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How do Social Studies Textbooks Examine Slavery in the United States?

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Slavery is vital in students' curriculum; this is what built the United States' "blossoming" economy. To truly understand what US history is, students need an awareness of slavery's perpetual robbing of people's liberty, wealth, and education, as enslaved peoples' way of life was exchanged for a thriving economy. Textbooks can be a student's primary learning material on these topics, and it is critical to teach history in an accurate and informative way. In recent years, research studies present that US history descriptions in textbooks are often imperfect and lack the genuine interpretation of the country's dreadful past (Henry, 2011). In tandem with these findings, this study will analyze several high school textbooks that specifically focused on chapters' diction regarding slavery and how this topic is assessed to understand if its portrayal is accurate.

Literature Review

Bias in Social Studies Textbooks

Textbooks are the foundation of learning United States history. When there is bias in social studies textbooks and curriculum, it is difficult to examine race in the country accurately. Research studies indicate there is an incomplete depiction of US history in textbooks. To demonstrate that there is bias in social studies curriculum, Henry (2011) examined US history textbooks and analyzed their depictions of both slavery and the country's foundation. Henry (2011) utilized Durkheim's notion of "dualistic nature in human endeavor" to demonstrate there are "two types of history — sacred and profane" (p. 1). Sacred history, which is the "glass half-full" type, is taught in middle and high schools. This type of history promotes patriotism and positivity (p. 406). The profane history

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incorporates the characteristics above, but also an understanding that a “society [can] often [fall] short of its ideals” (p. 406). Henry’s findings revealed that secondary textbooks do not discuss the conflicts between sacred history, the history of slavery, and the truth of how the United States’ foundation was built. He argued that they contained a superficial and watered-down history of African American enslavement. Henry’s article shows evidence that the curriculum is biased and tends to focus on glorified US history.

Multiculturalism in Textbooks and Classrooms

Multiculturalism attempts to include the perspectives and contributions of diverse members of society while respecting their uniqueness and resisting the urge for assimilation into the dominant culture (Eagan, 2021). Multiculturalism may elevate the status of history and social studies in schools and society, as well as raise awareness of democratic processes, ideals, and institutions. Wiggan and Watson-Vandiver (2019) argued that US schools lack diversity and multiculturalism in their textbooks and their classrooms. They support this finding with a qualitative case study which examines a high-performing school, the Harriet Tubman Academy. This academy provides an education with anti-racist and multicultural values (Wiggan & Watson-Vandiver, 2019). The academy utilized an African American-centered education and went “beyond the traditional heroes and holidays” that are commonly taught in a US history class (Wiggan & Watson-Vandiver, 2019, p. 783). Findings show an exceeding amount of respect for multicultural education by the students and teachers, a better interpretation of inclusivity, and greater academic achievement. In examining slavery in textbooks, it is essential that the information students receive in the content have properly accredited the details of slavery. Students will gain more appreciation towards the hardships that enslaved people endured if this is the case. Schools in the United States need to develop a comprehensive and historically accurate curriculum to provide students with sufficient knowledge on racial matters like slavery.

The Power of Publishing Industries and Their Social Responsibility

The writers, fact checkers, and publishing industry who construct social studies textbooks may be attempting to control society into favoring one specific group and are not upholding their social obligation to educate the students on the accurate history of America. Previous literature suggests that textbooks lack social awareness among students who are enrolled in social studies curriculum due to social interests of these industries (Wiggan

& Watson-Vandiver, 2019). Anyon investigated the content of seventeen United States history textbooks which focus on the Civil War to World War 1, the economy, and labor (Anyon, 1979). The study utilized “the most well-known secondary school United States history textbook that appears on the Board of Education lists of Books Approved for Use” (p. 363). Findings show that “school curriculum [is] a major contributor to social attitudes [and] can be used to change [students] attitudes” (p. 385). It is essential that schools’ curriculum guides students to an informative and truthful learning environment. The content of these seventeen textbooks certainly favors the interests of a specific group and the exclusion of others. For example, Native Americans, African Americans, and women are the common types of groups that are deemed trivial in the textbooks (Anyon, 1979). The study observed that oftentimes the groups listed above are frequently stereotyped or omitted from even the “updated social studies textbooks” (p. 382). The study presents that corporate businesses are guilty of excluding certain information to maintain America’s reputation (Anyon, 1979). In addition, many studies indicate that history taught has remained the same in spite of million-dollar education reforms (Wiggin & Watson-Vandiver, 2019). Recent reforms include both government-based and private initiatives such as No Child Left Behind, Common Core State Standards, and Race to the Top.

