

*An analysis of children's books on Central America reveals omissions and stereotypic views that prevent students from understanding current events in that region*

## School Books Get Poor Marks: An Analysis of Children's Materials about Central America

The following article is based on a study coordinated and prepared by Nancy Anderson and Rochelle Beck.

Central America has been in the headlines recently with reports of revolution, elections and U.S. military and economic aid packages; El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and other Central American nations have become familiar at least in name to those who follow the news. In fact, name recognition is generally the only knowledge that most people in the U.S. have about Central America. *Newsweek* recently questioned 755 adults about President Reagan's handling of the situation in El Salvador; almost half of them did not respond because they did not know where El Salvador was or which side the U.S. supported.<sup>1</sup> CBS-*New York Times* surveyed a random sample of 1,545 adults about U.S.-El Salvador relations, and more than half of them had so little knowledge of the area they felt they could not respond at all.<sup>2</sup>

Ignorance about Central America is caused by many factors. Media coverage, except in times of emergency, has always been scanty. Even when coverage is more extensive, it is often based primarily if not exclusively on materials and sources which reflect the official U.S. position at that time.<sup>3</sup> As a result, U.S. citizens rarely get enough detail or context to make informed judgments about leaders or events there.

<sup>1</sup>Melinda Beck et al., "The Fire Next Door," *Newsweek*, March 1, 1982.

<sup>2</sup>The results of this survey were reported in "Central America: Region in Revolt," a CBS Special news program aired March 20, 1982.

<sup>3</sup>Jonathan Maslow and Ana Arana, "Operation El Salvador," *Columbia Journalism Review*, May/June, 1981.

Where does this chain of ignorance begin? What are children taught about Central America? To find out, a content analysis was undertaken of children's materials in current use. Materials were identified through *Subject Guide to Children's Books in Print*, *El-Hi Textbooks in Print*, lists of elementary and secondary texts available from educational publishers and materials from the United Nations. A preliminary list included 15 children's books plus numerous textbooks. World geography, world history, U.S. history and social studies texts were considered because they are often students' only source of information about Central America. It was soon found, however, that the majority of these texts had such a paucity of information about Central America that it would be of little

### Media Coverage

The initial findings of the Council study on how Central America is portrayed in children's materials were released April 5 and received extensive media attention. *The New York Times* ran an article on the study that day and again in the "Week in Review" section on the following Sunday. An April 6 Associated Press feature on the findings was picked up by newspapers around the country and prompted numerous editorials questioning the content of textbooks used in local schools. The Council study was also the subject of the "Donahue on Today" TV program on April 29 and CBS Radio and TV news broadcasts reported the study as well. In addition, Interlink/Inter Press Service did a feature for distribution to newspapers in foreign countries.

avail to subject them to analysis; therefore, a representative sample of 11 of these texts was selected for an in-depth examination. A total of 30 works was examined in detail; brief reviews of these books begin on page 8. A subsequent search revealed 10 additional children's books, a few of which are out of print but still very much in use. An evaluation of these books (listed on page 12) confirmed the original findings. In addition, some 31 U.S. history texts (listed on page 12) were similarly examined. A total of 71 books was examined.

Based on the preliminary survey and with the advice of Latin American scholars, criteria were prepared focusing on the accuracy of the books and their quality as teaching tools. A panel of 15 reviewers knowledgeable about Central America was selected to analyze the books. Their evaluations were analyzed and tabulated and a summary of their findings was released to the media in April (see box). Below is a report on the results of this study.

**1. Books suggest that Central America is not important.** They do this in a variety of ways.

*Central America is entirely omitted from many of the most commonly used world geography, history and "cultures" books. Some books about Latin America even omit Central America or do not name the individual countries there.*<sup>4</sup>

So little is said about Central America and Central American nations that they seem not to exist. Again and again, re-

<sup>4</sup>Latin America includes Mexico, Central America, Spanish-speaking islands in the Caribbean and South America. Central America is here taken to consist of Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama (see also p. 13).

viewers noted that "Central America is barely mentioned." Discussions of Latin America are often accompanied by maps that omit Central America and show only South America.

