

August 19, 2006

PAGE ONE

Aiming for Diversity, Textbooks Overshoot

Publishers use quotas in images to win contracts in big states, but they may be creating new stereotypes.

Able-bodied kids pose in wheelchairs

By DANIEL GOLDEN
August 19, 2006; Page A1

BOSTON -- The prop room on the fourth floor of Houghton Mifflin Co.'s offices here holds all manner of items, including a blackboard, a globe, an aquarium -- and a wheelchair.

Able-bodied children selected through modeling agencies pose in the wheelchair for Houghton Mifflin's elementary and secondary textbooks. If they're the wrong size for the wheelchair, they're outfitted with red or blue crutches, says photographer Angela Coppola, who often shoots for the publishing house.

Ms. Coppola estimates that at least three-fourths of the children portrayed as disabled in Houghton Mifflin textbooks actually aren't. "It's extremely difficult to find a disabled kid who's willing and able to model," she says. Houghton Mifflin, which acknowledges the practice, says it doesn't keep such statistics.



An able-bodied boy poses as disabled for a Houghton Mifflin math textbook used in North Carolina.

Houghton Mifflin's little-known stratagem illustrates how a well-intentioned effort to make classroom textbooks more reflective of the country's diversity has led publishers to overcompensate and at times replace one artificial vision of reality with another.

To facilitate state approval and school-district purchasing of their texts, publishers set numerical targets for showing minorities and the disabled. In recent years, the quest to meet these targets has ratcheted to a higher level as technological improvements enable publishers to customize books for individual states, and as photos and illustrations take up more textbook space.

Although publishers describe these numbers as guidelines, many people familiar with educational publishing say they are strict quotas that must be adhered to. Moreover, in filling these quotas, publishers screen out a wide range of images they deem stereotypical, from Asian math students to barefoot African children.

DOW JONES REPRINTS

 This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit: www.djreprints.com.

- See a sample reprint in PDF format.
- Order a reprint of this article now.

Some educators complain that, at best, the efforts reflect political correctness gone awry -- and, at worst, that publishers are putting politics, and sales, ahead of student learning.

"There's more textbook space devoted to photos, illustrations and graphics than there's ever been, but frequently they have nothing to do with the lesson," says Diane Ravitch, a New York University professor and author of "The Language Police," a 2003 study of textbook censorship. "They're just there for political reasons, to show diversity and meet a quota of the right number of women, minorities and the disabled."

The motives of textbook publishers "are interesting and maybe even good," says Margery Cobb, an eighth-grade English teacher in Braintree, Mass. "The old textbooks featured white, suburban-looking kids. More diversity was a good idea. But they've bent over backwards in the other direction. I don't think they're achieving reality. What they're doing now is also stereotypical."

Publishers say their policies are aimed at increasing the realism of textbooks that once depicted white and able-bodied children almost exclusively. Students should "see children like themselves on the pages in their textbooks," says Houghton Mifflin spokesman Collin Earnst.

To meet their ratios, publishers not only use able-bodied models as disabled, but, on occasion, people of one minority group as another. Sometimes, publishers exclude depictions of important historical figures who don't help them meet their numerical goals. And while publishers say they try to mirror the national or school-age population, their racial targets reflect neither, understating whites and overstating minorities.

In 2004, according to federal estimates, non-Hispanic whites made up 67.4% of the U.S. population and 59.9% of the school-age population.