These studies show a better comprehension of how people with power can control a students’ learning in social studies textbooks is necessary. Industries are currently controlling the content taught to students, which means they decide how they want to depict slavery in the United States. It is essential to note that while the primary focus of this study is on depictions of slavery within textbooks, there are additional layers and areas of relevant consideration about the operations of hierarchy involved.

Theoretical Framework

Hegemony and U.S. History

The way we think, what we do, and what we believe is instilled in us by an innate set of norms which are introduced at a young age. Many do not question why our society operates as it does and believe it is simply “common sense.” In the United States, the relationship between current depictions of slavery and the hegemony of white individuals over all others is clear. Bias in history textbooks contributes to widespread ignorance of racism and its legacy in the United States today. Hegemonic powers altered the depiction of slavery in US history textbooks, creating a flood of misinformation in order to retain their interests over subordinate ones. This is made possible through the creation of ideologies that can be used

in social institutions. A social institution can be a government, economy, education, family, healthcare, or religion (UKEssays, 2018, p. 2). There are two distinct groups in social power dynamics: the dominant (superior or authoritarian) and the subordinate (inferior) class (Artz & Murphy, 2000). A subordinate group is a class that has less power than the authoritarian group. The subordinate group goes along with the superior's beliefs and the dominant group secures its position because of their status economically or socially (UKEssays, 2018, p. 2). This study will work to expand on the foundations of cultural hegemony while providing a discussion of how ideologies and social institutions contribute to its impact.

America serves a specific purpose to preserve dominant power structures and to maintain social order. In the American education system, there is a clear power dynamic between teachers and students, where teachers are dominant, and students are subordinate. Hegemony concerns the “hierarchical relations and vested interest” and how active consent is essential into maintaining the power of the dominant group (Arts & Murphy, 2000, p. 3). This common norm of American education is blindly accepted by society. Students and more importantly, teachers do not find themselves questioning the validity of the curriculum. Schooling is a tool for creating and spreading ideologies. These ideologies may uphold racial hierarchies through their interpretations of historical timelines. With that being said, schools play a crucial role in socializing young children's race and gender identity. The saying that “culture for humans is a lot like water for fish” (Artz & Murphy, 2000, p. 29) entails that people live their lives without noticing the hegemonic legacies they are carrying on.

Methodology

Text Selection

For my study, I researched the most frequently used textbooks using a website called Global Edge, which provides information on numerous textbook publishing companies. I selected this website because the Library of Congress names it as a credible source with resources available to the public. Global Edge provided eight publishing companies, and I chose three to focus my attentions on: McGraw Hill, Cengage Learning, and McDougal Little. I focused on only three textbooks to fully analyze the content within the time frame of the study. This allowed me to closely examine each of the companies and the content they offer. In addition, I confirmed these publishing companies are known for high school textbooks. I chose one United States history high school textbook from each company and confirmed they contained chapters on slavery. See

Literature Cited for publishing information of the textbooks examined.

Text Analysis

To analyze the three textbooks, I reviewed each chapter on slavery and specifically identified categories derived from my literature review and annotated bibliography. I utilized pre-existing constructs from my literature review and descriptive codes based on my text analysis. In addition, I followed an inductive approach; I chose codes and common themes that would expand my categories as I read the textbooks. In one example, I drew from Henry's (2011) construct of a superficial history of African American enslavement (p. 406) and Wiggan and Watson-Vandiver's (2019) outlook on a multiculturalism curriculum to determine a category of codes labeled "glorifying slavery." This inductive process led me to create other descriptive codes under that category such as "underplaying slavery" and "treatment/living conditions." Table 1 displays the definitions for each category and where my literature review, annotated bibliography, and inductive process impacted how the categories were selected.

