts others in ways that are culturally biased, so the spectrum for potential misrepresentation runs both wide and deep. This is a default disposition for the human condition (Derrida, 1992). As an example, Canada and the United States have much in common, both in terms of the roots of their cultural heritage and in present-day interaction through relations that are both cultural and economic. However, the versions of history taught in schools on either side of the border are quite different (McDiarmid, 1976). These versions apply directly to the building of what is considered national civic character.

Depictions by the United States and Canada of one another occur along numerous lines. This includes dimensions of economics, environmental activity, military history, colonial expansion, world affairs, political sovereignty, immigration, and a host of others (Barbre, 2008). Almost without exception, both

nations will cast themselves in a favorable light even when controversial issues are addressed. Both are quick to point out the faults of the others while choosing to selectively ignore their own shortcomings. What each student takes from this education goes with them past school into the workforce and college. Evidence of this can be seen in the understanding of history by students that have recently emerged from secondary school. James Tagg, an American historian who teaches at a university in Canada, administered a survey to his undergraduate history students and the results bear out the assertion that the information students are exposed to while in school comprise the biases they take forward with them. He reports that while many Canadian undergraduate students acknowledge the contributions made by the United States toward the greater global picture, they are even quicker to point out mistakes. According to Canadian undergraduates in the survey conducted by Tagg (2004), the Cold War era's beginning and continual reinforcement is credited to actions of the United States. The War of 1812 also has a vastly different interpretation by Canadians than by Americans.

The current division between the Turkish and Greeks over the island of Cyprus is presented in drastically different terms as to who started the conflict and who did not and who is responsible for the lack of resolution to these matters (Barbre, 2007). The controversy concerns the impact that the shaping/re-shaping of history through economic/political means can have on the mission and function of the school. Koutselini-Ioannidou (1997) reports that in the context of Cyprus, the political apparatus readily appropriated the history/civics curriculum of the school as a means to promote the Greek community over the Turkish one and vice versa and the majority of the propagandizing occurred in the social sciences.

Yet another example is the difference in historical accounts between Japanese and Korean history books. Japan's adoption of textbooks that significantly downplayed its wartime actions illustrates this well. The Japanese account is in marked contrast to the Korean account. Every two years, the Ministry of Education for the Japanese government updates information included in the history books. Reporting for the UNESCO Courier, Richard Werly (2001) asserts that the most recent adoption in Japanese junior-high and high school texts significantly downplay atrocities committed by Japanese troops towards the Koreans during the colonial period through World War II (see also Beal, Nozaki, and Yang, 2001).

3. Discussion

Culturally speaking, for a system of value or experience to be cohesive, it need not utilize, or victimize, another cultural system in a negative fashion in order to make itself appear better or more advantageous. However, the creation of this sometimes false polarization does represent the path of least resistance. In this manner, polarized interpretations of history are a substantial component of nationalism. Joseph Tohill (2003) observes that polarization reflects the centering of history and its teaching on the nation-state model and it is, therefore, most likely that history will be presented in this manner in texts. *Exceptionalism*, a feature of historical writing that can become readily apparent is the tendency to cast the 'other' nation or group in a negative light. While it is not, in all cases, a negative, it is utilized with varying degrees of accuracy, but it is an inevitable representation within polarized history. Montserrat Guibernau (1996) states that, "The state favors nationalism as a means to increase the links existing among its citizens. If the state is successful and, apart from the mere political connection, manages to develop a combination of several kinds of relations- economic, territorial, religious, linguistic, cultural- the state creates the nation" (pp. 70-71).

Epistemologically, nationalism does not have a singular meaning. While this topic is not new, scholarly inquiry into it is a fairly recent field (Ozkirimli, 2000). One of the shortcomings of the earlier writings on nationalism, as observed by Gellner (1983), lies in the fact that early thinkers in the field did not help to formulate any lasting treatise on the subject. Gellner observes that "this phenomenon [nationalism] depends a very great deal on local circumstances which deserve study; but I doubt whether the nuances of nationalist doctrine played much part in modifying those [local] circumstances" (1983, p. 124). The problem in examining nationalism is, again, one that arises in the forms that it takes from one setting or

group to another. Quoting Hobsbawm, Ann Low-Beer (2005) writes that “the standard example of an identity culture which anchors itself to the past by means of myths dressed up as history is nationalism...school history is singled out as one of the places where myth most easily takes over from history” (p. 3 Para. 4).

