

June 10, 1982

SPOTLIGHTING FEDERAL GRANTS
***THE COUNCIL ON INTERRACIAL
BOOKS FOR CHILDREN***

INTRODUCTION

Implicit in all of the textbooks surveyed is the assumption that the U.S. society is a true democracy...the distortion which results is serious, for by calling our government and economic systems "democratic," the textbooks deny the realities of capitalism and all that goes with it -- classes, conflicting class interests, and the ongoing struggle between those few who control wealth and those many who are trying to share wealth.

Guidelines for Selecting Bias-Free Textbooks and Story-books, Council on Interracial Books for Children (1980)

The Council on Interracial Books for Children wants to "reeducate" American children by producing new textbooks that would reflect the views presented above. The Council has been entrusted by the U.S. government with just that task. In July 1981, the Department of Education approved the second installment of a \$244,000 grant to the Council. The Department described the grant as "assisting in the development of two bias-free elementary readers." The Council was a bit more explicit about its ultimate intent: "Textbooks can mold human beings with counter-values that may help to restructure the society."

The grant does not represent enormous sums when measured against the total federal budget. Yet it is still taxpayer money. As such, what the Council is, how it intends to "mold" American children, and what it has done with the taxpayers' money are matters of taxpayer concern.

Founded in 1966, the Council on Interracial Books for Children first became associated with the Department of Education in 1977. Before that, the Council mostly conducted seminars and printed

literature on such topics as "Vietnamese (read: North Vietnamese) Children's Books," and "Teaching the E.R.A." Despite its stated purpose of "ridding books and other children's media of racism and sexism," the Council's hardened anti-capitalist rhetoric and easy affinity with radical left-wing groups kept it out of the mainstream of established educational organizations. Perhaps the Council would have continued in relative obscurity, except among more radical educators, had it not been for passage of the Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA) by Congress in 1974.

WEEA originally was established to help communities and educational institutions adjust to the sweeping implications of the 1972 Title IX amendment. This specifically prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, color, or other criteria within any federally funded program. Appointed to direct WEEA in 1979 was Dr. Leslie Wolfe, formerly a Carter appointee at the Office of Education. Wolfe, whose poster of Che Guevara hangs behind her desk at the Department of Education, has been ideologically akin to the Council. In fact, despite Congress's intent that WEEA grants be dispersed among a wide variety of groups around the country, Wolfe directed most WEEA funds toward a small and inter-related network of feminist and "activist" organizations.¹ It was not surprising, therefore, for the Council to find a patron in Wolfe. Indeed, in 1980 Wolfe awarded the Council a two-year grant totaling \$244,000.

The Council's 1980 WEEA grant was for a project titled Equity Models for Basal Readers, nicknamed Project EMBER. The goal of Project EMBER was to produce two bias-free elementary readers. No longer was the Council content merely with criticizing existing texts; they wanted to become actively involved in selecting, developing and marketing children's texts. This apparently was because the Council was dissatisfied with the efforts of publishers to produce non-sexist and non-racist texts on their own. These texts merely sought to assimilate minorities and women into the existing social order. The Council's primary objective extended well beyond eliminating racism and sexism. As stated in the Council's Guidelines for Selecting Bias-Free Textbooks and Storybooks, published in 1980:

Let's make it clear that we have no desire to see children's books that would solely help the dominated get a bigger piece of the pie. We don't like the pie, period...we are not interested in seeing different people win a place in the status quo, the present social structure. We are challenging the structure itself because it promotes anti-human values.

¹ Of the fifty-five grants awarded in 1981, only three went to state and local educational agencies. More than half of the others went to political activist groups such as the Council, National Organization of Women, Women's Action Alliance and others. These groups share common viewpoints and resources.

The Council's Guidelines publication was an attempt to promote itself as a group capable of producing bias-free texts.² However, the anti-capitalist rhetoric of Guidelines is so vitriolic and appears so often, one wonders how even Leslie Wolfe could have approved the Project EMBER grant after the Council's intent to propagandize through textbooks had been spelled out in detail. Repeatedly in Guidelines the Council indicts the "present economic system" as the reason, sine qua non, for racist and sexist attitudes in this country. For example,

Texts may imply that individual bigots, or groups of ignorant and prejudiced people, are to blame for some unfortunate situation, while ignoring a society that manipulates and encourages working-class divisions.... Because the economic system is not held accountable, students are led to believe that education and greater tolerance will eliminate societal flaws.... Racism, sexism, and economic exploitation are not occasional aberrations of the U.S. system, but deeply ingrained mechanisms of the national social and economic structure. (emphasis added.)