Table 1, Codes Identified and Their Descriptions

Categories	Inductive & Deductive Descriptions
Explanations of Slavery	I used Henry's (2011) construct of having an accurate portrayal of slavery by textbooks having a descriptive explanation. Henry states that there are two types of history: Sacred and Profane. Learning a sacred history tends to only focus on the good of what America has done and it lacks depth and detail of what slavery really was in the United States. This led me to label a category 'Descriptive Explanations of Slavery.'
White Dominance	Overall, I drew from Wiggan & Watson-Vandiver (2019) and Henry's (2011) construct of an inductive process by deriving a category labeled 'White Dominance.' This category relates to how often the textbooks rely how powerful white people were in slavery. I chose this because it is essential to realize the power white people played in slavery.
Racial Oppression & Mention of Racism	I drew from Wiggan and Watson-Vandiver's (2019) construct of how obtaining a multicultural and diverse curriculum helps students better understand the history of the United States. I then utilized an inductive process to derive descriptive codes under that category such as 'Racial Oppression and Mention of Racism.' This category is essential for textbooks to mention how their skin color affected them in such a negative way and even further how it has translated into today's world of racism.
Contribution of African Culture	Wiggan and Watson-Vandiver (2019) argued that schools lack diversity in textbooks which led me to derive a category of how well textbooks show the contribution of African culture. African culture consists of customs, beliefs, folklore, music, jazz, and spirituals.
Economic Gains	Utilizing an inductive process, I began with reading the textbooks and started to observe and detect patterns in the chapters. I quickly found regularities regarding economic gains. The chapters commonly focused on America's 'thriving' economy. This is a category because it is essential that these textbooks mention that America thrived because of the enslaved Blacks.
Proper/Negative Word Choice	I chose word choice because there could be an underlying bias or something that should not be put into a textbook while talking about slavery. Word choice is key into how the content of these hard topics are being taught. When the content displays proper word choice it does not give false assumptions to the students. For example, saying that enslaved Blacks would often scorn poor whites and call them nicknames. This suggests that enslaved Blacks were the bullies to white people. This is where I would say that negative word choice is being used.
Underplaying Slavery	Like I said earlier, Henry (2011) states that most of the time students are taught a superficial history that lacks an understanding of how brutal slavery was. For example, underplaying slavery would be saying that "many of the poorer whites were hardly better off economically than the slaves; some, indeed, were not so well-off." It is necessary to have this as a category because this will tell me how they are spreading awareness on this important time in history.
Brutal Treatment/Unfair Living Conditions	Treatment and living conditions are a major component into examining slavery and are essential to mention in the textbooks. I drew from Henry's (2011) construct of sacred and profane history. I inductively derived descriptive codes under what a profane history should look like. How the authors describe the unfair treatment will let me see how they treat the subject. I will place an X in the box if they mention whippings, their rooms, the food quality, sexual abuse, etc.
Idolizing White People	I took an inductive approach and while collecting the data, I analyzed patterns that I commonly saw. A frequently seen pattern was the idolization of white people in textbooks. I will place an X in this category if it takes away from what truly happened to enslaved Blacks. If these textbooks contain idolization of white people, it will demonstrate that there is an underlying bias in these textbooks, and it can give an inaccurate depiction of America's history.
Reliance on Enslaved Blacks	Wiggan and Watson-Vandiver (2019) found that it is important to be exposed to a multicultural view of America's history in the classroom but also in the textbooks. I inductively chose a category that represents that reliance on enslaved Blacks. This is key to understand what enslaved Blacks did during this time. In addition, when students are reading, they can have an increased amount of appreciation for what enslaved Blacks have done. When I place the X in this category it will be if they explicitly state white people needed Blacks to succeed.

In addition to the coding process, I uninterruptedly read through the data once. Afterwards, I annotated and noted phrases from each page. To organize my phrases, I created an Excel spreadsheet which consisted of quotes, page numbers, textbook titles, and the eleven categories. Every time a quote or text summary matched a category, I placed an X in the corresponding box. I repeated this process with each textbook. After reviewing each textbook, I totaled each column to identify patterns and show gaps in examining slavery in America. This helped me observe what the textbooks prioritized while describing slavery. If for example, there were many X's in the category "underplaying slavery," that would be a red flag in these textbooks. These categories are here to guide how social studies curriculums are covering such a major issue in American history. This furthered my study by demonstrating how publishing companies have a hegemonic ability to alter the curriculum toward accurate depictions, yet they have chosen not to. The multibillion-dollar publishing companies relay information to students who unknowingly accept the content given to them in school.