*Central America is consistently given significantly fewer pages than other land masses in books purporting to cover all regions of the world.* Although quantity may appear to be a trivial point, it is not. What can a child conclude when a world history devotes 11 of its 740 pages to Central America? Another world history text allocates 22 out of 838 pages to Central America. This pattern of neglect teaches children that Central America is not as important as many other parts of the world, about which they repeatedly receive more — and more detailed — information.

*Often Central America is referred to merely as the "bridge" between North and South America, with no differentiation of, or attention to, its nations or peoples.* One elementary geography text portrayed this graphically: its map of the Western hemisphere named all the countries — except those in Central America.

Many books combine discussions of Central American countries with those of one or more other countries, sometimes Mexico, the West Indies and/or other Caribbean nations. Others mention Central America only in passing, noting that it is part of Latin America. In all cases, this creates confusion, compounds students' vague sense of the area and reinforces their impression of Central America's unimportance.

**2. Most of the books contain racial and ethnic stereotypes.** Indigenous peoples and Blacks are portrayed as somnolent, lazy, less intelligent, childlike farm and manual workers and music lovers, unsuited for technological, modern societies.

Examples such as the following abound:

... It is difficult to develop stable and democratic government [in Guatemala] because so many of the nation's Indians are illiterate and superstitious. (*Let's Visit Central America*, p. 77)

The Negroes work on the docks and in port warehouses. During busy periods they sing and work steadily without rushing. At slack times many wander to other ports in search of jobs. (*Central America: Lands Seeking Unity*, p. 70)

Excitable and changeable, Nicaraguans often pour their energies into fighting. If they struggled as willingly against rugged mountains, rain forests, and swamps, they might advance more rapidly. (*Central America: Lands Seeking Unity*, p. 127)

### The Politics of Textbooks

No book can be completely objective. Numerous studies have noted the ways in which children's books — and school textbooks in particular — reflect the perspectives and interests of those who control a society's institutions. This survey of books about Central America provides an outstanding example of this observation.

Most, if not all, of the flaws cited in this report are due to the biases, acknowledged or not, of the books' authors, editors and publishers. For the most part, these mirror the political perspectives of official U.S. policymakers which function to support multinational corporate interests at home and abroad. The biases are often clearest — and most misleading — in discussions of the very issues that are crucial to an understanding of current events in Central America: class structure, economic inequities, the role of U.S. corporate interests, U.S. interventions, etc.

Sometimes the books simply omit crucial topics. That is in itself a political statement. At other times, a simplistic cold-war mentality (most blatant in the older books but occurring in newer materials as well) encourages an emotional response instead of knowledge and understanding.

If it is not possible for books to be totally bias-free, it is possible, and absolutely essential, that textbooks include a variety of points of view, especially when those viewpoints are supported by abundant historical evidence and regardless of whether they run counter to "official" policy.

Although Inge's people prefer to live as they have for centuries, modern times are catching up with them. (*Enchantment of Central America: Panama*, p. 22)

Latin America loves its fiestas. Especially with music. The people of all these countries are born music lovers. (*Getting to Know Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua*, p. 49)

When you arrive at the simmering airfield of Nicaragua's capital and hear the airplane's loudspeaker announce "Managua, Nicaragua," this is not meant to be an imitation of Donald Duck. (*The Land and People of Central America*, p. 18)

Chico liked to work with his hands much better than he liked to work with his brain. (*Chico of Guatemala*, p. 22)

**3. Books lead students to conclude that the major causes of underdevelopment and poverty are climate, physical terrain and the shortcomings of Central Americans. Exploitation is rarely mentioned.**

*Many books fail to mention or discuss the internal class structures in Central American nations, the economic patterns and land systems which created and help maintain underdevelopment.* While all the books refer to the region's poverty, they do not help students understand the ways in which unequal land and income distribution, economic exploitation and the ruling elite's need to maintain dominance are in fact the major causes of the ills that are grouped under the term underdevelopment: poverty, widespread disease, high infant mortality rates, illiteracy, inadequate housing, poor transportation systems, malnutrition, etc. Instead, many books imply that the poor are the cause of their own sufferings. Without information about the critical social and economic forces in Central American history, it is impossible to understand current dissatisfactions or reform movements — or to evaluate whom U.S. policy should be supporting.