In another passage, the Council states: "One of the great myths of U.S. society is that we have no class problem or class conflict.... Stemming from this refusal to recognize the conflict of class interests is the refusal to link sexism and racism to economic exploitation." And finally, "Individualism is a philosophy of life; it has not always existed in every human society and should be discouraged as a highly negative force."

With its own Guidelines as an outline, the Council began working on Project EMBER in 1980. The director and co-director of the project were women with established reputations as both educators and activists. Project Director Beryle Banfield, Ed.D., had spent years in the New York public schools as a teacher, vice principal and principal. In much of her spare time, she was a consultant to schools seeking to inaugurate courses in African and Afro-American studies. In 1968, she wrote a book entitled Africa in the Curriculum (Blyden Press). The project's co-director, Ruth Meyers, Ph.D., also had taught in New York but devoted much of her time to political and activist causes. She was a founding member of Women Strike for Peace, a campaign strategist for Bella Abzug's senatorial campaign, a public speaker specializing in women's movements in Communist countries (such as China and Mozambique) and had been the Executive Director of Freedom of Information Act, Inc. (This affiliation is particularly noteworthy

² Even in the production of Guidelines, the role of the federal government is evident. From the introduction to Guidelines: "In 1979, the U.S. Office of Education invited the Council to make a presentation on bias-free guidelines to program officers at H.E.W." It was out of this study that Guidelines emerged.

because of Meyers's refusal to allow a researcher into the Council's office to review material published with taxpayers' money.) Besides a small staff, Project EMBER also retained several outside consultants, many of whom were recipients of Education Department grants.³

During its first year, Project EMBER completed preliminary versions of the basal readers for grades 3 and 5. Teachers' manuals to accompany the texts also were prepared and, in many ways, are more important than the readers. Field test sites chosen for the readers included Arizona, Massachusetts, Florida and California. After several months of testing, the readers and accompanying teachers' manuals were presented to the Department of Education early in 1982.

The EMBER Readers 3 and 5 follow a standard elementary basal reader format. Each reader is divided into several sections with specific themes. These sections are then divided into chapters focusing on particular characters or events. The teachers' edition suggests exercises to develop word skills and "social skills" directly related to the content of the stories. Neither content nor exercises focusing on "social skills" are given primary emphasis in most basal readers. However, these "guidance tools" clearly seem to be the main purpose of the EMBER readers.

One story in EMBER Reader 3 is typical of the harsh realities portrayed by the reader. This story comes from a section titled "People We Love" and concerns a hard-working Latin-American family. The story begins by focusing on the rather commonplace occurrences in a typical, male-dominated household; father works, mother minds the children. But then tragedy strikes, as the girl narrator of the story recounts:

Even daddy fights if he has to. When he caught some men towing away his truck, he yelled at them to stop. They swore and said he hadn't paid up on the truck and shoved a bill at him.

"Hey!" my daddy said, "this bill is for Jose Hernandez. My name is Jose Gonzales."

"Okay, okay," one man said. "Hernandez, Gonzalez, you're all thieves, anyway."

³ Some of the consultants used by Project EMBER included Hollie Knox of NOW (her Legal Defense and Education Fund received over \$300,000 from the Department), Dr. Leslie Hergert, Director of The Network, Inc. (The Network, Inc. has received close to \$500,000 from the Department in grants and another \$500,000 in Department contracts), and members of the Feminist Press Collective (The Feminist Press received two grants from the Department totaling well over \$300,000). All these grants (or grant continuations) were approved in FY 1981.

Daddy gave that man such a punch that he fell down and his head hit the sidewalk. The ambulance had to come. I thought daddy was right to fight, but the judge didn't and he put daddy in prison for a year. He may get out sooner, maybe next month, if something called a parole board will let him.

While father languishes in prison, mother and daughter learn to take care of things at home. And after father returns from prison, the reader is left to speculate whether he will learn to adjust to mother's new-found independence. Is this depiction typical of the American justice system?

In the teachers' manual, the story's significance is not left to chance. According to a section entitled "Resource Information You Will Need," the teacher is given background material on the group represented in the story:

...Hispanics are among the poorest people in the U.S.... Housing and health facilities are grossly inadequate and political power is limited. These problems are aggravated by cases of police brutality and inequitable treatment by the courts. Discrimination and institutional exclusion limit possibilities for rapid change in their social, economic, and political conditions.

Various writing projects suggested in the teachers' manual include writing a letter to Mr. Gonzales in prison and contacting local minority organizations to ask for a speaker on problems of minority groups.

