

# School, Book, Nation

School textbooks, identity, and the pedagogies and politics  
of imagining community

James H Williams, Visiting Professor, CICE

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[jim@hiroshima-u.ac.jp](mailto:jim@hiroshima-u.ac.jp); [jhw@gwu.edu](mailto:jhw@gwu.edu)

## Opening (history) joke

There are two people sitting in a classroom and the one who is a foreigner asks the other who is a citizen of Kazakhstan, ‘Aren’t you afraid of the future here?’ and the second replies, ‘No, we’re not afraid of the future. We know what to expect in the future because we’ve all read Kazakhstan 2030 and with that document our future is laid out for us. We have no questions about our future because it’s been told to us in great detail by the government, and besides it reminds us of our former five year plans’. The first person finding this response rather strange asks, ‘What then are you afraid of if you’re not afraid about the future?’ To which the second person replies, ‘We’re afraid of the past because it keeps changing on us’.

(Interview, 11 April 2000) Kissane *Comparative Education*,  
*Vol. 41, No. 1, February 2005, pp. 45–69*

# Overview

- Official school textbooks provide rich source material to understand:
  - social effects of schooling
  - social and political contexts of education
- Textbooks:
  - provide official knowledge a society wants its children to acquire
  - frame this knowledge in larger, usually implicit, narrative
- Representation of past intimately connected with identity
- Textbook analysis provides lens to see nation's hidden social and political curriculum
- Analysis of implicit teaching-learning “pedagogy” provides insight into desired relationship between student and history
  - Is history presented as an interpretation of events which are socially understood, constructed and contested, and in which the individual has both individual and social agency, or as a set of fixed, unitary and unassailable historical and social facts to be memorized?
  - Do students have a role in constructing history, or is it external to them?
  - How is history presented when that history is recent and contested?

# Education systems

- Schools are the pre-eminent institution of modernity & nation-state
- Education systems
  - established & run or overseen by (nation-)state
  - socialize kids into the (nation-)state
    - Stories – explicit (history), implicit lessons
    - Rituals, practices, visuals; Common experience
  - emphasize national and “modern” identity
  - a key means for “imagined community” (Benedict Anderson)
- In doing so, they tend to deemphasize sub-national and super-national identities
  - “minorities,” localities, other language speakers, immigrants, various “others” or “othereds”
  - those outside the (nation-)state

# Things (nation-)states need to do— implications for schools

1. Build or reinforce the idea and memory of the nation
  - “Imagined communities”
  - National story or stories
2. Explain/deal with variation, or diversity or difference
  - Internal and external – who are we, who are we not, who are they?
3. Explain conflict and war
  - What happened? Why? Whose fault, what was “our” role? What was “their” role?
4. Create good citizens
  - What’s a good citizen in \_\_\_\_? What’s the proper relationship between a citizen and the state?
5. Teach/train/inculcate/socialize new generation

# Current project

4 edited books:

to get at social and political “curricula” of school textbooks, in contexts where:

- identity or legitimacy of state has become problematic (volume 1)  
→ **Building or rebuilding the nation**
- Membership/relationship among members of state is challenged (volume 2) → **(Re)Defining membership**
- conflict, or some aspect of conflict, remains unresolved (volume 3)  
→ **Dealing with conflict**

Vol 4 seeks to understand processes by which implicit social & historical lessons in textbooks are taught and learned, or ignored → **Teaching national memory**

# General approach

- Focuses (mostly) on:
  - School textbooks – quasi “official” narrative
  - National level – school curricula mostly national
  - History, geography, civics (or equivalent)
  - Secondary level (mostly)
  - Changes in portrayal during periods of rapid social, economic, political, or cultural change
  - Civics, history, geography have some protection from globalization
  - Even if global concepts are adopted, often adapted for local audiences and purposes
- About 60 country cases
  - Written by national experts

# General approach - 2

- Comparative analysis
  - To surface and make visible general *patterns across countries*
    - Differences in apparently similar places – how and why US & Australia differ in presenting histories of indigenous peoples
    - Similarities in apparently different places – post-independence textbooks in Turkmenistan and post-Ataturk Turkey
  - To understand specifics of particular cases
  - To understand cases of “positive deviance”
  - To understand *changes over time within and across countries*
- Textbook analysis looks systematically at:
  - What is said, unsaid; How it is said
  - How text squares with “reality”
  - How different groups are portrayed
  - How portrayals shift during rapid social/political change
  - Etc.

