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Black History in Selected American History Textbooks

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TEXTBOOKS usually present to impressionable young minds a picture of white, middle class culture as the standard for American society. The black slum dweller does not relate to this picture and soon sees himself as the man who is not there. Few of the contributions of blacks in science, business, military service, and in most walks of life have been reported in the textbooks.

Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*,[1] and James Baldwin's series of essays in *Nobody Knows My Name* [2] express this complaint, increasingly heard in recent years, from the American who is black in color.

Many blacks feel that they have not seen themselves, except in a stereotyped manner, in textbooks, magazines, movies, television, and in prominent places in American society. Blacks claim that this has produced a negative self-concept, a concept of worthlessness and despair.[3] Ellison goes further:

[1] Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man.* New York: Random House, Inc., 1947.

[2] James Baldwin. *Nobody Knows My Name.* New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1961.

[3] Lincoln Filene Center for Citizenship and Public Affairs. *Negro Self-Concept.* New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965.

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I am an invisible man. . . . you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder if you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. . . . you ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and swear and make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful.[4]

The Problem

The primary objective of this research was to determine the validity of the following hypothesis: No substantial change has been made in the reporting of contributions of black Americans in selected American history textbooks used in the elementary grades between 1963 and 1969.

The Sample. The sample consisted of selected American history textbooks approved for use in the elementary grades of the Chicago Public Schools in 1969 and the equivalent texts on the market in 1963.[5]

Limitations of the Study. In Chicago, American history is taught at the fifth grade level. Textbooks used at other grade levels could contain marked differences in the extent of information presented. Also, publishers' material not on the approved list of the Chicago schools or not included in the selection might have shown a wider range of differences.

The study dealt with only one criterion measure of material about blacks included in the American history textbooks.

Procedure

After a copy of each of the texts in the sample had been secured, each was read carefully and the actual wording of each reference to the American Negro, or a comment that would seem to have bearing on the Negro American, was noted. The two editions of each text from each publisher (three in one case) were compared for changes. The references from each series of textbooks were compiled in a form in which they could readily be compared.

Criterion Measure. In addition to comparing the changes in content from an earlier to a later edition of each text, *Eyewitness: The Negro in American History*[6] served as the standard in regard to both amount and accuracy of material.

Eyewitness is listed as "excellent" by the education director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People[7] and acclaimed by the Negro Book Club as "the best history book in print on the American Negro."[8] It is not expected that any textbook would include all the material in *Eyewitness*; however, the number of references in each textbook was compared with the number of major references in each unit of *Eyewitness*.

An outline of the Negro contributions in American history, based on *Eyewitness*, was made. After the textbooks were investigated, every item noted was compared with the outline and recorded.

Findings

The outline of *Eyewitness* listed 243 major references under nineteen units.

1. Twenty-six of the major references in the *Eyewitness* outline are mentioned in one of the seven textbooks surveyed.

2. Four items are listed in every textbook investigated: first slaves brought to Jamestown in 1619, Eli Whitney's cotton gin which led to a demand for more slaves, Lincoln's election and his concern over slavery, and the Emancipation Proclamation.

3. Two additional items are mentioned in more than one series: the distinction between field slave and house slave, and part of Lincoln's

[4] Ellison, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

[5] A list of the texts studied is available from the authors.

[6] William L. Katz. *Eyewitness: The Negro in American History.* New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1967.

[7] "The Negro in American Life and History: A Selected Listing of Books for Students and Teachers." New York: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, no date. p. 1. (Mimeographed.)

[8] Katz, *op. cit.*, book jacket.

speech on the continuance of a nation half slave and half free.

4. There was no black famous enough to be included in more than one of the series.

5. Only four blacks are mentioned by name: George Washington Carver, Matthew Henson, Ralph Bunche, and Haiti's Pierre Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture.

6. There has been some change in the pictures and illustrations in the texts used in 1963 and those used in 1969. The earlier editions had three or four pictures or sketches showing blacks, but in the later editions there were dozens of pictures and sketches of blacks. Some were the same pictures as in earlier editions but colored "black." In one series there were no differences in the number of illustrations from 1963 to 1969.