While things are very tough indeed for the Gonzales family here in the U.S., EMBER Reader 5 describes the life of a Hispanic woman in another country, who, by contrast, is inspired by the compassion and justice exhibited by her government. The woman is a ballerina who is going blind. Her country is Castro's Cuba. A section entitled "Newcomers" tells the story of "Alicia Alonso," a world-famous ballerina who elects to stay in Cuba after the Castro-led revolution. She is going blind, but the Cuban government gives her all the assistance she needs to set up schools throughout the Cuban countryside. Her courage in continuing to dance, despite her growing handicap, is matched only by the brotherly nature of the Cuban government, which is depicted as the provider of all worldly needs.

Perhaps the most telling story in either reader also comes from the "Newcomers" section of EMBER Reader 5. This story concerns the life of a teenage Polish immigrant around the turn of the century. The story is an actual account, recorded by a journalist at the time. Life is very hard for Sadie Frowne, the story's heroine, working in a New York sweatshop. Hours are long and the work itself is not only monotonous but occasionally dangerous, as when a bored worker accidentally slips her finger under a sewing needle. However, one is struck by Sadie's unflagging hope and the many indications that her new life in America

will provide -- eventually -- what she had expected. States the episode:

"I work in a factory making underskirts -- all sorts of cheap underskirts, like cotton and calico for the summer and woolen for the winter, but never the silk or satin or velvet underskirts. I started off earning \$4.50 a week and lived on 2.00 a week...and I had the rest of my money to do as I liked. Now I'm earning \$5.50 a week, and will probably get an increase soon."

That a newly arrived immigrant could save almost twice as much as her living expenses should indicate to some an extraordinary opportunity, something that could be noted in the teachers' manual. The EMBER manual, however, places its emphasis elsewhere. The "Desired Outcome" of this story, according to the manual, should be, "that students will develop understanding of inhumane and unfair working conditions experienced by women in the early 20th century." Furthermore, the "Background" section of the manual informs the teacher that:

Women factory workers faced many problems: long hours, low pay, inhumane work conditions, constant exposure to the risk of serious personal injury, and unequal pay as compared to men. These conditions were the result of exploitation of women by their employers. Their wages were purposely kept low so as to save employers money and increase their profits.

Never does the manual explain why Sadie Frowne would leave Poland to seek employment in America. Nor is there any indication that Sadie's savings were turned into future gain, either for herself or her children.

Exercises suggested for the "Sadie Frowne" story drive the message home. In "Taking Action," the manual notes: "Sweatshops have reappeared in large numbers. Immigrants are working in small neighborhood and home factories....Develop with students a survey form which could be used to gather information concerning working conditions of workers." Another writing project instructs students to "Write and deliver a speech to co-workers telling them the advantages of joining a union."

Although the Council on Interracial Books for Children is still receiving money from its 1980 WEEA grant, the Project is almost over and government funding of the Council will soon end. But Project EMBER may well live on. The Council recently held an "open house" for textbook publishers in New York. Attending the meeting were representatives of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, MacMillan, Prentice-Hall, McGraw-Hill, and Open Court Publishers. The meeting was held to introduce these publishers to the EMBER Readers, and indications are the publishers liked what they saw. According to Open Court Publisher Howard Webber, the Council stands a good chance of turning their WEEA grant into a handy profit by selling

its message to a publishing house. "If I read the intention of the Council properly," Webber commented, "they are now thinking of licensing publications separately. That would mean that a publishing house would sign a contract with the Council to produce readers and market them to the schools." How would the schools receive the Council books? "I can't predict how this will come out, but I think the Council has a fair shot of offering these books to schools as supplementary materials."

Webber's optimism concerning the success of the books was shared by the Executive Director of the Foundation for the Improvement of Education, Jack Kleinmann. The Foundation is affiliated with the National Education Association teachers' union and has offered to help the Council. "The schools are very interested in this book," Kleinmann acknowledged. "I think the country is getting into gear for this type of book. While a publisher has not yet been found, I don't think we will have any trouble finding one."

Were either Webber or Kleinmann bothered by anti-capitalist bias in the readers? "The readers are not, per se, argumentative documents," said Webber. "We publishers are rather centrist in our approach and shy away from accepting extreme views on content matter." Kleinmann was even more adamant: "I'm not an expert on the contents, but I can't say under any circumstances that the books had an 'anti-free market' bias. If that was true, I would have been troubled, because I believe very strongly in our economic system!" After being read certain passages from the Council's Guidelines, Kleinmann was more pensive: "Well, that doesn't sound good. Those quotes sound as though they could use a little harder look." After being read the same passages from Guidelines, Webber echoed Kleinmann: "That's very interesting. I'm going to have to give the Council a much harder look."

Next time the Council tries to use taxpayers' money for project like EMBER, the Department of Education should take a harder look.

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