

## The Politics of Culture: A Discourse Analysis of the Texas Social Studies Curriculum

Abbie Strunc\*  
Texas A&M University-Texarkana

\*Corresponding Author: [astrunc@tamut.edu](mailto:astrunc@tamut.edu)  
Received : 2018-12-29  
Accepted : 2019-04-29

---

How to cite this paper: Strunc, A. (2019). The Politics of Culture: A Discourse Analysis of the Texas Social Studies Curriculum, *Journal of Culture and Values in Education*, Volume 2 (1), 71-80.

---

### Abstract

Using Van Dijk's sociocognitive theory as a framework for discourse analysis, the state-mandated standards were examined to determine how the educational culture is impacted by the social studies curriculum. The process to revise the curriculum in Texas is highly politicized and outside interest groups, such as Mel and Norma Gabler's Educational Research Analysts, have inserted their own cultural perspective over the last 50 years. The article considers the impact of this influence and discusses the norms and power structures produced.

*Keywords:* Discourse analysis, Social studies, Texas, Culture

### Introduction

Culture is an important component to being human. It is broadly defined as a shared set of values, and it helps groups to formulate a shared identity: school culture, classroom culture, or values shared by another defining, common characteristic (Bruner, 1960; McMaster, 2015). Culture is a multifaceted, abstract concept which also evolves over time. As McMaster (2015) suggests, culture is an "unique expression of those wider social values, the tension expressed by conflicting paradigms interpreted by individuals and negotiated and renegotiated collectively" (p. 21). Culture is an important factor and function of schooling in the United States. Public schools have been the primary method of transmission of shared values and beliefs since the nation formed. As Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter to George Wythe, "I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge [sic] among the people. [N]o other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom, and happiness" (1786). Transmission of culture through schools has been an aim of public education since the nation was founded. Jefferson believed schooling necessary as educated citizens are able to prevent government from the tyrannical usurping of inalienable rights. As such, public schools have consistently integrated history, government, and the basic foundations of civics education in the curriculum. Oblique cultural transmission, the sharing of information among generations through worship, political entities, or schooling, began with the foundation of public schools (McMahon, 2017). Throughout American history, cultural movements in the U.S. realize the greatest impact in schools, as Levinson suggests schools are

“powerful sites of intentional cultural transmission within and against which identities are constantly being constructed” (1999; 596). To dismiss the importance of schooling as a place of cultural development is foolish and misguided. The construction of citizens who share the same democratic ideals and values has long been present within public schools. However, there are instances in which cultural influence can be harmful to student development (Laddson-Billings, 1994). This study is a discourse analysis which examines the influence of culture in the creation of the recently adopted social studies curricula for Texas K-12 public schools.

## Texas Educational Culture

### *Curricular Culture*

The battle for control of the driving narrative in Texas public schools is a long and storied tale. It is, while an historical reality, the stuff of legends and folklore. The story begins in Hawkins, Texas in the early 1960s. Mel and Norma Gabler were a quiet, nondescript couple living in east Texas. Mr. Gabler was a clerk for Exxon and Mrs. Gabler, a stay at home parent. Neither completed college – Mr. Gabler attended one year, while Mrs. Gabler finished formal schooling at high school graduation (Martin, 1982; Martin, 2007). Their son Jim noticed his American history content was not consistent with what his parents taught him. There are reports the Gablers first noted the exclusion of the words “under God” in the text from the Gettysburg Address that Jim was required to memorize. This was different from the phrase in a picture of the Lincoln Memorial, “and once the Gablers started reading carefully, they found a lot of problems” (Goodwyn in radio broadcast transcript, 2007). Other accounts note the differences in textbooks and the Gablers values, and the differences in content in textbooks produced in different years (Martin, 1982).

