Democracy and human rights: a critical look at the concept of Western values in Finnish school textbooks

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In attempts to explain the world, Finnish school textbooks, just like other media, tend to use the dichotomy of West and the rest of the world. In *The Idea of the West*, Bonnett (2004) successfully shows that as long as the notion of “West” has existed, the definitions of “Western” have evolved, both within and outside the West. It refers not only to a geographical marker but to an assumed collection of ideas and ideologies such as democracy and human rights. In this chapter, the aim is to examine how these concepts are connected to the concept of West (or Europe) in school textbooks. The data consists of the textbooks in grades 5-9 published in Finland in geography, history and social studies in 2005-2010. Inspired by the discourse theory analysis developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001), textbooks are seen as discursive documents that take part in the creation of objectivity. The analysis section consists of three parts. The first one focuses mostly on the definitions of the West and Western values as concepts, the way they emerge in descriptions such as that of Ancient Greece or the European Union. The analysis shows how differently the concepts of democracy and human rights can be tied to the concept of West. The second part discusses how the concepts of West and Western values are used in meetings with “the other,” using history and social science textbook articulations as examples. The third part focuses on textbook descriptions of the future of the West and the concept of Western values.

**Introduction**

Europe’s highest peak is located in the Caucasus. A) What is it called? B) How high is it? C) Between which two nations is it located? D) Discuss
why many nonetheless consider Mont Blanc in the Alps to be Europe’s highest peak (Biologian ja maantiedon polku 5, 2008, p.89).¹

The quote above, from a grade 5 geography textbook, shows that the geographic concept of Europe is not only a matter of facts, but of opinions, too. It is easy to find the right answers to the first three questions in the text in the chapter (Mount Elbrus, 5,642 meters, Russia and Georgia). However, the answer to the last part (D) is not there to be found. It can be assumed to be there in order to encourage independent thinking among the students, but what is the statement implying? The text presents a fact (that the highest peak of Europe is located in the Caucasus), then encourages the students to ponder on why “many” disagree with this fact. At issue here is the question of what Europe is, not according to the science of geography, but according to what “many people” think. It shows the ambiguity that is tied to the question of the borders of Europe. Furthermore, if the concept of Europe is difficult to define, defining the concept of the “West” offers an even more challenging task, since it points not only to a geographical marker but also to an assumed collection of ideas and ideologies. Yet, there are several references to the concepts of the West and Western values, often as parallel concepts to “European values,” in the Finnish school textbooks. These will be in focus in this chapter. In The Idea of the West, Bonnett (2004) shows that as long as the notion of “West” has existed, the definitions of “Western” have changed, both within West itself and outside the West. As one of many examples, he points out how Christianity was seen as an important part of what it meant to be Western during the time when the Soviet Union, which stood for atheism, was the West’s “other.” After the 1990s, when the “other” came to be represented by the Muslim world, the secularism of

¹ All the quotes were translated from the original Finnish or Swedish by the author and later language checked by a professional translator
“Western” was highlighted. Bonnett’s work shows how fluid the concept of “West” (and consequently, “Western values”) should be seen to be.

**The idea of the West in the study of textbooks**

Studies done on the role of textbooks in schools show that the textbooks are important and that they even make up the foremost source of teaching (Foster, 2011; Issit, 2004). This seems to be the case in Finland, too, where many teachers consider the school textbooks the primary source of reference, even more important than the curriculum guidelines. Differences, however, exist, for example, between school subjects (Heinonen, 2005; Atjonen & al., 2008). The role of textbooks can be considered particularly important in social studies, since its relationship with the academic disciplines tends to be complex. (Børhaug, 2011). Andreotti and de Souza (2012) point out the need within education to analyze hegemonies that reproduce and maintain global inequalities. Their suggestion to use postcolonial critique seems fruitful in the study of the portrayal of the “West” and the concept of “Western values” in school textbooks. Writing school textbooks that attempt to explain the world is no easy task, considering that the world changes fast and continuously. However, there are no shortcuts; there is a need to start presenting the world through a multitude of perspectives in order for students to develop an understanding of the world that is not based on old stereotypes. This way, students can learn to challenge global colonial power. Textbooks should be developed in a direction that more accurately represents the current globalized world (Pihl, 2009; Mikander & Holm, 2014).