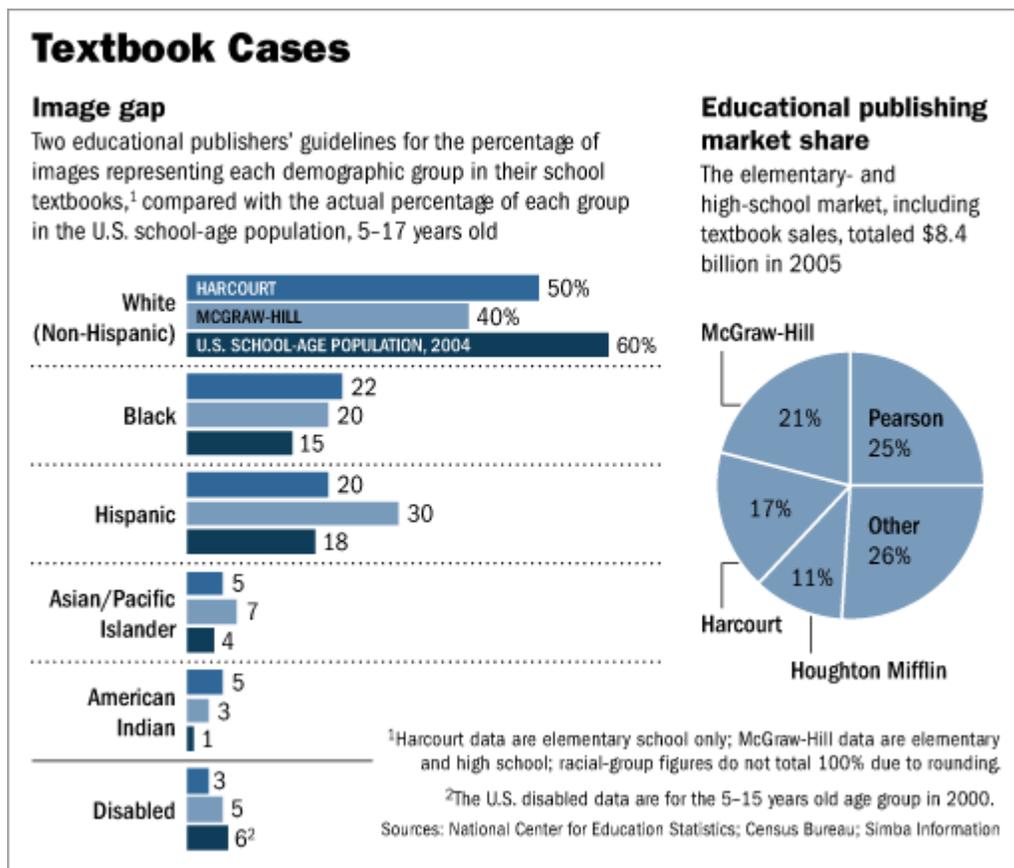
Under McGraw-Hill Co. guidelines for elementary and high school texts, 40% of people depicted should be white, 30% Hispanic, 20% African-American, 7% Asian and 3% Native American, says Thomas Stanton, a spokesman for the publisher. Of the total, 5% should be disabled, and 5% over the age of 55. Elementary texts from the Harcourt Education unit of Reed Elsevier PLC should show about 50% whites, 22% African-Americans, 20% Hispanics, 5% Asians and 5% Native Americans. Of the total, 3% should be disabled, says Harcourt spokesman Richard Blake.

Mr. Blake of Harcourt says its guidelines reflect "the demographic makeup of the markets for our textbooks" and that "ethnic representation is not considered in circumstances where it would compromise accuracy, for example, in a history or geography text."

The composition of textbooks is shaped to a great extent by the policies of several large states like California, Texas and Florida and by big urban school districts that select which textbooks their schools will use. About half of the states scrutinize and "adopt" textbooks, which districts may then buy with state funds. The purchasing decisions of these major customers can make or break a textbook. California, which is 35% Hispanic, is the nation's biggest market and its adoption process sets the pace for the country. Districts such as New York City and Miami-Dade County have centralized textbook selection in recent years, enhancing their clout with publishers.

McGraw-Hill says its minority-group percentages reflect demographic projections and are tilted toward major states and urban districts with high minority populations.

