

“WHAT YOU SUPPOSED TO KNOW”: URBAN BLACK STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES ON HISTORY TEXTBOOKS

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Abstract

Research in social studies education has raised significant practical and epistemological concerns with the history textbooks used in urban schools. While these concerns are well documented, we know less about their implications for Black students’ understandings and applications of historical content. This qualitative, ethnographic study explored six Black, urban students’ perspectives on history textbooks and how these textbooks influenced their historical knowledge about civil rights leaders. Guided by the critical race framework, connections are drawn between participants’ recollections of textbook accounts and their understandings of contemporary racial relationships and civil rights struggle. Findings suggest a *contentious relationship* with the information presented in textbooks and the need to rethink social studies curriculum and pedagogy in relation to the contextual realities and lived experiences of Black urban youth.

Keywords: black students, urban schools, social studies education, history textbooks

Social studies education researchers have identified notable limitations with representations of racial struggle in history textbooks (Alridge, 2006; Brown & Brown, 2010; Curwen, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1998; 2003). In relation to the histories and identities of Black people, history textbooks have been described as “reductive” and “incoherent” (Ladson-Billings, 1998; 2003); “stereotypical” and “inaccurate” (Brown & Brown, 2010); as well as “overly simplistic” and “one-dimensional” (Alridge, 2006). These limitations are exacerbated in many urban schools, wherein a racially homogenous teaching force (Sleeter & Milner, 2011) routinely relies on outdated history textbooks (Crocco, 2008; Epstein, 2010).

Analyses conducted through the critical race framework suggest that history textbooks deeply inform students’ understandings of citizenship and democracy (Brown & Brown, 2010; Epstein, 2001; Howard, 2003; King & Swartz, 2014; King, L., 2014; King, L., Davis & Brown, 2012; Woodson, in press). However, few studies have centered Black students’ perspectives of

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history textbooks to illuminate if and how these resources help “students engage in the complexity of social issues that they encounter on a daily basis” (Howard, 2003, p. 497). In this article, I examine six Black urban students’ perspectives on textbooks. Specifically, I interrogate their understandings of the term ‘civil rights leader’ as synecdoche for broader representations of racial struggle. The data illuminates a contentious relationship with textbook narratives. I conclude offering recommendations toward supplementing and challenging problematic textbook knowledge.

Black Urban Students and Social Studies Textbooks: A Brief Review

In a review of challenges and possibilities faced by social studies teachers in urban classrooms, Gay (2004) contended that the field of social studies education “has a long history of not being very popular with or valued by” students in urban schools, in part because the content and priorities of the field may not meet the needs of urban students (p. 76). Gay’s position is supported by research examining history textbooks in urban classrooms. Reporting on the meanings that high-achieving, urban secondary Latino students’ afford to history curriculum, Terzian and Yeager (2007) argued that the American history “textbooks and curricula” in urban schools “tend to depict an authoritative account of the nation’s past” that students of color “may not subscribe to” (p. 56). In a survey of nineteen history textbooks published between 1999-2003, Brown and Brown (2010) found that narratives about Black political struggles are rendered in “fragmented” (p. 59) and “misleading” (p. 54) ways. Alridge (2006) added that “textbook writers have difficulty giving equal attention to all who participated in the black freedom struggle” (p. 673), erasing some historical voices and models of resistance to racial subjugation. Consequently, Black students “will not leave their history course with any sense of a coherent history of Africans in the Americas,” and the ways these individuals struggled for social and political recognition (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 3).

Two additional concerns compound issues with content. Crocco (2008) noted that many “urban school systems use textbooks that are 10 or 20 years old” (p. 181), further restricting the historical accuracy and sociopolitical relevance of the texts. With few cost effective curricular alternatives, many social studies teachers continue to rely heavily on these textbooks as a source of information (Alridge, 2006; Percy, 2014; Salinas & Sullivan, 2007). A second area of concern is the identities and perspectives of the social studies teachers utilizing the textbooks. Levstik (2008) argued, “urban schools may face more challenges” finding and keeping “ambitious teachers who provide coherent, interesting and worthwhile social studies instruction” (p. 52). Sleeter and Milner (2011) add that many schools also struggle to recruit and retain racially diverse teachers, who might be more aware of or inclined to challenge textbook limitations in regard to race and racism. Milner (2014) suggests that social studies teachers often do not prepare students for the “racialized experiences that they will inevitably face” (p. 14).