*Almost three-fourths of the books reviewed fail to discuss the impact of external economic interests (e.g., the United Fruit Company) in creating and maintaining these nations' poverty.* Books present a one-sided and over-simplified picture of the role of the U.S.-based United Fruit Company (now called United Brands) in the economic development of Central America, and one goes so far as to suggest that the reader "think of big companies like the United Fruit Company as providing foreign aid" (*Let's Visit Central America*, p. 74).

Most books do not discuss the exploitative role of the United Fruit Company, or its links with the U.S. government.<sup>5</sup> For instance, in 1951 the U.S. opposed and

<sup>5</sup>It is, for example, instructive to look at U.S. government links with United Fruit in 1954, when the U.S. was involved in the overthrow of the Arbenz government in Guatemala because its land reform policy would deprive United Fruit Company of some of its profits. Sullivan and Cromwell, the law firm headed by John Foster Dulles, U.S. Secretary of State at the time, was the chief legal counsel to United Fruit. Dulles' brother Allen, Director of the CIA, was in charge of "Operation Success," the plan to topple Arbenz; Allen Dulles was also a member of Sullivan and Cromwell and a shareholder of United Fruit as well. General Robert Cutler, head of the

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refused aid to Guatemala for construction of a highway to the Atlantic because the highway would interfere with the monopoly on industrial transportation held by International Railways of Central America — a United Fruit affiliate.

**4. Books communicate that Central American countries are important only insofar as they directly affect U.S. economic or strategic interests.**

*In almost half the books reviewed, no mention is made of treaties, wars, cultures or trade when the U.S. was not directly involved.* Alliance and conflict within Central America, either between countries or within national borders, is barely touched upon. Thus, children get little sense of issues and relationships among Central American nations or the influence of other nations in the area.

One example of an important event omitted from textbooks because it did not directly involve U.S. interests is "La Matanza" ("The Slaughter") in El Salvador. In 1932, Salvadoran peasants, artisans and workers, armed only with machetes and stones, rebelled against the oppression in which the majority of the population lived. This uprising gained the support of many Salvadorans. The paramilitary forces, organized by the large landowners and supported by the Salvadoran army, killed 30,000 Salvadorans within a month. Peasant leaders were hanged in the town squares, their bodies left there for days as a warning to anyone else contemplating opposition to the military rule which was established. Firing squads rounded up all those with Indian features and shot them. In all, 4 per cent of the entire Salvadoran population had been killed. This massacre began the 50-

Continued from previous page

National Security Council, was on the board of directors of United Fruit. The brother of John Moores Cabot, Undersecretary of State for Latin America, was president of United Fruit. Spruille Braden, Secretary for Latin American Affairs, became director of United Fruit and Walter Bedell Smith, Director of the CIA before Dulles, became a director of United Fruit a year after the Arbenz overthrow. President Dwight Eisenhower's private secretary was Ann Whitman, whose husband Ed was United Fruit's public relations director. Last but not least, Henry Cabot Lodge, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, was a major United Fruit stockholder. When the Guatemalan government urgently requested that the U.N. Security Council be called into session to deal with the efforts to overthrow Arbenz, the request was turned down by the president of the Security Council—who happened to be Henry Cabot Lodge.

year rule of the military in El Salvador. Without knowing this, students are seriously hampered in understanding the causes of the present situation in El Salvador. They are also unable to evaluate U.S. foreign policy toward the country.

*In most U.S. history texts, discussion of U.S. relations with any Central American nation is limited to the Monroe Doctrine and the Panama Canal.* The description of the Canal frequently is limited to how the U.S.'s superior abilities succeeded in getting it built. Typical of many texts is the following brief account:

Many routes have been used across this narrow bridge of land between North and South America, but as yet there is only one canal, the Panama Canal. Begun by the French in 1882, the work was difficult, especially in what was then such an unhealthy area. Many workmen lost their lives. Later the construction was taken over by the United States, and the canal still belongs to the U.S.A., together with a strip of land on each side. (*Mexico, Central America and the West Indies*, p. 44)

It is rare to find books that even hint at the degree of blatant U.S. interference in the destinies of Panama and Colombia. *World History* is better than most in this regard.