"It's a real benefit for minority children to be able to see their own ethnicity in a position of responsibility or in a historical perspective," says Cheryl McConaughy, assistant superintendent for Lamont school district in California, which is 92% Hispanic. "I remember the delight with which my seventh-grade students encountered pictures of Roberto Clemente and César Chávez in their textbooks." Ms. McConaughy says percentage targets for minority images "are needed to assure diversity. If we don't quantify them, they get lost."



California, Texas and Florida require publishers to reflect diversity but don't specify percentages for particular groups. A Florida manual for evaluators of instructional materials cautions that "substance" matters more than numbers: "It can be misleading to count the number of pages or illustrations devoted to a social issue or group."

publishers have begun tailoring numbers to particular states. Hispanics account for 35% of photos and illustrations in the California edition of one high-school social-studies textbook, but only 6% of the North Carolina version, according to a person involved in its design. By contrast, African-Americans make up 22% of people shown in the North Carolina edition, compared with 7% of those in the California edition.

States weed out images that might be deemed objectionable. In its 2005 adoption of history and social science texts, for instance, California required compact disc publisher Decision Development Corp. to revise or delete "stereotypical and demeaning" caricatures in magazines submitted as supplementary material. One drawing it found offensive illustrated the 18th century European rivalry for the Indian subcontinent by depicting an Indian in a loincloth and turban tugged in opposite directions by arms wearing the English and French flags. DDC protested in vain that the political cartoons were "exaggerated to provoke thought" and "add some lightness and humor," and then withdrew the magazines.

To forestall such trouble, McGraw-Hill's 2004 guidelines for artwork and photos say Asians should not be portrayed "with glasses, bowl-shaped haircuts, or as intellectuals"; African-Americans should

Recently,

be shown "in positions of power, not just in service industries"; elderly people should be "active members of society," not "infirm"; and disabled people should be shown as independent rather than receiving help.

An older McGraw-Hill manual -- which a company spokeswoman says is "still relevant" as guidance -- discourages depicting Asian-American males as waiters, laundry owners or math students, or showing Mexican men wearing ponchos or wide-brimmed hats. African-Americans should not be portrayed in "crowded tenements on chaotic streets" or in "innocuous, dull, white picket fence neighborhoods," but in "all neighborhoods, including luxury apartments."

For a spread on world cultures, one major publisher vetoed a photo of a barefoot child in an African village, on the grounds that the lack of footwear reinforced the stereotype of poverty on that continent, according to an employee familiar with the situation. It was replaced with a photo of a West African girl wearing shoes and a gingham dress.

Some textbooks shortchange depictions of important historical figures. As submitted to Texas for adoption in 2002, McGraw-Hill's "The American Republic Since 1877" included a profile and photo of Bessie Coleman, the first African-American woman pilot. But there was no mention or image of aviation pioneers Orville and Wilbur Wright. After a Texas activist who advocates for more patriotic textbooks complained, McGraw-Hill added a passage and photo about the Wrights. A company spokeswoman said the brothers had been left out inadvertently.

Although publishers don't have numerical targets for religious affiliation, they're wary of slighting any faith. Rubin Pfeffer, a former executive with Pearson Education, says its marketing department vetoed a cover illustration for a 2005 first-grade reader of a pig walking down the street, on the basis that it might offend Jews or Muslims who don't eat pork. Pearson spokeswoman Wendy Spiegel says a beaver was substituted on the cover, but the inside pages featured a "beautifully illustrated" pig.

Publishers often turn to PhotoEdit Inc., a Long Beach, Calif., firm, for what its Web site calls "positive images of ethnic and minority people in all walks of life." Founded in 1987 by Leslye Borden and Elizabeth Ely, PhotoEdit began specializing in such images after a New York editor told Ms. Borden in 1989 that Southern California had the "right Hispanics" for textbooks. Ms. Borden says the editor was alluding to Mexican-Americans. PhotoEdit, which has annual revenue in the low seven figures, fills publishers' needs from an archive of 230,000 images, or assigns their requests to photographers whom it represents. Its slogan, "Everybody counts," alludes to the publishers' image targets.