Problematic narratives of race in dated textbooks, and the reality that many urban teachers serve students whose social, cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic needs differ from their own, foreshadow a contentious relationship between Black urban students and history textbooks. Without minimizing the need for continued structural critique and reform, this study builds on Gay’s (2004) insistence that social studies educators in urban settings must explore “the contextual reality of urban living and the perspectives and positionalities” of diverse students, and allow these explorations to inform and improve social studies instruction (p. 77).

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

The theoretical framework for this study is critical race theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In the field of education, CRT is used to “question social constructions and assumptions of race” (Parker, 1998, p. 44), and to illuminate the meaning of race and racism in the lived experiences of students and educators (Howard, 2004). The framework has also been used to examine how race and racism are represented within social studies curriculum (Brown & Brown, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2003), and how students understand and engage in race-related dialogue in social studies classrooms (Howard, 2004). The critical race tenet that race and racism are integral features of society and schooling systems (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker, 1998) supports centering race and racial identity as variables in examinations of urban Black students’ access to and understandings of the knowledge presented in social studies textbooks.

CRT also affords primacy to the experiential knowledge of marginalized racial groups when analyzing the nature and implications of race and racism (Howard, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Thus, CRT supports positioning urban, Black students’ experiences in social studies classrooms as necessary and legitimate sources of knowledge for constructing social studies curricula that better respond to these students’ cultural, political and educational needs (Bernal, 2002; Howard, 2004). CRT provides a useful lens for examining urban, Black students’ perceptions of social studies textbooks, the narratives of the civil rights leadership within these textbooks, and how these narratives inform students’ understandings of contemporary race relations and civil rights struggle.

Methods

This study explored Black urban students’ perspectives on social studies textbooks. Data was collected during a larger, three-year ethnographic case study exploring Black urban youths’ broader perceptions of social studies education. All six participants were between 16 and 19 years of age and were identified through a work readiness program for vulnerable youth of color where the author facilitated writing and journalism workshops. All participants also attended one of two urban schools. Both schools had not met Adequate Yearly Progress at the time of participant recruitment, had high proportions of students who receive free and reduced lunch, and high rates of administrative and teacher turnover.

Data sources were semi-structured focus group and individual interviews, participants’ assignments and journals, and participant observations conducted during community events that participants identified as relevant to the study. Extensive field notes were maintained throughout the interviews and observations. Individual interviews lasted sixty to ninety minutes, and focus group interviews lasted ninety to 120 minutes. Twelve individual interviews and four focus group interviews are the primary source of data for the findings below. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Though all data sources are not reported on here, each source was used to develop and confirm the results shared below.

Data Analysis

The objective of this study was to ascertain my participants’ perspectives of history textbooks in general (rather than responses to a particular text or texts). To meet this objective, I read all transcripts and field notes, with specific attention to reflections on textbooks. A table

documenting expressions, observations and experiences related to social studies textbooks was created for each individual participant utilizing individual interview transcripts, journal entries, individual assignments, and ethnographic field notes. Tables were also created for each focus group session utilizing interview transcripts and artifacts brought to or created during that session. Reflections on textbooks were then categorized based on the nature of the reflection: positive or negative, useful or not useful, trustworthy or untrustworthy, accurate or inaccurate, relevant or irrelevant, boring or engaging, etc. A cross-case synthesis was then developed by identifying convergence across the tables created for each case (Yin, 2013). Through this process, I was able to develop insight into participants' understandings of history textbooks, their content, and their significance. I verified all themes during member-checks (Maxwell, 1996).

For the present analysis, I focus on the theme *contentious relationships*, which captures participants' simultaneous judgments that textbooks were useful and untrustworthy. Black students' perspectives on textbooks are underrepresented in research literature (Epstein, 1994; Howard, 2004), and this theme advances understandings of the perceived credibility and role of textbooks in these students' lives. *Contentious relationships* describes my participants' sense of suspicion toward textbooks, despite the fact that textbook accounts serve as the primary source of their historical knowledge. As this theme was well represented across interviews and recurrent conversations about civil rights and civil rights leaders, excerpts from these conversations frame the findings presented below.

