Judging a Book by its Cover:

The Textbook Industry and what it means for Schools Today

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Introduction & Problem Statement

Throughout the course of this semester, we have been looking in depth into the realm of education, specifically the post modern era and its impact on curriculum. Our discussions have led us to the idea of currere, the latest State Senate Bill, and of course, No Child Left Behind. While all these are relevant to education and its curriculum, there is one area which I wanted to pursue further – textbooks. We use these books and resources everyday in the classroom, but we may never have asked ourselves: Who decides what is in and out of the textbook? How does this impact student learning? What are the ramifications of leaving race and culture out of the books? These are several of the questions I had as I began my research.

During my time in undergrad, I read a fascinating article, “The Muddle Machine: Confessions of a Textbook Editor,” and it has always stuck with me as something to look further into. As a classroom teacher, I am faced with textbooks, student workbooks, and teacher manuals all day long. The amount of information and materials is overwhelming. Through my chosen topic, I hope to gain a better understanding of textbooks, the industry, and the current trends in both public and private sectors of schools.

I am going into my fourth year as a teacher, and working in a private school has been a very rewarding experience. I have curriculum which I must follow and topics which my students must have knowledge of by the end of the year, but I do not follow all the textbooks as they are written. I add my own enrichment projects or work to a particular chapter, especially when the recommended ideas in the text are below the level of my students.

Along with projects, I like to use games and hands on activities or manipulatives and add to what my students are learning. For example, in Social Studies, my students and I are discussing new countries each week, created travel diaries, and each student has made a country project. In the private school, I have the luxury of adding these types of projects and moving away from teaching the textbook verbatim. Would I have been able to do this in a public school setting? Or would I have to stick to only what is printed in the text given me? I will return to these questions later on.

The textbook industry began booming in the 1980s and 1990s, when the competition between publishers was fierce. Small companies began to be bought out and larger corporations began to take over like Pearson and McGraw-Hill. This exchange of power and money lead to the decrease in the amount of basal readers and choices in texts along with editing staff (Ansary, 2004). Freelance writers are hired to produce books quicker and cheaper than historians and authors – it has become an “assembly line system.”

Here is the ever present thought of education being run as a business. It seems as if education is focusing more attention on capital and productivity than the students in the classroom. Publishers are following financial capital strategies in order to make a profit. This is starting to become the trend these days in education – and its affects are rippling down into our textbooks. As Apple suggests, these and other factors including politics and economics are just some of the deciding factors when it comes to what is in textbooks. Apple calls it “a complicated situation in which biographical and local factors involving authors, publishers, school systems, and classroom reality” (Apple, 1989).

There are also those who are in power – “these are the people that represent the status quo and call themselves Universalists. The curriculum is being controlled by groups with a parochial view of what the curriculum should and should not include” (Anaya, 1992). This includes those “who hold narrow views of what should be included, publishers who control what is printed, and politicians who defend their particular social and political interests” (Anaya, 1992).

With all this being said, who decides what is in or out of textbooks? The textbook industry is billion plus market and there are many who feel they need a say or have some input as to what textbooks look like. California and Texas are the two states at the front of most of these debates. Texas accounts for a large percent of the textbook market in our country and what is decided there can usually be found in classrooms all over because to reprint or change textbooks for only a small percent of states is deemed too expensive.

Conservatives and fundamentalists, including the well known Gabler family are a force to be reckoned with when it comes to publish new editions of textbooks; especially science and history books. In 1982, the Gabler family was concerned over material that offended religious ideals and political views rather than the educational content. Not only did the Gablers’ become involve, the People for the American Way started to publicize the inadequacy of the textbooks. As a result, Texas made changes to the selection of textbooks and limited the amount of say the Gabler family had. There were also other factors that helped aid in the outcry. Fundamentalists including Pat Robertson and others used their religious talk shows to bring these issues to the masses. ADD OR CHANGE STUFF HERE – NEED TO TIE IN SOMEHOW OR LINK TO CLASS DISCUSSIONS???????

These groups also spark outcries to pieces of literature and novels which are used in English/Reading courses. Rather than put up a battle and risk losing their jobs, many teachers succumb to authority and teach books that are deemed “safe.” While these books may seem “safe,” are we shielding students from topics which should be talked about openly? Are these “glitzy” textbooks just a front for unreadable material? The ultimate question in: what should be left in and out of textbooks?

Perhaps this ultimate question may never be answered, but it does bring up the topic of censorship, one that goes hand in hand with textbooks.