Social Studies Education: History Books in Question

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I want to be a secondary social studies teacher. That is my career goal and dream. It explains why I am pursuing my Master of Arts in Teaching degree. My view of teaching social studies was very straightforward until recently. I thought that the social studies curriculum was well planned out; reference would be made to textbook readings, students would complete homework assignment sheets that correspond with their texts and then there would be the chapter test, culminating with the end of the year final and New York State Regents Exam. I will honestly and proudly state that my frame of reference has been dramatically changed and my vision for myself, as well as my future students, is in the process of being revised. After reading Lies My Teacher Told Me by James W. Loewen, I have come to realize that much work needs to be done to change the intentions of teaching social studies. In this paper I will be analyzing two recently published articles from Social Education and Education Week. In analyzing these articles I hope to provide context for how recent history, in particular September 11, 2001 is being established and studied in newly published social studies textbooks. Through various points Loewen makes throughout his texts, it will become clear that history presented in textbooks is misleading and lacking the viewpoint of multiple perspectives. This is critical because multiple perspectives are what propel young students to become active citizens and advocates of social justice.

After doing my own research in locating current articles on topics relating to Loewen’s work, it has become clear to me that the subject of social studies is in a grave state of affairs. The current curriculum fails to supply our youth with the necessary tools in becoming critical and active citizens promoting social justice. Omission of the voices of socially marginalized players in history from textbooks is the reason for this state of
affairs. Loewen makes a number of valid arguments in regards to the misrepresentation of historical facts in current textbooks. Ultimately it is up to the educator to be the facilitator in bringing to light the need for critical thinking in the social studies classroom, regardless of what textbooks state.

Articles, such as “9/11 and Terrorism: The Ultimate Teachable Moment in Textbooks and Supplemental Curricula” by Diana Hess and Jeremy Stoddard, provide guidance in understanding Loewen’s work in a specific contemporary context. The main point of this article is how September 11, 2001, a recent historical event, is mentioned in history textbooks. According to the article, including this event and its aftermath in social studies textbooks is a complicated situation. Hess and Stoddard assert the importance of how teaching and studying September 11th can affect our national discourse; textbooks will undoubtedly misrepresent 9/11 and leave out vital facts regarding the cause and effect of this incident. Thus, textbooks readers will form opinions based on false facts or myths.

This perception compliments one of the problems Loewen has with textbooks, for he states in his work, “history textbooks take us away from the facts of history and into the realm of myth. We have been duped by an outrageous concoction of lies, half-truths, truths and omissions” (Loewen, 1995, p. 39). Information exchange between educators and students in a social studies curriculum is greatly affected by the concerns of what real and phony facts are being published in textbooks. Schools teach what is considered the “official knowledge” that students need to learn to be successful (Hess & Stoddard, 2007, p. 231). This “official knowledge” is detrimental to positive growth and learning for students because information that has been omitted is vital in our efforts to work towards
social and environmental global sustainability. Information being presented in today’s textbooks, according to Loewen, is the “Disney” version of history. Many times the “facts” being taught are nothing but false tales used to promote the specific heroification of people, times and events in the past of the United States. Loewen believes that the results of heroification are crippling to students and keeps them in intellectual immaturity, where they are unable to develop an understanding of causality in history (Loewen, 1995, p. 38).

When Hess and Stoddard reviewed textbooks that were published including September 11th, they found many similarities. Descriptions of this recent event lacked specific details and offered vague explanations. A handful of textbooks spoke of the number of people killed in the attacks and who were responsible for them, while other textbooks did not mention such specifics. Textbooks do not always cover the basic and introductory information when detailing historic events. In Loewen’s research he found that many authors of textbooks begin telling their own version of history and take the reader away from the facts of history and into the realm of myth (Loewen, 1995, p. 39). Readers, educators and students fall into a “false sense of education.” Important facts and details are omitted by the authors in an effort to keep the teacher and student comfortable with the material. Omission of facts also keeps the information in textbooks consistent with the American “cultural values,” the four pillars of this nation: democracy, liberty, equality and individualism.

According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, terrorism is defined as “the systematic use of terror especially as a means of coercion.” In textbooks that reference September 11th, the event is labeled as an act of terrorism. Yet, this is the only event in
the nation’s historical past being analyzed that is defined as terrorism. Hess and Stoddard researched published textbooks and found more than 40 other examples of “terrorism” based on the dictionary definition. None of these examples were clearly identified as terrorism because they were all actions carried out by the United States and not against this country (Hess & Stoddard, 2007, p. 232).