American engineers suggested two possible locations for the canal. . . . The Senate picked Panama as the site for the canal. Panama, however, was part of Colombia. The United States offered to pay Colombia \$10 million plus a yearly rental of \$250,000 for a strip of land through the Isthmus. Colombia wanted more money, however, and rejected the proposal. Then a revolution broke out in Panama on November 3, 1903. By a strange coincidence, that very same day, an American gunboat arrived in the harbor of Colón in Panama. The American ship prevented Colombia from landing troops to put down the revolt. Three days later, the United States recognized the new republic of Panama. On November 18, Panama signed a treaty with the United States for construction of a canal. . . . Colombia was furious. But it lacked the power to do anything about the situation. . . . (pp. 510-511)

**5. Books distort the role of the U.S. in Central America, portraying it only as the perennial "helper."**

*The U.S. has repeatedly intervened in the internal affairs of Central American nations. Rarely are these interventions mentioned.* The 34 U.S. military interventions in the area from 1898-1932 — and the numerous interventions, both covert and overt, since then — are ignored.

A striking example is the inaccurate and misleading treatment of the overthrow of the Arbenz government in Gua-

# PANAMA

and the CANAL ZONE



Above, some children's books on Central America. Almost all of the children's books that are available mirror official U.S. policy, neglecting the Central American grass-roots perspectives that would give students a more accurate understanding of current events in that region.

temala in 1954 that occurs in many texts. The following is typical:

Jacobo Arbenz was the president of Guatemala from 1950 to 1954. While he may not have been a Marxist, he was in favor of them [sic]. Arbenz was defeated, though, before he had a chance to make long-lasting changes in Guatemala. (*Insights: Latin America*, pp. 106-107)

These brief accounts misrepresent history. Jacobo Arbenz was elected in 1950 by 63 per cent of the Guatemalan electorate. As Stephen Kinzer wrote in "Isthmus of Violence":

Jacobo Arbenz won congressional approval for an agrarian program aimed at giving poor Guatemalan peasants access to land for the first time. Soon after the law was passed, Guatemala's National Agrarian Department began to expropriate the vast unused properties (some 400,000 acres) owned by United Fruit.

This was too great an outrage for Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to accept. Instinctively hostile to Arbenz anyway because of Guatemala's leftist drift, Dulles agreed that the regime would have to be overthrown.

Dulles' brother Allen, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, had successfully deposed the government of Iran just a year earlier. He was called upon to duplicate the feat in Guatemala, and he went about the job with gusto. Agents established clandestine radio stations to spread misinformation in Guatemala, American pilots flew unmarked planes that bombed military and civilian targets, and the CIA put together a motley "Liberation Army" of exiles and mercenaries under the control of a disgruntled Guatemalan colonel. President Arbenz, already unpopular in many quarters, was no match for the CIA juggernaut; on June 27, 1954, he [resigned]. . . . (*The Boston Globe Magazine*, August 16, 1981)

The role of the U.S. is almost always presented as benign, encouraging students to be "shocked" if they hear about anti-American sentiment. Many books seriously distort events by characterizing the U.S. as a "helper." One book does mention that the U.S. intervened in Chile, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Guatemala, but concludes only that "this caused some problems."

*Books frequently mention the Alliance for Progress and the Peace Corps as programs whose only purpose is to "help" the receiving countries.* They fail to place either program in the broader context of U.S. economic and political interests — particularly the shift in focus of U.S. aid after the Cuban Revolution. The majority of books carry sentiments like the following:

As you watch your new friends strive to create a better life, you can be proud that our country is helping them toward their

goal. (*Getting to Know Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua*, p. 61)

Yet, another viewpoint — one that does not appear in any other book reviewed — is presented in *The Human Expression*:

The Alliance for Progress was President

### Sexism by Omission and Commission

History books have always been — and unfortunately continue to be — sexist, particularly by omission. That is, histories, for both children and adults, never show the ways in which women have been movers and doers in individual countries, regions, continents or the whole world. (Needless to say, the same statement can be made regarding the history books' omission of Blacks, Indian peoples, Asians, Latinos, the poor in general, and workers — men and women, Black, brown, white, etc.)