Results: Contentious Relationships

During a focus group session, Stefanie defined civil rights leaders as "Black people who fought for, um, our freedom to do what we were born to do". Jasen¹ would add that civil rights leaders were "brave" individuals who "basically told white people what's up". These and other comments contributed to a baseline understanding of how my participants' understood civil rights leaders, including the perception that civil rights leaders were Black people who engaged in confrontation with white people for certain freedoms. To explore these insights further, I asked my participants to name ten civil rights leaders. This request resulted in the following list: Martin Luther King, Jr.; Rosa Parks; Malcolm X; Medgar Evers; Maya Angelou; Thurgood Marshall; Nelson Mandela; Frederick Douglas; Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. Once the list was compiled, I inquired:

Researcher: Where do these names come from?

LaDarius: Like, you know, school and shit. In like history classes.

Xavier: I hates history classes.

Crystal: We been talking this whole time about like, what we don't be learning in schools.

LaDarius: I'm not saying that like everything they say in school is what's up or whatever. That's not what I'm saying. It's like who was supposed to be a historical person, like who was important, you know what I mean, that is like something that they will basically tell you at school... So teachers lie, you know books lie, I mean or whatever, but they can't just make a person up and write that down and put it in a book.

Crystal: ...But they can like, leave people out of the book.

¹ Participants are referred to by pseudonym.

Jasen: But like, what do they basically win by doing that? Like, civil rights leaders are like you know American heroes or whatever.

Stefanie: Why would they take away role models? I mean like, Black role models? They always be like we need them, so why not put them in the book?

In this exchange, my participants debated the authority of textbooks for understanding history. Their responses suggest they believed history classes and textbooks are intended to provide information about “who was important,” “American heroes,” and potential “Black role models”. LaDarius seemed to believe that textbook accounts were at least in part accurate when he argued that textbook authors “can’t just make a person up”. Crystal was critical of the extent to which textbooks provided accurate information, but felt that she had limited options to develop alternative interpretations of history. In an individual interview, she reflected:

I was always like kind of not with it... like always like this don't seem like right, like how Black people would just disappear from total whole moments... My last history book was like five hundred pages. Like, you can't make up five hundred pages worth of writing. But still it's like, how do you know what stuff is for real and what somebody made up? ...And if you don't know, then like, you have to trust it until somebody tell you different.

Crystal's reflection supports Rosenweig's (1992) contention that for many students, textbooks are “the primary lens through which they incorporate historical knowledge for the rest of their lives” (p. 1377). Despite the primacy of textbooks in her understandings, she did not invest completely in these accounts. Still, she felt she had to “trust” these accounts until a “different” one emerged.

My participants' descriptions of textbook knowledge appeared to affirm Alridge's (2006) argument that history textbooks often “deny [students] a realistic and multifaceted picture” of history (p. 663). They seemed to believe that textbooks were missing information. Their recollections of textbook accounts did suggest notable historical absences. For example, a particularly truncated portrait of civil rights leaders emerged as we explored commonalities across their list of civil rights leaders. This portrait confirmed that they perceived all or most civil rights leaders to be Black:

Researcher: What else do these people share in common?

Monica: They're all Black.

Researcher: They are all Black, you named all Black people.

Jasen: But you said civil rights leaders.

Researcher: Are all civil rights leaders Black?

Xavier: What else would they be?

This exchange highlights an overly simplistic black-white binary in understandings of civil rights struggle, one that silences the historical voices of queer, feminist, labor, and other activists of color that have called for social reform. Participants attributed this perceived binary in part to textbooks, and it contributed to their contentious relationship with textbook narratives. For example, Monica stated:

...I'm not saying they always tell everything... but the textbook is what you supposed to

know, so basically, if it's just us against white people in there, then that's what history will be to me...I feel like they can't make somebody pose for that kind of picture, you know, or just find a group of all Black people to pose on the street for a march. That makes me feel like other races of people, you know like Mexicans or whatever, just used our sacrifices for their communities with no appreciation.

