

7. Social Studies: Specifications that misdirect

[Article 7 of 10: The previous article exposed that content thematically organized was incidental and not relevant to what should be taught. This article exposes that content, when specified, is not always as it appears.]

Implementation texts for teachers and students are the tip of the educational sword. Mostly created by outside vendors, they arrived pre-designed, with expert representations of advanced behavioral pedagogical techniques. Their complexity creates a barrier to entry to competition.

Authorities dissemble when they posture that content has been left to local authorities. Districts seldom have the time, curricular expertise, or funding to create the classroom material necessary to compete with outside vendors. Requirements are so strict that local districts are left no practical alternative but to accept implementations that express pre-established voice.

The Social Studies Frameworks and outside vendor implementations are like two non-toxic chemicals that, bound together in binary chemical weapons, turn into poison gas. The EngageNY.org website posted vendor-provided sample social studies content for Common Core English Language Arts (ELA) grades 2-12 lessons raise the same concerns as the Social Studies Framework.

The Grade 2 ELA text breaks the non-fiction contract with readers. A non-fiction contract requires a narrative arc to convey a full and accurate repre-

sentation of facts. It's read-aloud pushes a pasteurized "Democracy Good" Athenian notion that, even simplified for second grade, undermines essential American principles. Half-truths presented as conventional wisdom promote acculturation that trains impressionable students to favor administration prejudices:

- The authors claim Athens favored education while Sparta favored military training—omitting that in Athens girls were not educated while Sparta educated girls to the same level as boys.

- The authors claim Athens invented democracy, while Sparta was a monarchy—omitting that, before Athens created its democracy, Sparta created a balanced constitution incorporating monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy with checks against all three.

- The authors claim Athens favored peace while Sparta favored war—omitting that city-states including Athens respected Sparta because of its concept of justice and willingness to fight to defend it.

- The authors claim Athens favored individualism and Sparta did not—yet in Athens marriages were arranged while Spartans married for love.

- The authors claim Athens was the seat of reason—omitting that demagogues in Athens drove their democracy to collapse, while Spartans, sensitive to democratic flaws refused to participate in the Athenian call to war.

- On the other side, the authors

omit that enforced equality of Sparta, where private wealth was banned, left it without the wealth Athens' economic engine generated that allowed creation of naval power strong enough to take on Sparta.

The authors weave partial truths into a preferred narrative. Peace becomes the absence of war rather than the absence of the need for war. Athenians become lovers of peace, arts, and learning and while the Spartan approach valued different lessons the authors considered less positive. Athenians invent democracy while Spartans are not praised for their concern about democracy's potential for overreach. Intentional misrepresentation in business commits fraud; in education it commits social change.

In another sample, ELA reading materials for grades 6-12 purport to teach students about "Evidence-based claims." The lessons repeatedly drill students to scan readings for "evidence" of claims, even though such claims are taken out of context and impossible to validate. They encourage students to cite things that are not true without any way of knowing it. They prepare young minds to put blind trust in oratory easily hijacked by demagoguery.

One ELA reading has American tennis player Venus Williams plead for equal prize money for women. The lessons imply something is wrong with America by omitting that her criticism was directed at Great Britain

and that equal prize money had been awarded 32 years earlier to American women.[2]

A 30-year-old reading from Cesar Chavez from 1984 has lessons that drive readers toward a preferred dramatic narrative. The Grade 7 sample reading offers no alternative evidence to assess the assertions Chavez makes, no defense is offered about his accusations, and nothing suggests the problem is contemporary.

Lessons inform students an evidence-based claim, "States a conclusion you have come to... and that you want others to think about." Each "evidence-based" claim is out of context and based upon a single tenuous unsubstantiated opinion that, repeated often enough, easily becomes believed.

Bogus assertions are not fact, but content reinforces feelings about the country. One misrepresentation might be happenstance, two a coincidence, but consistent superficiality spread through every year of middle and high school lessons represents either incompetence or a plot.

[Next article: The Social Studies Frameworks push methods as if learning to be an historian is somehow the same as learning history.]

[1] http://www.p12.nysed.gov/engageny/k-2-curriculum/G2_D5_Anthology.pdf

[2] <http://engageny.org/resource/making-evidence-based-claims-unit-ccss-ela-literacy-grade-8>