Findings

Four key claims emerged from the data analysis process: the three textbooks shift focus to the economic gains from slavery which supported the United States' booming economy; the textbooks did not fully mention the positive contributions of African cultures; the three textbooks often justified enslavers' actions; and textbooks elaborated the descriptive qualities in enslaved peoples' hardships. Note Table C at the end of this section for a simplified version of the evidence to support these claims.

The three textbooks shift focus to the economic gains from slavery which supported the United States' booming economy. A distinct pattern was displayed in regard to emphasizing how great the economy is. Each chapter starts with the production of cotton and later on spoke about treatment of slaves, the culture, and the contributions enslaved people handed America. I observed that of the 97 quotes, 20% were in regard to economics. For example, Shi and Tindall (2015) address within the first 6 pages of the chapter that America's main focus was to grow cotton, sugar, and secure more slaves. In addition, the same textbook goes on to express that even though slavery was immoral it was the fastest growing element to success in America (Shi & Tindall, 2015). Another textbook states on the first page that the blast of the cotton industry generated much more labor, which was needed for America to succeed (Kennedy & Cohen, 2013). Furthermore, there was often a relation between the booming economy and the subsequent need for slaves. 24% of quotes were linked to reliance on enslaved people. The United States needed slaves to do the work to obtain greatness (Kennedy & Cohen, 2013). This evidence speaks

immediately in the introduction of slavery where the first chapters alluded to money and success of America. Later on, it discusses the ruthless treatment and deterrents of oppressed individuals.

The textbooks did not fully mention the positive contributions of African cultures. I detected that only 11 of the 97 (11%) quotes discussed African cultures and their positive contributions to the United States. The textbooks were informative and demonstrated appreciation toward African Americans. However, they also tended to only allocate a small section to folklore, jazz, family traditions, and religion. Moreover, all of the textbooks brought attention to the fact that religion was an important aspect to African culture. One text disclosed that enslaved people would stress that their Christian beliefs guided them in their impossible situation (Kennedy & Cohen, 2013). Along with religion, another textbook writes that marriage among enslaved people was “until death or distance do you part,” and emphasized that they maintained a family life while enslaved (Kennedy & Cohen, 2013, p. 330). Furthermore, enslaved people carried their culture to mark their territory. The textbooks present that African culture comprised of singing with passion and powerful messages (Brinkley, 2014), creating folklore (Shi & Tindall, 2015), which then established America’s foundation for music; for example, gospel, blues, jazz, rhythm, rock, and rap (Brinkley, 2014). The textbooks and evidence provided the positive contributions that enslaved people brought into America. Despite the hardships, they continued constructing their culture and it is still influencing America’s culture today.

The three textbooks often justified the actions of white people during slavery. 31 out of the 97 (32%) quotes held negative connotation regarding enslaved people and slavery. The textbooks focused on how poor European Americans were treated; for instance, the textbook mentions that poor European Americans were not well-off compared to the enslaved people (Kennedy & Cohen, 2013). It later proclaims that enslaved people “scorned” the poor European Americans by calling them, “hillbillies,” “crackers,” or “clay eaters” (Kennedy & Cohen, 2013). Another text explains that poor European Americans were called these exact same nicknames (Brinkley, 2014). The same textbooks brought up the fact that African American women and men did struggle, but also that women suffered, too (Brinkley, 2014). This piece of evidence minimizes what enslaved people went through by comparing European and African American women. Moreover, all three textbooks referred to a “paternal relationship toward their slaves” (Shi & Tindall, 2014, p. 351); for example, some masters protected their slaves’ wellbeing by looking after their wealth (Brinkley, 2014). Lastly, a common idea depicted in the textbooks was how many enslaved people masters owned. It frequently said that masters own very few enslaved people and if anything, masters

would work alongside the enslaved people (Brinkley, 2014). The textbooks positively frame enslavers to diminish the true brutal nature of slavery.