During a subsequent interview, I asked Monica to elaborate on what she meant by "the textbook is what you supposed to know". She shared:

It's basically what you know, what you need to know to graduate...not like the real history of the world, just like what your teacher thinks important... I know that a lot of our history, like Black women and things we did as maybe civil rights leaders in history is missing. It's what you supposed to know to get through this system, you know, to graduate...just to keep your teachers or the testers happy.

Monica distinguished between the history she read in textbooks and "our history," or the history of "Black women". She described the practical utility of textbook knowledge, which she understood as necessary to graduate and to pass standardized tests. But this history was not "real" to her, as it excluded the historical achievements and civil rights leadership of Black women. Though she needed textbook knowledge to do well in school, she believed that important parts of her history as a Black woman and potential leader were "missing" from this knowledge.

Discussion and Conclusions

Though Monica, Stefanie, Crystal, LaDarius, Xavier and Jasen debated the accuracy of textbook accounts, they also seemed to rely on these accounts as they explored the concept and designation of civil rights leader. The theme contentious relationships highlights the tension between the centrality of textbook knowledge to their high school success, and their perception that textbooks "lie", that Black people "disappear", and that Black women leaders are "missing" from textbook accounts. Their synopses of the textbook knowledge that they encountered affirmed previous research on textbook representations of race, racism and racial struggle (Alridge, 2006; Brown & Brown, 2010; King, L., 2014).

In relation to their understandings of civil rights leaders, their understandings suggest troubling implications of "reductive" and "overly simplistic" presentations of history. For example, they believed that all civil rights leaders were Black and were primarily active during the abolitionist and modern Civil Rights movements. These beliefs led to Monica's contention that other ethnic and cultural groups unfairly benefited from Black leaders' sacrifices, and seemed to prevent the recognition of contemporary figures as civil rights leaders. Further, my participants viewed civil rights leaders almost exclusively as "heroes" and "role models". This tendency might prevent my participants from understanding these figures as "real" people, who develop into leadership over time (Alridge, 2006, p. 667). These understandings seemed to constrain their sense of contemporary race relations and civil rights struggle.

Social studies educators face significant structural challenges in presenting curricula that will better prepare Black urban students to understand and live in a racialized world (Milner, 2014). My participants' understandings of civil rights leaders are not inherently 'urban'.

However, I argue that their understandings bear specific implications in urban contexts. The reliance on textbooks seemed to function as a conceptual barrier to more radical interpretations of civil rights leadership, in which ordinary people from multiple oppressed groups work collaboratively to combat disenfranchisement. Urban students of color are in dire need of such interpretations, as they are uniquely vulnerable to various forms of political, economic and cultural marginalization and exploitation. Due to the design of this study, the findings may not be considered generalizable. Nonetheless, the perspectives shared above offer insight into the types of questions we might ask to disrupt the influence of limited social studies textbooks in urban students' understandings of the world.

Based on the data and my experiences as a social studies and urban teacher educator, radical interpretations can be developed in many ways. A teacher might engage LaDarius, who believes that social studies teachers and textbooks "lie," in dialogue about the origins of and politics surrounding textbook narratives. Assignments that support such dialogue include allowing students to construct their own history textbook units. As they do so, teachers can provide conflicting primary and secondary sources for students to reconcile, offer a variety of photographs for students to select and contextualize, and encourage students to be explicit about how they understand the significance and meaning of figures and events. Once the units are completed, teachers can pose questions such as: *What perspectives are present?*, *What perspectives are absent?*, and *What interests are served by the perspectives shared?* These questions might help students to understand textbooks as a potential source of evidence, a source whose content and structure reflects the perspectives of its creators.

For students like Crystal and Monica, who desire more historical representations of Black people and Black women, a teacher might enliven the curriculum with autobiographies, guest speakers, photographs and other historical artifacts that extend or challenge aspects of the textbook narrative. Asking students to pick social groups of interest – groups of varying ability and diverse ethnic, racial, gender, sexual, religious, and socioeconomic identities – and discussing the experiences of these groups across time periods discussed in the textbook, allows an opportunity to cover the same material while diversifying historical representations in the social studies classroom. My participants' respective reflections provide a point of departure for rethinking the role of history textbooks in urban classrooms. For urban students and for all students, educators must work to present textbook narratives as narratives that can be resisted, corrected and enhanced, so students' knowledge reflects the complexity of race and the potential of ongoing civil rights struggle.

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