Initially, school officials, politicians, and textbook companies ignored the Gablers’ complaints. The Gablers continued to attend hearings, review textbooks, and file complaints over the content in textbooks, but did not find any success until 1970, eight years after Norma Gabler first traveled to Austin in 1962. In 1973, Mel Gabler took early retirement to found Educational Research Analysts (ERA), a non-profit organization still working to review textbooks for Texas nearly fifty years later (Martin, 1982; ERA, 2019). For more than 40 years Mel and Norma Gabler reviewed, examined, and expanded their influence in the content of textbooks for Texas students. Their concern for factual accuracy initially garnered the attention of Texas textbook committee members and publishers, but the core of their work was the influence of not only the educational culture, but the very core of Texas culture: “Mel Gabler even feels that new math contains the seeds of cultural disintegration. “When a student reads in a math book that there are no absolutes, every value he has been taught is destroyed. And the next thing you know, the student turns to crime and drugs.” (Gabler, 1982 as cited by Martin). As the United States has experienced several cultural shifts, including the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and 70s, it would seem that in the twenty-first century the influence of the Gablers would have declined. Yet in 1999 the Texas State Board of Education (SBOE) honored the Gablers for their “years of sacrificial service, both in textbook review and in the textbook adoption process...” (NCSE, 1999). Both Mel and Norma Gabler are deceased, Mel in 2004, and Norma,

in 2007, but their legacy in the cultural battle for the minds of Texas students continues through the ERA (2019). Their mission:

We are a conservative Christian organization that reviews public school textbooks submitted for adoption in Texas. Our reviews have national relevance because Texas state-adopts textbooks and buys so many that publishers write them to Texas standards and sell them across the country.

Our unique 50 years' experience gives us expertise equal to or beyond that of the education establishment itself in all phases of the public school textbook adoption process, and in that our standard review criteria spell out what public school textbooks often censor on certain topics.

Publishers market textbooks – and many teachers select them – based on convenience of their teaching aids. Unlike them, we review textbooks for academic content only. Parents, teachers, and school board members can all profitably use our materials. (ERA, 2019).

There is nothing inherently wrong with a conservative, Christian perspective; however, inserting this worldview into the largest consumer of textbooks in the United States, which likely appears in the content for other states, is an area in which the dictated 'culture' suppresses students' ability to think and engage in independent self-determination (ERA 2019; Collins 2012; NSCE 1999).

### *Political Culture*

In Texas the process for revising and evaluating the curriculum is political. The SBOE is a board of 15 members elected from single member, geographically sectioned areas of the state. The members serve four year terms (TEA, 2018). The current SBOE includes five Democrats and ten Republicans. The responsibilities of the SBOE include: (a) determining curriculum standards, (b) approving instructional materials, (c) controlling high school graduation standards, and (d) other administrative responsibilities. Per the Texas Education Code, the SBOE considers the content of the state learning standards, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), for each subject area every ten years. The process begins with a notice call for participation from K-12 teachers, college professors, retired teachers, and private citizens across the state to work on the "streamlining" or revision teams. Each SBOE board member recommends candidates from their district to serve on teams which include current or retired educators and interested community members. These working groups identify the critical information that should be taught to students and sends their recommendations to the SBOE. The board allows public testimony regarding the proposed changes; however, the board retains the authority to amend or alter the learning standards they deem appropriate. Ultimately, the SBOE votes to approve the finished curricula.

Although these are elected officials, selected by popular vote in each district, this process represents a significant cultural influence in the education of more than 5.4 million Texas students (TEA, 2018). Members insert, suggest, and remove people, places, and ideas in accordance with their political perspectives, limiting the purview presented to students in social studies K-12 (McGaughy, 2018).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Using Van Dijk's sociocognitive theory as the framework for discourse analysis, the author will analyze the social studies learning standards to determine the impact of culture in the power structure created by the state-mandated curriculum (Van Dijk, 2016). Van Dijk's (2016) sociocognitive theory is an appropriate framework for this study because the sociocognitive approach to discourse analysis argues "social interaction, social situations and social structures [only] influence text and talk through people's interpretations of such environments" (p. 64). The environment established by the Texas social studies curriculum is the mandated text that students and teachers use across Texas to interpret and build their knowledge of social studies education. This is significant in that conversations about history, economics, citizenship, and government are based upon a curriculum which is essentially created and edited by politicians, not academics.

The motivation for politicians is not to ensure factual accuracy, but rather to be re-elected. This framework for analysis is particularly useful because the document, the TEKS, Subchapter 113, creates a power structure in which the curriculum is dictated to the students of Texas and reproduces previous injustices in the curricula. In 2010, the last time the SBOE revised the social studies standards, the curriculum excluded many minority figures, and glossed over many of the discriminatory events and practices in U.S. history (Strunc, 2017).