# General approach - 3

- Each volume contains:
  - Theoretical introduction (editor)
  - Cases (national experts)
    - Methodologies vary
    - Common outline
    - External review, for bias and academic rigor
  - Analytic essay(s) (topical experts)
  - Discussion & synthesis (editor)
- Not organized by region, by choice
- Must remember the instructional context
  - Intended curriculum → teacher → implemented
  - Implemented curriculum → kid → acquired
  - Looking (mostly) at Intended Curriculum
  - All in context of all the education that takes place out of school – family, community, media

# Traditionally, history education has

- Tended to
  - Emphasize transmission of knowledge
  - Favor political and constitutional history and wars
  - Focus predominately on events and personalities
  - Assume the national historical narrative coincided with history of largest national grouping and dominant linguistic, cultural community
  - Reflect and help foster dominance of those in power
  - Reflect and help foster dominance of men
  - Rely on content-rich chronological survey of national history
  - Emphasize retention as mode of learning
  - Rely on a single, authoritative narrative

# History education has also tended to

- Glorify leaders, wars, events
- Emphasize the stories of men
- Teach a triumphant national story—even if that means dignity in noble defeat
- Emphasize national ideals (even if sowing seeds of future challenge)
- De-emphasize or ignore unflattering facts
- Leave out counter-narratives or details contradicting dominant narrative
- Ignore minorities
- Assume the nation-state as focus of identity
- Essentialize national identity
- Help create enemies
- Nurture national wounds
- Emphasize memorization, or “critical thinking” that fails to challenge basic story

# Recently, history education

- Has tried to balance teaching students about the past with providing students the means to “think historically “about the past
- Emphasized analysis, interpretation and synthesis of evidence from multiple sources, primary & secondary
- Recognized that most historical phenomena can be interpreted and reconstructed from a variety of perspectives, reflecting
  - limitations of the evidence,
  - subjective interests of those who are interpreting and reconstructing it
  - shifting cultural influences
- But hard-going in context of more primal social and political needs/forces

# Current thinking in West

- Recognizes that in past, history education has mostly been taught from a mono-cultural, ethnocentric, and exclusive perspective
- Focuses more on history of social categories and groups previously ignored—women, poor, ethnic minorities, children, families and migrants
- Tries to prepare children to live in a world of ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity, where there may be no overarching shared value system or ways of understanding things
- Challenge
  - To teach that there can be multiple, true, and contradictory narratives
  - But not all narratives are equally true
  - And how to deal with those primary social and political forces

# National dilemmas

- How to tell a positive story, including a discredited past
  - e.g., internment of Japanese-Americans in WWII
  - Argentina and military government
- How to deal with a past that's still present (“active” past)
  - e.g., post-conflict Liberia or Rwanda; civil war in parts of US
  - 1967 war in Israel
- How to deal with new diversity
  - e.g., “guest workers” in Germany
  - Multiculturalism in South Korea
- How to deal with an unsatisfactory present
  - e.g., stories of restoration of past glory
  - Russia
  - Find a convenient enemy
- How to explain defeat
  - e.g., Germany and Japan post WWII
  - USSR post Cold War
  - U.S. post Vietnam
  - Serbia post Dayton

## National dilemmas (cont.)

- How to explain victory
  - e.g., U.S. and Soviet Union post WWII
  - U.S. post Cold War
- How to build national identity in a new state
  - e.g., Post-Soviet republics
  - African states post Independence
- How to build national cohesion in a multicultural state
  - e.g., U.S., Canada or Australia versus Netherlands, Spain, Italy, France
- How to manage competing or contradictory trends
  - e.g., Pakistan vis a vis cosmopolitanism, India, Islam and the West
  - Singapore vis a vis economic development and Asian values
- How to portray the nearby “other”
  - e.g., Israel & Palestine
- How to build cross-national, even post-national, identity
  - e.g., post WWII Europe

# National dilemmas (cont.)

- How to teach kids
  - To be creative or entrepreneurial but not critical
  - To think critically but responsibly (without bringing down government)
  - Multiperspectivity without total relativization

# Dealing with discredited past

- Discredited pasts
  - Easier to deal with if the past is truly past & broadly discredited
    - Generally takes a generation
    - A decisive result is helpful (to teaching)
  - Examples (not intending to equalize or minimize suffering)
    - US: Treatment of native peoples; Slavery; Internment of Japanese-Americans
    - Cambodia: Pol Pot regime & Khmer Rouge
    - Japan, Germany: World War II
    - Argentina's dirty war
  - Discreditation process can take time (though an interesting process to watch)
  - Most societies have events which are discredited by some, and not by others
  - Talking about difficult past is particularly difficult after recent conflict
    - Rwanda, Cambodia, Liberia
    - Is it necessary?