The textbooks elaborate the descriptive qualities in enslaved peoples' hardships by explaining how discrimination and systemic oppression under European American dominance. In spite of framing slavery in the ways described above, the textbooks did in fact include descriptions of the hardships. The analysis indicated 59 of 97 (60%) of quotes showed descriptive explanations of slavery, using common themes like rape, abuse, and enslaved peoples' resistance and resilience. More than half of the quotes represented gruesome, informative, and truthful examinations of slavery in textbooks. For instance, one text stated that "enslaved girls were often sexually abused by men and women [and] they would be locked up in a cabin and the task was to impregnate her" (Shi & Tindall, 2015, p. 365). Similarly, another textbook expressed women were vulnerable to sexual abuse and often pressured into sexual relationships, which resulted in rape (Brinkley, 2014). In addition, the texts conveyed that enslaved people had two strategies facing slavery. They would either resist or adapt to their situation and develop their own unity (Brinkley, 2014 & Kennedy & Cohen, 2013). The evidence supports the texts' portrayal of the deprivation slaves suffered due to their skin color. The textbooks expanded largely on the obstacles enslaved people were forced to endure because of their skin color.

One subclaim regarding descriptive qualities included brutal treatment and unfair living conditions. 38% of the quotes noted unfair treatment of enslaved people. For instance, a recurrent idea was the cruelty of slave auctions and their enslaved people's standard of living. All three textbooks used similar ways of explaining how enslaved people were property, regardless of their age (Shi & Tindall, 2015). Slave auctions were barbaric sights, and it was almost like "human flesh under the hammer" (Kennedy & Cohen, 2013, p. 329), and it is the horrific truth that slave trade was the reason why America prospered (Brinkley, 2014). A common routine for enslaved African Americans often involved whipping because that was a way for the enslaver to maintain his power (Kennedy & Cohen, 2013). The textbooks did not circulate around the idea of slavery and acknowledged the power enslavers held while providing readers with graphic and explicit details.

Another subclaim was that racial oppression and European American dominance affected enslaved peoples' standard of living. 54 out of the 97 (55%) quotes regarded European dominance and 39% revealed racial oppression. A pattern throughout the textbooks was that the tone of enslaved peoples' skin determined if they would be allowed to live the life of a European American individual. The textbooks reflected that European American men did not want to feel inferior and that "every white [had

to] feel that [they] belong[ed] to an elevated class” (Shi & Tindall, 2014, p. 349). Another textbook stated that enslavers deprived enslaved people of their education because it would allow them to have ideas (Kennedy & Cohen, 2013). More importantly, the textbook reveals a detailed description of an enslaved woman who was raped for five years and ended up killing her enslaver. Her trial contained an all-European American jury and they sentenced her to death by hanging (Shi & Tindall, 2015). This example demonstrates a detailed depiction of the quality of life an enslaved person received. The quotes indicate that enslaved Blacks were restrained from a moral way of living.

Table C, *Claims with Evidence to Support*

Claim & Subclaims	Number of Quotes Referencing Claim (Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number)
Economic Gains	19/97 (20%)
African Cultures	11/97 (11%)
Downplaying Slavery	31/97 (32%)
Descriptive of Slavery	
<i>Descriptive Qualities</i>	59/97 (60%)
<i>Brutal Treatment & Unfair Living Conditions</i>	37/97 (38%)
<i>Racial Oppression & White Dominance</i>	38/97 (39%) and 54/97 (55%)

Conclusion

These findings suggest that these textbooks contain minimalistic information regarding slavery. They contain red flags which need to be reconsidered to create a more honest learning environment for students. Education systems are the foundation in teaching these essential topics and it is vital the United States’ corrupt past is directly confronted. Some may argue that these textbooks are inclusive to the experiences and culture of enslaved African Americans. Although the textbooks, to a small extent, acknowledge the contributions of African culture and descriptive qualities of slavery, these contributions are negligent as any inaccuracies and desensitized explanations for the atrocities committed during slavery should not be tolerated. Additionally, the textbooks justified the actions committed by European Americans in several places, which trivializes slavery. These findings also highlight an issue within publishing companies. It would be beneficial for further research to analyze how publishing companies have altered their content over time. The findings of this study beg the questions: When will textbooks be updated to depict a precise representation of slavery and what prevents their revision? Is it due to the editing costs, or perhaps, is it because companies want to take control over students’ social attitudes to preserve the mindset of the United

States' greatness and maintain racial hegemony? It is important that we are challenging these educational institutions and utilizing a counter-hegemonic approach to the "innate sets of norms" deemed normal in the content of history textbooks. The hierarchy seen in these findings shows that the United States continues to maintain power structures within curriculum and society. Education systems are the main social institution for young children in the US and it is crucial that students are aware of hegemony in textbooks and how often information can be deceiving in an attempt to maintain the status quo of the United States.

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