Following Van Dijk's (2016) sociocognitive approach, first considered is the cognitive component of the learning standards. This includes the knowledge, attitudes, and values found in the Texas social studies curriculum. The analysis will attempt to answer what the learning standards seek to establish as social norms in the study of social studies. The approach also examines the social aspect of the curricula, the.... How are politicians able to dictate "the knowledge worth knowing" through the social studies curriculum (Freire, 2009)? Finally, the discourse of the learning standards will be considered. What norms and values are created through the learning standards to reproduce existing power structures? How are these norms and values implicitly or explicitly expressed throughout the social studies standards (Van Dijk, 2008)?

### **Social Studies Curriculum Revision 2018**

On November 16, 2018, the SBOE voted to adopt "Proposed Revisions to 19 Texas Administrative Code (TAC) Chapter 113 Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for Social Studies" (TEA, 2019). This 99-page, approximately 49,000 word manuscript creates the incoming social studies curriculum for K – 12 education in Texas and serves as the body of text.

Officially, the PDF file posted of the social studies standards on the Texas Education Agency's website indicates that the document is approved for final adoption, but has not yet been filed with the Texas Register. The Texas Register operates under the Texas Secretary of State, and is the vehicle by which all proposed, accepted, and rejected policy, legislative, and procedural changes are published and then drafted into the Texas Administrative Code. Editors can revise the learning standards from the time they are filed in the Texas Register until final adoption (TEA, 2019). This document produces the discourse for the social studies curricula, which is taught to students across Texas, and in that vein establishes cultural values which are reproduced throughout Texas classrooms.

Van Dijks (2016) writes that his Discourse-Cognition-Society triangle characterizes the relations which exist among discourse and society specifically by the way in which people think about the written word they consume, the social interactions with people, and the way in which they construct meaning from those interactions. In this instance the discourse created by the social studies TEKS is taught to students in public schools across the state, and the discourse created in the document is reproduced in the social setting of public education. The way in which the students and teachers who learn and teach about social studies through the social studies TEKS think about the interactions of the written word and social environment in school forms the norms and values which make up the cultural principles presented in public schools (p. 64).

The social studies TEKS are divided into three "subchapters": A, Elementary, B, Middle School, and C, High School. Within the divisions the curricula establish cultural values in Texas, based upon the language choice, topics, content selection, and ideologies (Van Dijk, 2016).

Analyzing the text from a sociocognitive perspective requires that the formal structures of the TEKS be overlooked. I am not interested in formal language which introduces the curriculum. The language of significance are those aspects of the standards which create a cultural norm for social studies education in Texas through the interaction of discourse, cognition, and social expectations. Notably, the language which reinforces cultural imbalances, power structures, and norms which exclude others is the focus.

The influence of the Framers and the ERA is evident in the new social studies standards after fifty years in their efforts of "fact checking" textbooks. The Framers' rhetoric included (a) the belief held by the Framers of the Constitution in a small, limited national government, (b) Christian values, (c) traditional gender roles in which men work outside the home and women embrace their role as homemaker, (d) individual rights, (e) states' rights, (f) free market, (g) capitalist economic principles, and (h) patriotism (Hefley, 1979; Martin, 1982). Analyzing the social studies TEKS reveals many of these beliefs imbedded implicitly and explicitly throughout the standards from kindergarten through twelfth grade.

### *Good Citizens*

The social studies TEKS begin to demonstrate "Good Citizens" perspective as early as the first grade learning standards:

12 Citizenship. The student understands characteristics of good citizenship as exemplified by historical figures and other individuals. The student is expected to: (A) identify characteristics of good citizenship, including truthfulness, justice, equality, respect for oneself and others, responsibility in daily life, and participation in government by educating oneself about the issues, respectfully holding public officials to their word, and voting (TEA, 2019).