# Discredited past (cont.)

- Common responses to discredited past
  - Ignore or misrepresent
  - Downplay it or “Other” it in some way ...
    - Minimize
    - Treat as exception
    - Emphasize other things
      - one’s good intentions
      - one’s victimhood (Japan, chosen trauma)
      - situational circumstances
    - Justify– because of greater wrong
    - Blame others
    - That was then
    - Sanitize
    - Bury it in the middle of other stuff
  - Acknowledge difficult past, but fail to link to possible reoccurrence
- Exceptions
  - Learn from the past (really understand how it happened in past, how it might happen again or here or by us)

# Useful concepts

- “Usable” past – explanation of past used to justify present
- “Narrative templates”
- “Chosen trauma,” “chosen glory” – defining losses, victories
- “Active” past
- Multiperspectivity
- National, international, global (also local)
- Heritage versus history

# Common patterns in nation-building

- During nation-building periods or challenges to legitimacy of nation or state
  - Harder, brittle nationalism
  - Internal diversity is downplayed or worse
  - Assimilation is common goal
  - Careful delineation of us and “them” – “othering”
  - An enemy can be helpful (whether actual, embellished, or invented)
  - Essentialism, binaries, and oppositionalisms predominate
  - Guilt over maltreatment of internal enemies often comes only after their defeat
- Glorious past is useful—whether actual, embellished, or invented
  - May be positive – chosen glory – or negative – chosen trauma
  - Challenges to glorious past are not welcome
  - Critical thinking is downplayed
- The state will try to create a “usable past”
- When challenged to reform, superficial changes will be seen; the core will be protected, usually invisible

# Nation-building

- What role does education play in supporting the nation, when...
  - A new state is created – Turkmenistan
  - A state is revived after .... – Lithuania, Israel
  - A state (too) successfully integrates itself into the global economy – Singapore
  - Immigration forces a crisis of meaning of the nation – France
  - A country faces tensions between diversity and unity – Canada
  - A country comes into majority rule – South Africa
  - A country becomes independent – Ghana

# Some national stories

- Pakistan – class-based ethnocentricity and cosmopolitanism
- Lithuania – victims and perpetrators
- Japan & Canada – indigenous people
- National Textbook Commissions in Europe – textbooks for peace
- U.S. – a story of progress despite it all
- Rwanda – teaching history in context of recent genocide
- China – victimized again
- UK portrayal of Crusades
- Israeli texts –contradictions between ideals and realities
- Palestinian texts – acceptance of oppressor other
- Hong Kong & Singapore – teaching critical thinking, carefully
- Russia – reluctant defender

# Dealing with diversity and difference

How does a nation and its education system deal with different groups within society? Three approaches:

- **Assimilationist** – It educates all children within single institutions operating according to values of the dominant tradition; Minority needs and interests often neglected – U.S.
- **Separatist** – Separate institutions serve different constituencies with homogeneous populations, institutions may or may not acknowledge broader diversity outside the institution – Bosnia
- **Integrationist** – Children are directed to common/shared institutions with diversity represented within institution – Canada

# Approaches to pluralism

- **Conservative pluralism** – education environments emphasizing similarities between people
  - Stresses commonalities
  - Avoids overt expression of cultural or religious identity, which are private
  - Avoids display of religious, cultural symbols
  - Workplace/learning environment seen as ‘neutral space’, controversial issues avoided
- **Liberal pluralism** – more emphasis on accepting differences among people
  - May become preoccupied with ‘exotic cultures’ and politically correct ‘celebration of diversity’
  - Workplace/learning environment may contain diverse symbols of identity
  - More willing to acknowledge difference as potential for conflict
  - Uncomfortable at addressing underlying causes.
- **Critical pluralism** – recognizes similarities/differences between people but also acknowledges differences in status, privilege, power relations within society & between societies
  - Willing to identify underlying causes & explore possibilities for action to address social injustice (Smith & Vaux)

# Portrayal of difference/diversity

- How do textbooks show “us”?
  - As one type or as diverse as we are
- How do textbooks show other groups? Common patterns:
  - More or less invisible/visible
  - Through eyes of dominant group
  - As “other” different than “us”
  - Less than fully human
  - Human like us
  - Essentially the same as us
  - Different but ok
  - Not quite as \_\_\_\_\_ as us

# Developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS)

**Ethnocentric** -- involves the interpretation of events and behavior from one's own cultural viewpoint

**1. Denial**

- assumes there are no real differences among people from different cultures

**2. Defense**

- differences are viewed suspiciously, possibly threatening to self-esteem and identity.
- inferiority of other cultures or superiority of one's culture
- sometimes Reversal – one's own culture is inferior, other cultures superior

**3. Minimization**

- over-generalizes similarities between self and other, allowing cultural differences to be trivialized and so "harmless"
- human similarity or "physical universalism"
- universal values or "transcendent universalism"

# DMIS – 2

**Ethnorelative** - one's own culture is one among many viable constructions of reality

## 4. Acceptance

- Recognition of deep cultural differences in languaging, nonverbal behavior, and styles of thinking and communicating.
- “Goodness“ is assigned to different ways of being in the world.
- Acceptance does not mean "agreement“

## 5. Adaptation

- Expansion of one’s perspective and skills to incorporate other ways of communication
- Does *not* mean a person "assimilates“ to a dominant pattern by giving up his/her own cultural values, beliefs, or practices
- Cognitive frame-shifting, behavioral code-switching

## 6. Integration

- Attempts to integrate one's multiple cultural identities into a new whole
- One's identity does not fit into one cultural frame

**Constructive marginality**

(Milton Bennett, DMIS)

# Teaching all this

- Nature of knowledge
  - Fixed or constructed
- Conception of history
  - Fixed truth or (periodically) renegotiated and interpreted
  - One history or multiple
  - Known or periodically reexamined
- Role of student
  - Memorizer or active interpreter
- Role of education
  - Pass on received wisdom or continually seek new wisdom
- Agency
  - Does student receive history or help create it
- Citizen of what?
- Is all this too “Western?” Are there non-Western conceptions that give students agency?
- Does this make our student a “schizophrenic cosmopolitan?”

# Presentation of (5) war(s) in US high school American history textbooks

- From 40s-00s, 2+ books per decade
- Mexican-American War, Spanish-American War, World War II, Cold War, Global War on Terror
- Coded for:
  - Pedagogy
  - Narrative structure
  - Cause, agency, and culpability
  - Empathy
  - Content
- Over time, textbooks became
  - Longer
  - More colorful
  - Multiple voices
  - Multiple sources
  - Asked for higher order thinking
  - More representations of non-white & non-male actors
  - More representations of ordinary people and their experiences
  - More likely to present controversies
  - More diffuse in presentation of narrative, less overtly patriotic

# War in US American history textbooks (cont)

- But
  - Varied by level (sophisticated for advanced placement, simplistically patriotic for more basic)
  - The core narrative was not disturbed: “We started out pretty good and have been getting better ever since.”
  - Never really connected past wars to present wars
    - Even though “military-industrial complex” & other critiques were noted
  - Books portrayed particular wars but said little about the pattern of war
  - Students were not equipped to challenge war or wars
  - Never pointed out some obvious points:
    - (Almost) every war led to more land, greater power
  - Served to “normalize” war

# What's citizenship education for?

- Definitions found
  - To support legitimacy of state
  - To prepare loyal citizen-patriots?
  - To provide students with a common frame of reference (responsibilities, rights)
  - To prepare moral citizens (what is morality? which morality?)
  - To prepare critical thinkers?
  - To prepare active citizens who will promote transformative social change?
  - To integrate diverse citizens into a common sense of nationality?
  - To prepare global citizens?
  - To prepare citizens who will work for national unification and reconciliation?
  - To equip students with knowledge, skills and competencies required for coping with challenges of globalization?
  - To socialize children in accordance with local cultural values and norms?

# Remaining/Final thoughts

- Textbooks teach national ideals, often to build pride—what a noble people we are! But the contradictions between ideals and reality can spark change.
- Textbooks can contribute to inter-group conflict, directly by actively misrepresenting a subdominant group, or indirectly, by not commenting on existing injustices.
- Are there examples of building collective identity that do not require negative “othering,” and that are multi-cultural, ethno-relative, and inclusive?
- Is nationalism always bad? How to deal with need to belong? Will belonging to humanity ever really satisfy?
- (How) Can school textbooks help school kids make sense of a world where many people get their current events from the internet or tv? Could this become one of the main functions of the textbook in the electronic era?
- Generally, textbooks (and schools more generally) follow changes in society rather than lead them. Under what circumstances can textbooks (and schools more generally) lead the transformation of society, rather than follow it?
- Is the need to teach children to “think historically” universal, or particular to the Western tradition (even if rarely practiced)? Can children deal with multi-perspectivity? How can children be taught about the discredited past?