The primary dimension of nationalism we are interested in here is its manifestation in the printed materials used by schools, particularly in the area of history. Dan Fleming (1992) refers to textbooks as “mirrors that reflect the social studies curriculum as to priorities” (p. 59). These priority-influenced textual truths are woven together to form a longer historical narrative that favors a particular cultural orientation.

In *Theories of Nationalism*, Umut Ozkirimli (2000) situates nationalism as it exists within multiple national contexts of experience and perception. Quoting Bilig (1995), he writes that, “Nationalism is a discourse that constantly shapes our consciousness and the way we constitute the meaning of the world. It determines our collective identity by producing and reproducing us as nationals” (p. 4). It is appropriate to better define how this might happen through the history or social studies curriculum. Reproduction of values in education occurs through students’ participation and their submitting to information that is considered a ‘cultural truth’. This is because the nature and orientation of history as it is told through history books, is told with the quality of being a narrative tale. These stories stir and blend what happened in history in a way that favors one perspective over another.

Culture is a natural transmission of value that occurs within any school setting. The subject of how textbooks either disseminate or refute the claims of a nation’s historical narrative can be a slippery slope. David Tyack (1993) observes that bias and prejudice within school were historically have viewed as things to be fixed on the part of the people and not the system itself. Thus, the system and the various tools at its disposal were above reproach. This same bias and prejudice are then transmitted through materials used to teach students.

It cannot be said that there is a singular culture in any setting where a nation-state is examined. However, certain groups do possess greater degrees of power and influence than others and this accounts for a particular structural or organizational hegemony. This framework results from the collective efforts and sensibilities of numerous individuals that vie for influence and/or control. Over time and through the presence of economic, political or social shifts, adjustments naturally occur. Ney and Molenaars (1999) note that competition between groups within the same culture or nation produces a self-adjusting effect that accounts for the shift in emphasis from one area or practice to another within the nation’s or culture’s resources, educational or otherwise.

While this kind of hegemonic adjustment is common within the same culture or nation, it is far less common to have the same influence exerted from outside the group. Different groups compete with each other over control of the resources that establish particular social practices, of which the form and content within schooling are but one. The greater hegemonic structure and set of interests that prevail because of competition between groups presents various socio-cultural results. One of these is the ability to control resources such as the particular version(s) of history as it is covered in the school curriculum.

Culture of the Text

When analyzing the texts used in any curriculum, one must first acknowledge the multiple factors that affect the presentation of print and pictures on their pages. A second, but no less important, matter is that textbooks represent an economic commodity and it is in the interest of publishers to secure as large a return as possible for their extensive investment of capital and human resources into the development of this commodity, be it privately or through the state. Whether one is referring to a de-centralized textbook adoption policy as seen in Canada and the United States or a country with a nationalized curriculum with specific texts, the textbooks that are written must be acceptable to those in policy-making positions.

In either scenario, culture is omnipresent through the text and the symbolic and other representational claims it makes. Drawing on the work of Raymond Williams, Michael Apple (1991) discusses culture in two ways: first as lived experience and the second as a commodity.

“This dual nature of culture poses a dilemma for those individuals who are interested in understanding the dynamics of popular and elite culture in our society. It makes studying the dominant cultural products—from films, to books, to television, to music—decidedly slippery, for there are sets of relations behind each of these “things.” And these in turn are situated within the larger web of the social and market relations of capitalism” (Apple, p. 22)

In dealing with texts as a commodity, two kinds of capital are employed: symbolic and financial. Symbolic capital revolves around the information, concepts, and ideas that students receive from the text(s) they use. Financial capital involves the monetary returns that a company must make in order to continue to be able to conduct business and/or survive. In distributing a text to schools, the publisher’s first priority is to recover those resources invested in packaging and marketing the textbook, not to mention the highest profit margin possible. The symbolic capital, then, takes a secondary role. According to Apple (1991), “A substantial cultural or educational vision and the concerns associated with strategies based on symbolic capital will necessarily take a back seat...” (p. 30). The writing of the text and the revision of the information are separate processes from the marketing aspect, but are still interrelated since one affects the other and, ultimately, financial returns are affected the most. Financial capital, though its priority influences the context of truths, is the end goal for engaging in the process in the first place. Apple, citing Coser, Kasushin, and Powell (1982), states that, “Ultimately...if there is any censorship, it concerns profitability. Books that are not profitable, no matter what their subject, are not viewed favorably” (1991, p. 31)