The books about Central America included in the accompanying study must all, to a greater or lesser degree, be termed sexist. This is not so much because they contain overt material which is offensive to women (although quite a few of them do) nor because they consistently use only masculine pronouns and make no attempt to include women even linguistically. More significantly, they neglect to let the reader know that there have always been women who have struggled and worked in all the areas in which their male counterparts have been active. A few of the books have taken the trouble to find and name a handful of women artists or performers, the "Great Women" approach; these efforts are to be applauded but they are insufficient. Other books, if they deal with social customs, have been quick to mention the "machismo" of the region, but generally they present it as virtually another quaint custom practiced by the rather backward Central Americans: chauvinism is not discussed as a serious social, economic, historical and cultural problem which affects the lives of all the women and of the men. Neither is any connection made between "machismo" and the sexism in other countries.

Books about Central America need to include information about women's roles in the history of these countries. They should also discuss the ways in which women's roles are changing. An article on this topic begins on page 19.

John F. Kennedy's program for containing Castro's appeal. The program called for large-scale U.S. aid. The money was to be matched by equally large amounts from participating countries. It was meant to pay the cost of a peaceful social revolution. Along with economic development, the Alliance was to promote democratic and social justice. . . . Ten years of the Alliance for Progress accomplished little. Some of its inspiration was lost when Kennedy was killed. It failed, too, because the traditional landowning class in Latin America resisted change. In addition the U.S. compromised its aims even as they were announced. From the beginning it cooperated with conservative and military elements. The Alliance spent \$10 billion. Two-thirds of it went to military rulers or military-controlled governments. Much of the money went for weapons and not for social reform. (p. 778)

### 6. Books emphasize "exotic" differences, creating an obstacle to the fullest understanding of Central America.

In one children's book — *Chico of Guatemala* — the main character with whom young readers might identify is not even given a name, nor are other members of his family. He is merely called "Chico," which is the Spanish word for "little boy." The text is punctuated by lengthy phonetic spellings of Spanish words (often incorrect), which, in conjunction with the exotic story line and the stereotyped characters, emphasize superficial differences between the lives of children in Guatemala and the U.S.

*Illustrations are often stereotypical.* They reinforce the racism noted above and distort the realities of life in Central America by focusing almost exclusively on the "exotic," the "primitive," the rural, the indigenous populations and the ruins of ancient civilizations. Many books fail to show urban dwellers, professionals, middle-class workers or the wealthy nor do they include enough modern settings; the variety of everyday life in Central America is thus ignored. There are few scenes of anyone leading a modern life which U.S. students might see as similar to their own. Women are generally shown in "traditional" settings; they are also often shown as "Spanish señoritas" in mantillas, long earrings and flounced dresses with captions that refer to them as "girls" in "native dress." In addition, there are few illustrations showing families or in any way reflecting the importance of family life at all levels of Central American society.

*Significant achievements by Central Americans — in science, math, art, mus-*

ic, literature or leadership — are mentioned only in passing. Students are not told enough about the achievements of the ancient Meso-American civilizations, including the Aztecs and Mayas, and contemporary achievements by Central American poets, scientists, inventors and diplomats are neglected as well.

Central Americans are presented from a Eurocentric perspective. Some books emphasize the "superstition," "bizarre spectacles such as human sacrifices" and the "pagan practices that still exist among the Indians."

In the first place, excessive focusing on these areas while deemphasizing current political and social problems does not give the young reader an accurate picture of the region.

In the second place, many books do not mention that (a) there is serious question as to whether any of the indigenous civilizations did in fact practice human sacrifice and, if so, in what context; (b) one person's belief is often another person's superstition; and (c) in most Central American countries, religion plays a more significant role than it does in the U.S. today.

One reviewer found that "no modern Central Americans are mentioned by name in the text. Instead, the only people mentioned are North Americans, Spaniards and one Indian leader." Half the books reviewed do not mention people at all; they confine their discussions to geography, soil and crops. Those that do discuss people present them either as "dignified but exotic" or negatively stereotyped. The result is that students are unlikely to understand the concerns, motivations or potential of Central American people or to understand historical or current events.