As an example, the citizenship learning standards create a sense of belonging by defining “good” citizenship for Texas. The standards describe good citizens by specified desirable traits, while leaving unsaid that those excluded are not truthful and do not have respect for others and self. The “characteristics of good citizenship” reappear throughout with the emphasis placed on identifying and understanding the aspects of “good citizens”. This effort to separate those who belong from those who do not continues in the second grade TEKS: “11. Citizenship. The student understands important symbols, customs, and celebrations that represent American beliefs and principles that contribute to our national identity...(D) identify how selected symbols, customs, and celebrations reflect an American love of individualism, inventiveness, and freedom” (TEA, 2019). The Gablers were interested in preserving the values they embraced through holding politicians and textbook publishers accountable through checking the historical facts in textbooks. However, the facts they supported also created a polarized sense of citizenship and what that looks like in society. This notion of citizenship continues in the eighth grade in which those who practice “good” citizenship recognize “responsible citizenship [by] obeying rules and laws, staying informed on public issues, vote, and serving on juries” (TEA, 2019, 19.C). The persistent definition of citizenship with subjective adjectives preceding the word throughout the curriculum create a culture of behavior and expectations of citizenship. One can claim membership as a “good citizen” if one participates and believes accordingly. Those who vary from this paradigm are relegated to membership on the other side. This is particularly frightening because students are not asked or encouraged to question the government or consider how valuable and relevant the right to protest and assemble has been throughout United States history. The “good citizenship” mentality is particularly evident in the United States History Studies Since 1877 course, part of the high school curriculum. Students are asked to

Understan[d] the impact of political, economic, and social factors in the U.S. from the 1970s through 1990. The student is expected to: A) describe Richard M. Nixon’s leadership in the normalization of relations with China, and the policy of détente; B) describe Ronald Reagan’s leadership in domestic and international policies, including Reagan’s economic policies and Peace Through Strength; C) describe. U.S. involvement in the Middle East, such as support for Israel, the Camp David Accords, the Iran Hostage Crisis, Marines in Lebanon, and the Iran-Contra Affair; D) describe the causes and key organizations of the conservative resurgence of the 1980s, such as the Heritage Foundation, and the Moral Majority (TEA, 2019, 10 A – D).

The discursive practices used throughout the social studies TEKS create a structure which seeks to create a cultural value system that includes those who embrace subjective, conservative

values, while casting aside those who do not fully agree with the group culture written into the curriculum.

### *Norms and Values*

Social studies education varies across the United States because individual states retain much control over their public education systems. However, organizations such as The National Council for Social Studies (NCSS), form advocacy groups to promote norms and values common in social studies curricula across the United States. In the NCSS Position Statement (2016), social studies education seeks to develop students into citizens through activities, creativity, critical thinking, and connecting learning to current events and issues (p. 180). The council summarizes important elements of teaching and learning in social studies to include “the values embodied in our democratic form of government, with its commitment to justice, equality, and freedom of thought, are embodied in social studies classroom practice” (NCSS, 2016, p.181). Nationally, the norms and values of a social studies education are inclusive and committed to social justice, freedoms, and democratic practices. However, the norms and values present in the social studies TEKS do not align well with those norms and values as defined by NCSS.

The social studies TEKS define the norms and values of social studies with the verb choice interspersed within the document. Students are repeatedly asked to identify, recall, understand, and describe. Those verbs task students with rote memorization and are not conducive to creativity or critical thinking. In the high school course, Economics with Emphasis on the Free Enterprise System and Its Benefits, students are directed to understand “the basic characteristics and benefits of the U.S. free enterprise system” (TEA, 2019, 5). The title of the course alone works to create an accepted norm that a free enterprise system only has benefits. To enrich the learning, the curriculum instructs students to “explain the benefits of the U.S. free enterprise system, including individual freedom of consumers and producers, variety of goods, responsive prices, investment opportunities, and the creation of wealth” (TEA, 2019, 5 A).

The text here delivers a set of norms and values in which the individual is prized over the collective group, and a free market economic system is not only the norm, but also implicitly the best option, as there are only benefits to a free enterprise market structure. This norm appears multiple times throughout the curriculum. In kindergarten and first grade, the norms are emphasized as the purpose for holding jobs, satisfying needs and wants through market structures, while the term free enterprise is explicitly in the curriculum beginning in the third grade. Using intentional language, the standards create a norm and value system in Texas educational culture which prizes the free enterprise above other market structures. There is no consideration given to any negative effects of this market structure. In fact, the curriculum implicitly references the need for jobs and work, implying that those who might see negative aspects to a free enterprise structure would not fit the model of good citizenship because those beliefs are not responsible. Influence of these norms and values on the educational culture in Texas does not allow for students to consider a wide range of perspectives, but rather limits the worldview and information they use to build a framework of knowledge. This repeated

singular perspective in the curriculum does not balance and support factual accuracy and thereby censors what students learn. Censorship is not aligned with freedom of thought, expression, and growth.