7. There was virtually no change in textual material in the two editions of the texts studied.

One must conclude that there is no substantial change in the reporting of contributions of black Americans in selected American history textbooks used in the elementary grades of the Chicago Public Schools in 1963 and 1969. There was some change, in most series, in pictorial representation of blacks.

Discussion

It appears that while much has been written about black or Afro-American history, little has been done in regard to how this subject is treated in American history textbooks used in the public schools. Grambs points out the need:

. . . the Negro child, from earliest school entry through graduation from high school, needs continued opportunities to see himself and his racial group in a realistically positive light. He needs to understand what color and race mean, he needs to learn about those of his

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race (and other disadvantaged groups) who have succeeded, and he needs to clarify his understanding of his own group history and current group situation.

At the moment, these are missing ingredients in the American school classroom.[9]

One recent study of materials in junior and senior high schools was made by Sloan in 1968. His purpose was "to determine how the Negro is represented in the latest editions of secondary school American history textbooks."[10] The results of his evaluation of these selected textbooks indicate the black man is represented poorly.

When it comes to criticizing the lack of emphasis on Afro-American history and the treatment American schools accord the black child, the literature is fairly extensive. As Katz put it, "Although the Negro has played a significant role in history since the dawn of civilization, neither his face nor contribution has found a place in history texts."[11]

Sloan underscores this with:

> . . . after reconstruction 200-300 pages pass before we get reference to the Negro. This is why whites do not always "see" Negroes. As Ralph Ellison puts it, they are "invisible." And the reason they are unseen is that they are left out from such a large part of American history.[12]

James Baldwin further notes:

> . . . if one managed to change the curriculum in all the schools so that the Negroes learned more about themselves and their real contributions to this culture, you would be liberating white people who know nothing of their history.[13]

The same thesis, in three succinct statements, is made in a recent issue of *School Management:*

1. The American Negro has been deprived of his heritage, his history, and his heroes.

2. Equally tragic, the white American has been deprived of knowledge about, and understanding of, the Negro race and its past.

3. The nation's public school system must shoulder a major share of responsibility for rectifying this situation. Clearly, there is an urgent need to integrate the nation's curriculum, as well as its classrooms.[14]

That the schools have clearly not taken this responsibility in years past is indicated by the U.S. Riot Commission Report. The Commission states that few texts have "featured any Negro personalities . . . or contributions of any Negroes to the country's culture and history."[15] The vast majority of both black and white children have not had the opportunity to understand each other because of the pattern of segregation prevalent in this country.[16]

The National Education Association's Task Force on Human Rights is even more devastating in its criticism. It calls slavery our "congenital defect" and discrimination our "dismal legacy." It blames our educational institutions for having helped bring about the present crisis of confrontation between blacks and whites.[17]

The findings in the present study tend to support the criticisms that have been made of textbooks in the past. Any change that has been made in the textbooks is superficial and of little substance. One must conclude that textbook authors and/or publishers have decided that the criticism of textbooks, based on studies, is either invalid or unimportant. □

[9] Lincoln Filene Center for Citizenship and Public Affairs, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

[10] Irving Sloan. *The Negro in Modern American History Textbooks.* Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Teachers, 1968. p. 6. (Editor's note: A revised edition with new findings was issued in 1972.)

[11] William L. Katz. "The Past and Its Presence." *Southern Education Report* 4: 20; July/August 1968.

[12] Sloan, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

[13] James Baldwin. "A Talk to Teachers." *Saturday Review* 46: 44; December 21, 1963.

[14] Reprinted from: "How To Integrate Your District's Curriculum." *School Management* 12: 21; August 1968. This article is copyrighted. © 1968 by CCM Professional Magazines, Inc. All rights reserved.

[15] National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders.* New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1968. p. 434.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 426.

[17] National Education Association. *Report of the Task Force on Human Rights.* Washington, D.C.: the Association, 1968. pp. 7, 3, 29.

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