**7. Books often convey one of two distorted images: Central America is either a lush, tranquil backwater with rural peasants and no problems, or it is a violent, politically unstable, trouble-torn area where governments topple swiftly at the hands of machine-gun toting guerrillas.**

*The books give little sense of contemporary politics, of what political movements exist, their history and context, who supports them.*

Some books' neglect of politics leads them to portray the region as a placid, uneventful place. A typical reviewer's report reads: "One could never predict the present turmoil in the region on the basis of reading this text. There is nothing in the content or tone which implies deep-seated problems or strife within the

region or between the region and the U.S." Most books present dictators' lip-service to democracy as if it reflected reality; there are few facts about how countries in Central America actually are governed.

Similarly, reasons for political instability, revolutions, dictatorships, oligarchies or emigration are oversimplified. For example, one book explains that:

Central American countries have for years been politically unstable. It is not uncommon for one ruler to be assassinated and quickly replaced by another. This is another reason why this whole area could be a world trouble spot. (*Mexico, Central America and the West Indies*, p. 44)

Ignoring the poverty, ill-health and repression of the indigenous populations, another book states merely:

The Indians pose one of the major problems of Central America. They are an ideal group for Communist agents to work on. (*Central America: Lands Seeking Unity*, p. 205)

Several texts attribute complex events — including revolution — in Central America simply to the proximity of Communism in Cuba. Instead of explaining how internal events in each nation might cause dissatisfaction or revolt, readers are left with the idea that: 1) Cuba is bad because it is communist; 2) Central American revolutions might be bad because they include ideologies similar to Cuba's; 3) therefore, the U.S. should not support these revolutions. The possibility that a revolution can be a positive force for social change is never suggested. One reviewer noted: "Revolution is not a disease. It is a choice people make about how to change their lives. It is important to point out causes of unrest and violence; otherwise children think they are something a country catches, like a cold."

### Recommendations

It is recommended:

1. That publishers review their titles in light of these findings and consider them when revising textbooks and preparing new ones;

2. That members of textbook adoption committees, teachers and librarians evaluate materials in light of these findings and share their concerns by providing feedback to publishers' regional sales representatives and by writing to publishers directly, indicating desired changes;

3. That parents and community members examine the texts used in their schools and discuss any inadequacies

## The United Fruit Company

by Pablo Neruda

When the trumpet sounded  
all was prepared on the earth  
and Jehovah divided the world  
among Coca Cola Incorporated,  
Anaconda, Ford Motors and other  
entities.

The United Fruit Company Incorporated  
reserved for itself the most succulent  
portion:

the central coast of my land,  
the sweet waistline of America.  
It rechristened its lands  
"the Banana Republics,"  
and on the sleeping corpses,  
on the uneasy heroes  
who conquered that greatness,  
that freedom, and those flags,  
it established an opera bouffe:  
it enraptured all fancies,  
granted Caesar's laurels,  
unsheathed envy, and attracted  
the dictatorship of the flies,  
Trujillo flies, Tacho flies,  
Carias flies, Martínez flies,  
Ubico flies, flies sticky  
with humble blood and marmalade,  
drunken flies buzzing over the people's  
tombs,  
circus flies, sage flies  
familiar with tyranny.  
Among the sanguinary flies  
United Fruit embarks,  
its boats brimful with coffee and fruit,  
gliding like trays with the treasure  
of our drowning lands.

Meanwhile, in the sugary  
chasms of our ports,  
Indians fell, buried  
in the morning steam:  
a body rolls, something  
nameless, a fallen number,  
a bunch of dead fruits  
scattered on the hill of rotting refuse.

Translated by Victoria Ortiz

with teachers, department heads, principals, school board members and local or state textbook adoption committees, urging educators to replace inadequate texts and/or use supplementary resources; and

4. That teachers hold classroom discussions about the portrayal of Central America in texts, newspapers and TV, using resources and information such as those provided in this *Bulletin* to initiate student analysis and criticism. □