Textbooks defining “terrorism” as one violent act carried out against the United States and ignoring other violent acts initiated by the United States that are clearly terrorist acts, constitutes a misrepresentation of information. One incident of United States terrorism that is never revealed in textbooks took place in 1954 when the U.S. helped in organizing, funding and equipping the coup that brought down the democratically elected president of Guatemala, Jacobo Arbenz. In the process of backing the coup, thousands of people were killed, injured and even missing. Support from the U.S. has continued for years in creating insurgencies that have governmental influence and protect U.S. corporations of the United States. With U.S. support guerilla warfare became the tactic of choice, leaving many people being killed, raped and savaged over decades.

Another important aspect of the Hess and Stoddard article is how terrorism is defined and presented in the textbooks. In the textbooks analyzed, some books provided a definition of terrorism, while others avoided this controversial definition altogether. The definitions provided established terrorism as an “established concept that means the same thing everywhere” (Hess & Stoddard, 2007, p. 233). By defining terrorism in such vague terms, the textbooks are being negligent. Students and teachers have no outlet to critically analyze the definition and cannot appreciate a critical study of the selective use
of terminology that could provide them with insight about manipulation of attitudes through language choices.

It should be noted that the U.S. has had the lowest number of terrorist attacks against it, with 17 taking place between the years 1997 and 2003 (Hess & Stoddard, 2007, p. 234). Loewen would say the definition of terrorism presented in the texts is another way in promoting the American “standards and ideals” of the national culture, as well as exemplifying our egocentrism and our status as perpetual victims in the world. In history books, the U.S. is depicted a nation of humanitarians, the idealistic actors on the world stage, helping other countries deal with economic and social issues (Loewen, 1995, p. 227). With America being the “good guys” the country is in the position of being “attacked,” even when its stated national ideals are challenged. When an actual violent act like 9/11 is committed, we have no national discourse with which to consider any possible relationship between our own national policies and practices and such an attack, however, clearly irrational.

Images are an important tool in the studying of history. The image of the firefighters raising the flag has become the “image” of 9/11. The textbook authors and editors have decided to use this image as a way to invoke patriotism, nationalism and heroism when studying September 11th (Hess & Stoddard, 2007, p. 233). Textbook authors believe that this feel good image demonstrates the nation’s ideology; when in a crisis, the United States will nationally rise to the challenge.

The use of such images relates to the Loewen’s chapter, “Down the Memory Hole.” With textbooks showing specific uplifting photos, other key images of particular events are being left out of the memory when textbooks choose not to include them
during publishing. Loewen believes that all types of images should be incorporated in the texts, for even the most disturbing are an important part of history too. With 9/11 the images of the Twin Towers, Pentagon and Shanksville, Pennsylvania need to be included in history textbooks. According to Loewen, added complexity arises in the study of the recent past. September 11th is part of the recent past and “we read partly in the spirit of criticism, assessing what the authors got wrong as well as agreeing with and perhaps learning from what they got right.” Textbook authors were alive during the recent past, as well as teachers, parents, and the textbooks editing board members. Textbook writing is a business, with the bottom line being profit, and this greatly affects the authors’ typical decision-making process with regard to what gets included. In most situations, the critical information is omitted and the topic is dealt with in an artificial fashion. It is in these escapes of controversial material that leave students are unable to critically evaluate and form their own educated opinions about their own country. Lack of information hinders their growth as actively engaged citizens.

With the analyzed textbooks presenting September 11th in such a particular fashion and the images being selectively situated and terms being carefully defined, the assignments for students to complete do not allow for critical intellectual work. The assignments are closely aligned with the mission of the textbook, to protect the American standards and cultural values (Hess & Stoddard, 2007, p. 234). Students are not able to critically think about the attacks of September 11th, what particularly caused them and therefore what lessons might be available in the aftermath for foreign policy decisions of the United States. The assignments, void of any creativity and emotion, call for a regurgitation of the textbook have material, this time in the lifeless words of the student.
Again, textbooks have stifled the meaning by suppressing causation (Loewen, 1995, p. 15).

