

Description of history of textbooks in lies my teacher told me

[Education](#), [Learning](#)



The book *Lies My Teacher Told Me* by James W. Loewen focuses on many of the discrepancies and inaccuracies of history textbooks that are used in schools. Loewen insists that many teachers rely on textbooks and are afraid to deviate from the information in the textbooks. Throughout the book, Loewen examines different high school American history textbooks and points out potential issues with the content within the books.

The author continually brings up the fact that we tend to worship and praise certain individuals who might not be as deserving of praise as we think. One of the major topics within the book is the inaccurate history that is often presented when reading about Christopher Columbus. Loewen presents many textbook passages portraying Columbus as a hero and expands on the passages, explaining the discrepancies that are often present. The author also focuses on other historical figures, including: President Woodrow Wilson and Hellen Keller.

Another one of Loewen's major focuses throughout the book is the way that race is depicted in many American history textbooks. He covers inaccuracies about both Native American and African American history and suggests that for the most part, racism tends to remain invisible within our textbooks.

Loewen concludes by informing his readers why history might be taught in that manner that it is currently taught. He claims that history textbooks and teachers give students "no reason to love or appreciate the subject" (p. 311). He insists that if we want students to actually learn about history we need to make history interesting and to do this, we should tell the truth about American history. He also brings up that point that many people have

started to advocate for changing high school history textbooks and that change is slowly beginning to happen across the country.

The book demonstrates the role and impact oppression and assumptions in several areas. The first area I noticed oppression was when the book discussed Columbus's encounter with the American Indians. Loewen quotes, "when Columbus and his men returned to Haiti in 1493, they demanded food, gold, spun cotton—whatever the Natives had they wanted, including sex with women. To ensure cooperation, Columbus used punishment by example. When an Indian committed even a minor offense, the Spanish cut off his ears or nose" (p. 54). The natives were subjected to this unfair control for a long time, before they decided to fight back. Unfortunately for the natives, with 200 soldiers, the Spanish won rather easily. Eventually, Columbus created what is known as the encomienda system, in which Natives were basically enslaved. When Columbus attempted to justify his treatment of the Native people, he claimed that they were "cruel and stupid, a people warlike and numerous, whose custom and religion are very different" (p. 62). This brought about the major assumption by many people during the time that the Natives were indeed unintelligent savages who didn't deserve fair treatment in society.

Another instance in which the author touches on both oppression and dominant assumptions is when he discusses the enslavement of blacks. Loewen particularly focuses on how people attempted to justify slavery. Loewen quotes, "Northerners claimed that black people were so hopelessly inferior that slavery was a proper form of education for them; it also

removed them physically from the barbarism of the “ Dark Continent”” (p. 144). The dominant assumption at the time was that blacks were in many ways inferior to whites. This assumption helped to socially construct the idea that blacks did not deserve equal treatment and that slavery of black people was acceptable. This assumption has led to the current inequity between blacks and whites. As Rothenberg points out in *Race, Class and Gender in the United States*, “ One of the first things we notice about people when we meet them is their race” (p. 16).

Yet another instance in which the book touches on oppression and dominant assumptions is in the discussion of social class. According to Loewen, when asking high school students about social class, many respond by “ blaming the poor for the not being successful” (p. 205). This assumption is still widely held by many people today and continues to affect the way individuals of low socioeconomic status are treated in society. The author goes on to explain how those of a low socioeconomic status have been oppressed. One particular form of oppression discussed by the author is prenatal care and medical advice that is received by expecting mothers. Often times, expecting mothers of low socioeconomic status do not receive adequate medical care when pregnant, which puts the child being born in a bad position to start off life. A baby in poor family might not receive proper nutrition, interaction, or schooling. Loewen quotes, “ even when poor children are fortunate to attend the same school as rich children, they encounter teachers who expects only children of affluent families to be able

to answer the questions” (p. 207). Our assumptions of poor individuals have caused us to treat them in a way that is unjust and in some cases cruel.

One topic that is continually developed throughout the book is the history of Christopher Columbus. This history relates to the field of public education, because in most cases, students are presented with a widely inaccurate view of Christopher Columbus. Many students and adults are ingrained with the idea that we should celebrate Christopher Columbus and his founding of the “new world.” The author depicts many discrepancies about Columbus and his journey that are found in textbooks, and also insists that there is a lot of uncertainty surrounding Columbus. Loewen also brings up some of the terrible things that Columbus did that are simply left out of textbooks. Loewen quotes, “Columbus kidnapped some ten to twenty-five American Indians and took them back with him to Spain. Only seven or eight arrived alive” (p. 54). This was only the beginning of the cruelty and brutality that Columbus showed toward Native Americans. According to Lee’s article, “Taking Multicultural, Antiracist Education seriously,” when referring to the history of Columbus, the article states, “you might not have that information on hand because that kind of knowledge is deliberately suppressed” (p. 12). The discrepancies and lies that have been presented in schools have and continue to have an effect on how students view Columbus and how teachers present Columbus to students.

Another issue that is developed throughout the book is that we tend to worship and praise certain historical figures. This issue also relates to the field of public education, because it is typically school where individuals

learn about historical figures. Christopher Columbus is just one of many historical individuals that we tend to praise. The book looks extensively into different presidents who we often praise. Although many might credit Jefferson with being one of the greatest presidents of all time, it is often left out of history textbooks that Jefferson owned slaves and did not ever free the majority of his slaves. Yet another historical figure that is often misrepresented is President Woodrow Wilson. Many associate Wilson with women's suffrage, however, according to the book, "although women did receive the right to vote during Wilson's administration, the president was at first unsympathetic. He had suffragists arrested; his wife detested them" (p. 15). The misinformation that students are presented about historical figures leaves students uninformed about certain parts of American history.

Before writing this paper, I was actually already familiar with the majority of the discrepancies that were presented in the book. My high school history teacher had given me the book and challenged me to find any "lies" that he had told me in his class. At first, I was disappointed that *Lies My Teacher Told Me* was the only book left to sign up for my book review. The book was my last choice, because I had already thoroughly read and analyzed the book. After reading the book again, I did notice a few more of my beliefs that have been challenged. One belief that was challenged was my belief about Helen Keller. Even after reading the book the first time, I still only saw Keller as deaf and blind girl who overcame the odds and learned how to read and speak. What I didn't realize was that the majority of American history textbooks leave out the entirety of Keller's adult life and the fact that she

was a socialist. In reference to Keller, the textbook quotes, “ her praise of the USSR now seems naïve, embarrassing, to some even treasonous” (p. 15). I was definitely one of the individuals who felt naïve.

Another instance in which I learned something and my beliefs were challenged was when I was reading about the first Thanksgiving. When reading about the first Thanksgiving, I realized that when I think of the word settlers, generally only white people come to mind. In actuality, many of the earliest settlers in America were Spanish. According to the book, “ some later Spanish settlers may have been our first pilgrims, seeking regions new to them to secure religious liberty” (p. 71). The book made me reevaluate my definition of settlers.

This book is relevant to an education class in many different ways. The obvious relevance is that in an education class, many individuals will likely become teachers, possibly teachers of history. It’s important for future to teachers to realize the inaccuracies in history textbooks so that they can present more accurate information to students. This book is also relevant in an education class, because as future educators, we might have students who come from different ethnic, socioeconomic or racial backgrounds. It’s important that we are able to take in the perspective of our history from others who might not come from the same background as us. It also relates to an education class, because it’s a book that could potentially be used in a high school history class to show students some of the inaccuracies in our history textbooks.