There is also the matter of the various professional and academic dispositions of authors. For this reason, people of different cultural, social, political, and economic thought do not always agree with one another. The textbook written by a person of a particular intellectual tradition often reflects the biases or predispositions when such thoughts are grafted onto that text. C. Behan McCullagh (2000) aptly observes that “...liberals think people are normally motivated by reason and principle; Marxists think they are normally motivated, often unconsciously, by socioeconomic self-interest. The inferences they draw about people’s motives for action will vary accordingly” (p. 40). For this reason, groups are bound to disagree. The influence of the author’s values on the way history is presented becomes relevant because cultures have slightly different value systems from one to another. Regardless of political, linguistic, ethnic, or cultural similarities, the fact that authors live across national borders from one another accounts for significant factors of difference.

Schools and the social structures they feed are largely influenced by symbolic power. Apple (1991) quotes Stuart Hall in saying that also placed strictly within a particular framework is the set of ideas for thought or action in what is considered “...rational, reasonable, credible, indeed sayable or thinkable within the given vocabularies of motive and action available to us” (p. 12). Terrie Epstein (1997) has shown through studies within U.S. high schools that students from diverse backgrounds often construct different interpretations of the same content and materials that are read from history books. This comes about through the process of aligning what they read and discuss with their own life experience(s) and what they were taught or experienced outside school. This naturally occurs along lines of ethnicity, culture, race, and economics. Therefore, students at this age suffer a handicap in their ability to look critically at the information and experience presented in history texts. They do this because of a lack of similar life experiences as might constitute a challenge to the other sets of normative claims being made.

Another factor lies in the use of standardized examinations in schools. Numerous aspects of the schooling experience address citizenship education, of which history is the primary vehicle of delivery.

Historical events with their outcomes, both critical and minor, are interwoven form a basic perception or set of assumptions in the mind of the student. The tests that students must take each year directly address this information. Carole Hahn's (1998) research into different aspects of citizenship education in numerous westernized countries reveals that standardized examinations often leave the teacher feeling pressured to be able to cover the information relevant to the curriculum and the test. This leaves little, if any, additional time for critical inquiry into history. Critical inquiry is the essential ingredient in further examining social conditions and the need for change and social justice. This fact, accompanied by the use of standardized history texts, blunts the edge of inquiry in favor of a model of education that focuses more on performance.

The point is that the information presented in history texts inevitably works to reify a particular framework of social hegemonic truths. When the truth regarding historical occurrences is negative and might work against the groups or parties in positions of power or leadership, those same occurrences are often downplayed or sterilized in order to propagate a more homogenized and non-confrontational version of history.

Due to the different schools of thought, and points of view, the absence of bias in history is impossibility, and history is always related from a particular point of view. While historians will go to great lengths to separate themselves from the bias, which accompanies a traditional canon of historical lore, they are still bound by the fact that their experiences and perceptions are bound within a particular context of cultural experience. While it should never be assumed that historians are permanently tainted by their cultural experience, the level of bias we are referring to here is a fundamental one because it is culturally/socially constructed and so programmed.

4. Conclusion

The challenge in connecting social justice to the history curriculum lies primarily in better understanding the predilections that students take from school and apply to the way they see others in the world. An approach to social justice within the history curriculum has its ultimate effect in this post-school framework of thought. By looking at history from a transnational point of view, a different perspective is developed. This perspective enables people to look at history in terms of a larger set of patterns and less along the lines of 'us versus them'. By taking these steps, the dimension of blame or 'othering' becomes less important and larger populations see more of what they have in common besides their rivalries.

Much has been said of the considerable difficulty that bias presents to historians. Certainly guiding axioms are meant to minimize bias to the greatest degree possible. Objectivity is a creed to aspire to, but examination of any qualitative research methodology will reveal biases. Raymond Grew (1980) addressed bias when he wrote of the need and legitimacy in comparing historical accounts between peoples. Quoting Lord Acton, "The process of civilization depends on transcending nationality" (Grew, 1980, p. 763). This speaks directly to the limitations imposed by strict nationalist interpretations of historical accounts.

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