Ms. Borden says racial counts are often based on look rather than lineage. For instance, she says, publishers may substitute a Chicano for a Native American from the Southwest, because they "look very similar."

Marjorie Cotera, studio manager for Texas photographer Robert Daemmrich, who takes photos for textbooks, says "facial features" of some Asians resemble Native Indian tribes from Mexico. "There are some times where you can flip-flop." On the other hand, Ms. Cotera says, blond and blue-eyed Hispanics "might not work" toward that group's quota because their background would not be apparent to readers.



The quest for diversity appears to have influenced the depiction of another



Robert Daemmrich

key figure in U.S. history: Franklin Delano Roosevelt. As president, Mr. Roosevelt didn't want the public to see his polio-induced paraplegia, and almost all photos show him from the waist up.

Now publishers troll for images of FDR as disabled. In its elementary text, Houghton Mifflin used one of the three photos in his presidential library at Hyde Park, N.Y., that shows FDR in a wheelchair -- a 1941 shot in which he holds his terrier Fala on his lap. Pearson opted in its fifth-grade history book for a photo of a statue of the president in a wheelchair at the FDR Memorial in Washington. Both Pearson and Houghton Mifflin says they use such images for historical accuracy rather than to meet quotas.

Because photos of FDR and other people in wheelchairs can be hard to come by, publishers maximize the visibility of each image, worrying not just about numbers but placement on the page. "Make sure physically challenged people are visible enough to comply with state requirements" and "appear on right-hand pages for a 'thumb test,'" McGraw-Hill 2004 guidelines advise. Translation: Time-pressed state officials sometimes use their thumbs to flip through the pages speedily looking for images of minorities or the disabled. Generally, this results in examining only the right-hand pages.

And sometimes the pictures of "disabled" figures are actually able-bodied models. Typically, models earn about \$80 an hour playing teachers, students, athletes and other textbook roles. Ms. Coppola, the textbook photographer, says this is necessary because getting candid shots in the classroom is a "logistical nightmare" that disrupts schooling and requires permission from parents and administrators.

Mr. Daemmrich, the Texas photographer, says publishers sometimes find themselves "one disabled child short" at the last minute and ask him to put a fully mobile child in a wheelchair. His staff rents the wheelchairs and persuades friends' children to participate. Mr. Daemmrich complies reluctantly: "To me, that goes beyond the line."

Thomas Hehir, a Harvard professor of education and former director of special education at the U.S. Department of Education, says the able-bodied models in wheelchairs don't resemble most disabled children, who have conditions such as cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy that "affect their appearance in other ways. I look at the pictures in the textbooks and I say, 'This doesn't look like a kid I know. How did this kid become disabled?'"

Mr. Earnst says Houghton Mifflin enlists able-bodied models for the disabled only as a last resort, and "makes a very strong effort" to photograph disabled children. It has "done casting" at Children's Hospital in Boston, and featured a Down syndrome child in one textbook, he says. But he says it is "challenging" and "expensive" to find disabled models, because there are few talent agencies for them.

Laura Rakauskas, whose son has modeled for textbooks, said she attended a photo shoot for a Houghton math book where organizers sought a girl to pose in a wheelchair. She said several mothers refused on their children's behalf before a volunteer came forward. She says she wasn't troubled because seeing able-bodied children in a wheelchair is a "gentle introduction" to disability for students who haven't encountered it.

The use of able-bodied models creates potential for an embarrassing gaffe -- the same child posing as

disabled in one chapter and running a race or playing football in another. To avoid such problems, Houghton Mifflin keeps track of faux-disabled models in its filing system.

"We mark the model's card to say that we're showing this particular kid to be disabled" in a math textbook, Ms. Coppola says. "After the book is done, we can use the kid" for an able-bodied role.

Write to Daniel Golden at dan.golden@wsj.com¹

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB115595234477240157.html>

Hyperlinks in this Article:

(1) <mailto:dan.golden@wsj.com>

Copyright 2006 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.