## Conclusion

Ironically, the very fear which started the Gablers on the path to action, censorship and undue government influence in the curriculum has become the reality in 2019. Much of the Gablers' efforts were driven by fear: fear of morals deteriorating, fear of secular humanism and its ills replacing American values in the curriculum. Arguments accusing textbook companies of leaving out the foundations of the United States as a Christian nation began the fight over curriculum: "Did you know that, almost without exception, Big Government is treated as desirable? In fact, the foundation of our nation on a heritage of Christian principles is generally slighted or ignored" (Gabler, 1979 as cited by Hefley, p.20). The Gablers, and their many supporters, feared communism, the teaching of religion under the guise of history, and a one-sided, biased curriculum that would destroy a factual education for the school children of Texas. What has transpired over the last fifty years has allowed their desire to preserve American values to be strongly inserted into the TEKS. The level of influence attained is so significant that, in some ways, the Gablers seem inconsequential as their perspective has been pushed for so long. They feared a lopsided, heavily-biased curriculum, and fifty years later that is what the people of Texas, and perhaps the United States, have been given.

Examining the social studies TEKS for K-12 students is important because the most recent adaptation is a byproduct of political maneuvering, influenced by outside sources for more than fifty years. It is also "the knowledge worth knowing" (Freire, 2009) dictated for students across the state of Texas, and potentially across the United States. Additionally, it is a document which influences and shapes the culture of Texas. Students learning under these standards develop their feelings regarding citizenship and cultural values in an environment where preference and influence has created a culture with norms based upon the influence of the Gablers and the ERA: a conservative, singular viewpoint of what it means to be a U.S. citizen. The language of the standards, the influence of outside sources, and the mandate from the state of Texas to teach these standards for the next ten years cultivate a social culture in public schools which inserts a worldview that does not consider other perspectives. Excluding ideologies from the curriculum is a dangerous practice.



## References

- Bruner, J. S. (1960). *The process of education*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Bryman, A. (2008). *Social research methods*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Collins, G. (2012). *As Texas goes: How the lone star state hijacked the American agenda*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation.
- Freier, P. (2009) Pedagogy of the oppressed. In D. J. Flinders & S.J. Thornton (Eds.), *The curriculum studies reader* (pp. 147-154). New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group
- Hefley, J.C. (1979). *Are Textbooks Harming Your Children?* Milford, MI: Mott Media.
- Jefferson, T. (1783). Extract from T. Jefferson to G. Wythe [Letter written August 13, 1786 to G. Wythe]. Retrieved March 23, 2019, from <http://tjrs.monticello.org/letter/1283#X3184736>
- Levinson, B. (1999). Resituating the place of educational discourse in anthropology. *American Anthropologist*, 101(3), 594-604. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/683850>
- McGaughy, L. (2018, November 16). Texas history curriculum: Hillary Clinton and Alamo heroes are in. Oprah's out. *The Dallas Morning News*. Retrieved from <http://www.dallasnews.com/news/education/2018/11/13/texas-education-board-debate-eliminating-hellen-keller-hillary-clinton-others-history-curriculum>
- McMahon, M. (2017). *Cultural transmission (sociology)*. Salem Press Encyclopedia.
- McMaster, C. (2015). Where is \_\_\_\_\_?: Culture and the process of change in the development of inclusive schools. *International Journal of Whole Schooling*, 11, 16–34.
- National Council for the Social Studies. (2016). A vision of powerful teaching and learning in the social studies: A position statement. *Social Education*, 180 – 182.
- Strunc, A. (2017). Rewriting the standards, not history: A critical discourse analysis of the Texas State Board of Education social studies standards revisions. *National Journal of Urban and Public Education*, 11, 2, 39 – 51.
- Texas Education Agency. (2018a). SBOE Members. Retrieved from [https://tea.texas.gov/About\\_TEA/Leadership/State\\_Board\\_of\\_Education/Board\\_Members/SBOE\\_Members/](https://tea.texas.gov/About_TEA/Leadership/State_Board_of_Education/Board_Members/SBOE_Members/)
- Texas Education Agency. (2018b). State Board of Education - SBOE. Retrieved from <http://tea.texas.gov/sboe/>

Van Dijk, T. (2008). *Discourse and Power*. Houndmills: Palgrave-Macmillian.

Van Dijk, T. (2016). Critical discourse studies: A sociocognitive approach. In R. Wodnak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse studies* (Third ed., pp. 63–74). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.