Critical examining can also evoke emotion and allow for engaging thought and communication. Typically history textbooks used in the social studies classroom fail to evoke an emotional response. Loewen uses the example of racism and its causes. He speaks of slavery and how it developed a “less than” identity of African-American people. Loewen shows that the emotion that results from learning about slavery is one of sadness, when it should be rage and anger. The problem with this reality is that students have been blinded by white privilege and the dominant culture’s power associated with this privilege. As stated in Privilege, Power and Difference by Allan G. Johnson, people are afraid to use language that promotes awareness of patterns of oppression. If people could reclaim language and not be afraid of words like racism, then the social construct of race and unequal access could be processed emotionally and intellectually. They would be aware of becoming more involved in solving the racial problem that exists today, which is deeply rooted in the slavery they learn about in the textbooks. This blandness also creates a lack of provocation of empowering rage. Students are unable to truly become passionate about the ills the historical past created. Students will then have a better understand of “marginalized people” and how important multiple perspectives are when studying slavery, as well as recent historical events, such as 9/11.

The second article that I want to focus on in relation to Loewen’s arguments is an article by Derek A. Webb titled “Civic Education for the Entire Brain” that was in Education Week. This article argues that despite the growing test scores of 4th, 8th and 12th grade students in U.S. and world history, most of the students have not demonstrated
civic skills and dispositions (Webb, 2007, p. 24). Even though students are performing better on standardized and state mandated tests, their civic skills are lacking. Civic skills drive critical thinking and knowledge about how to become an actively engaged citizen. Educators should be seriously concerned because students are less engaged in promoting social justice and being involved in their community. Currently, school administrators and politicians claim the nation is on the correct path of creating involved youth, when the reality is quite the opposite.

Webb points out that this issue has not received the attention it should because all the attention has been focused on the student’s growing performance in their factual knowledge base of No Child Left Behind. Students are reading and recalling what they read in their textbooks, but are not truly learning the significance of their reading. Students are not engaged for involvement as active citizens, which is about critical reasoning and analysis in understanding the meaning of events, not just the memorization of facts for tests (Webb, 2007, p. 24).

Webb suggests some solutions to the less civically engaged classrooms and students; he promotes the teaching of civic skills and focusing on citizenship that invokes memory use, reasoning and feeling. He also calls upon the educators to be well-trained in teaching a curriculum that is well-designed in order for students to better understand the meaning in their texts. Lastly, Webb believes that civic engagement and citizenship can be developed through extracurricular activities such as meeting with elected officials, student government and service-learning projects (Webb, 2007, p. 24).

This article has many common themes with the Loewen text. Loewen is a major proponent of emotions being included in history education, recognizing that history
should be taught to invoke feeling. Emotion is a very powerful teaching tool because it helps connect students to the past and to their future. Many history textbooks, curriculum and educators are lacking this call for emotion because of the pressures of state standards in the curriculum development and vital textbook fact omission. Also, textbook authors fear students thinking critically about history because by doing so students will use their own personal knowledge and understanding in examining the past of the United States. By doing so, the “herofication” view of the United States will be seriously challenged and the views that textbook developers hope to achieve will be crushed. Students should have the opportunity to think differently about the written work (the texts) and not agree with what is being stated (Loewen, 1995, p. 239). Webb stresses this point in his article; students need to take an active role in their education.

The Hess and Stoddard article, as well as the Webb article demonstrates the legitimacy of Loewen’s arguments. It is up to future social studies educators, like me, to read work by authors such as James W. Loewen, Derek A. Webb, Diana Hess and Jeremy Stoddard because their work brings up critical issues relative to creating an innovative social studies curriculum, while pointing out how textbooks can perpetuate biased points of view. It is my job as a teacher to facilitate dialogue and intellectual engagement, as well as to show students how to look beyond the writings of their textbooks and to search for meaning and relative information from outside sources. It is my job to illustrate the importance of critical thinking, questioning ideologies, invoking change and advocating for students to become proponents for social justice, in the classroom and in their communities. This can all be achieved through careful multiple perspectives social studies education.
References


Professor Regenspan’s Comments:
Dear Emily: You have done valiantly here. Your grade for this essay is an “A-“. Make sure you put this paper in a file for your web portfolio because it says so much about what you already understand about social studies teaching. Excellent work here. I mean it! PR