

# *Textbooks: Do They Meet Fair Minority Group Standards?*

MAX ROSENBERG\*

There is an ongoing "battle for better books." . . . The struggle will be won when educators insist that only those new textbooks be approved for purchase and use in their own school or school system which meet both high standards in curriculum content and high affirmative standards in providing fair, accurate, and balanced treatment of minority groups.<sup>1</sup>

THE above statement appears in a brochure recently published by the Michigan Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (MASCDC). Titled "Criteria for Evaluating the Treatment of Minority Groups in Textbooks and Other Curriculum Materials," the publication provides evaluative guidelines that can be most helpful to board of education members, superintendents, curriculum supervisors, principals, teachers, and others engaged in the task of examining textbooks for the purpose of review, selection, and purchase.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Sorenson. "Introduction." p. 1. In: Max Rosenberg. "Criteria for Evaluating the Treatment of Minority Groups in Textbooks and Other Curriculum Materials." Position paper of the Michigan ASCD. n.d. 4 pp.

<sup>2</sup> Copies of this brochure may be obtained by writing: Michigan Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1216 Kendale Boulevard, East Lansing, Michigan 48823. The charges are: 1 copy, 15 cents; 10 copies, 50 cents.

## **Unsatisfactory Textbooks**

Many textbooks in current use in schools across the country are unsatisfactory tools of learning for children and youth in a pluralistic, democratic society. Altogether too many textbooks either omit black people and other minorities, or give them a role of secondary and lesser significance. Very infrequently does the black, or Spanish American, or Oriental American, or Indian appear in a position of centrality or leadership. The minority group characters that are utilized are mostly stereotypic images from the world of sports and entertainment. It is of more than passing interest to note that blacks and other minorities will be shown in a prison scene or in a mental health hospital, but rarely, if ever, will a picture of a happy, healthy, wholesome black family be shown in textbooks.

Most textbooks contain very few pictures of fully integrated human groups. Where whites and blacks do appear together, the blacks are nearly always in the background or on the periphery. Another device commonly used by publishers is consciously to camouflage and confuse racial identification.

\* Max Rosenberg, Editor, *Quest, Detroit Public Schools Staff Journal*, Detroit, Michigan

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## **HOLT, RINEHART AND WINSTON, INC.**

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A number of publishers simply smudge some color over Caucasian features.

When one analyzes large numbers of textbooks, a pattern appears to emerge. This pattern seems clearly to be one of minimizing the roles of minority groups in the development of our civilization and in the ongoing life of our contemporary society. Even though there are some exceptions, this is true of textbooks generally—regardless of subject matter area or grade level.

## **Attitudes Affected**

Most educators are aware that textbooks and other curriculum materials constitute highly consequential elements in the total educational environment.

Textbooks and other instructional materials affect the life and learning of our young people in crucial ways. All text material—whether intended or not—affects attitudes as well as knowledge and skills. Consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, in ways that are sometimes obvious and sometimes subtle, the content and illustrations of text materials—all text materials—teach the learner a great deal about social groups.

It is clear that the content and illustrations of a music book and a math book and a literature book—as well as social studies textbooks—teach the learner much about group and intergroup life. In the very matter of inclusion or exclusion, in the quality and quantity of representation, in the position and placement of material, in editorial commentary, the learner absorbs certain attitudinal assumptions and understandings.

It does not take the learner very long to "get the message" about his own group and about other racial, religious, ethnic, and social class groups. The "message" concerns such critical dimensions as group image, group power or powerlessness, level of group expectations, and group life role and goals. And this in turn has profound psychological effects upon the individual and his self-pride, level of aspiration, basic motivation, identification with the school program and process, indeed the individual's sense of involvement with our whole society and his stake in it.

There is a growing recognition of the importance that must be attached to the treatment of minorities in textbooks as a decisive factor in education.

### **Actions by School Systems**

A few school systems have begun to take necessary steps to ensure that their book adoption procedures always give careful, searching, analytical attention to the fair treatment of minority groups. One outstanding example is Detroit. The Detroit Public Schools have acquired a national reputation as a battler for better textbooks—for developing "hard line" policies, for refusing to purchase books which do not meet fair standards, for working with publishers to effect changes, for seeking to influence other school systems to join forces in this very important campaign.

In recent years the Detroit Board of Education has rejected as unacceptable large numbers of textbooks submitted by the leading textbook publishers in the United States. A number of these rejected books have been changed and revised in significant ways.<sup>3</sup>

Not long ago Alexander J. Burke, General Manager of the Webster Division of the McGraw-Hill Book Company, wrote to Detroit staff members, "You have served as a catalyst for the publishing industry and for education, and I hope that you will be increasingly pleased with the impact that your efforts are having."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See: Freeman Flynn and Max Rosenberg, "One Textbook, One Publisher, One School System," *Quest*, Detroit Public Schools Staff Journal; Autumn 1971.

<sup>4</sup> Letter addressed to Arthur L. Johnson, Detroit Public Schools Deputy Superintendent in charge of school-community relations.

### **Actions by Educator Groups**

A number of educator organizations have also begun to take some steps to ensure that textbooks and other curriculum materials used in our public schools are appropriate and acceptable for *all* of our children and youth.

One of these organizations at the state level is the Michigan Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. MASCD has established a standing Equal Educational Opportunities Task Force, which deals with a number of continuing concerns of special importance in the treatment of minorities in Michigan education.

One chief continuing concern of MASCD is the textbook issue. MASCD has sought to alert Michigan educators to the problems resulting from the use of textbooks that are unsatisfactory, and indeed harmful, to members of both majority and minority groups. This organization has conducted textbook evaluation workshops and clinics for teams of educators from a number of school systems in the state. It has now issued the aforementioned brochure, which underscores the need for action, and provides an instrument that can serve well in the process of evaluating textbooks and other learning materials.

When will publishers publish textbooks that *do* meet the needs of children and youth in our multiracial, multireligious, multi-ethnic society? Publishers will provide the kinds of textbooks that we need when boards of education and educators insist upon them—refusing to settle for the "best available," and rejecting all textbooks that do not meet high standards in the treatment of minority groups as well as in curriculum content. □

## **SUPERVISION: Emerging Profession**

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Edited by ROBERT R. LEEPER

273 pp.

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\$5.00

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