International research shows that school textbooks in geography, history and social studies have historically reflected prejudices, even though blatant racism has faded since the 1960s (Marsden, 2001; Graves, 1996). Even without overtly offensive
statements, however, prejudices and stereotypes have harmful effects. Although the negative attitudes in textbooks might be the same as those that flourish in other types of media and in society at large, school textbooks are in a special position considering that they are often widely distributed and legitimized by the state apparatus (Loftsdóttir, 2010).

Several studies have shown that prejudices continue to prevail in school textbooks. Referring to several studies of textbooks in Sweden, Kamali (2005) shows how the books tend to take on a perspective of “us” Westerners and portray other peoples selectively as the opposites of progressive, civilized Europeans. In descriptions of what the concept of European means, the focus is only on positive elements such as the Renaissance, revolutions and democracy, and almost never on wars, colonialism, slavery or genocide.

As for Finland, a country celebrated for its PISA success in mathematics and science (Kupiainen, Hautamäki & Karjalainen, 2009), there are some alarming signs concerning the lack of interest in social studies and society as a whole (Suoninen, Kupari, & Törmäkangas, 2010). As Alem, Johnson Longfor & Oskarsdóttir discuss in this volume, one may ask if success in the learning areas measured in PISA really cover what is needed for students to live and work in a society of people with different world views. The national core curriculum (FNBE, 2004) states that all basic education should be based on a number of values, initially mentioning democracy, human rights and equality. The core curriculum does not define these values (Lampinen, 2013). The draft for the coming new curriculum also stresses that basic education is based on values such as respect for human rights and promoting democratic values. (FNBE, 2014) The importance of these values needs to be stressed considering the newly reported study that shows that in an international study of 38 countries Finnish boys hold the most
negative attitudes towards immigrants (YLE, 2014). Whether or not school textbooks can be seen as one of the main reasons behind negative attitudes, as suggested by Pudas (2013), they have an indisputable role as discursive documents that can be found in the school bags of a whole generation.

**Method**

This study is part of a doctoral thesis, which is an analysis of a total of 70 Finnish textbooks for grades 5 to 9 (11-16-year-olds), when geography, history and social studies are taught in basic education. The analysis covers all the textbooks published in these subjects by the (then) six major publishing companies in Finland between 2005 and 2010. All the books were read and examined with regard to either a portrayal of all human beings as equal (as in accordance with the values of the Finnish core curriculum) or a portrayal of the West as superior. During the reading, articulations such as texts, pictures and assignments were categorized into subcategories such as war, culture, population, and references to the concept of “West.” This study is an analysis of the last-mentioned category. The articulations that somehow could be characterized as ideological definitions of the West or Europe were gathered into one document and analyzed. The following questions were asked: what are the definitions given to the concept of West or Europe? What is explicit, what is implicit? What ideological values (such as democracy and human rights) can be perceived to be attached to the concepts of “Western” or “European?”

The aim of schoolbooks is to synthesize information into generally regarded objective and useful pieces of information (Loftsdóttir, 2010, p. 81). However, some questions about objectivity emerged during the reading of the material, such as: How is
this objectivity defined? Whose objectivity is it? These questions can be turned back to the material.

At an early stage of the research, it became clear that the research would benefit from a discursive approach. There is a need to see the school textbooks as documents of our culture and time; they cannot be seen apart from society at large. In the words of Loftsdóttir (2010, pp. 22–23): “It is important to see schoolbooks not merely as discourses that create images that are influential in their social setting, but as being derived from, being a part of and interacting with their social settings.” Textbooks are in society, come from society, but also influence society by creating a version of what can be seen as objective knowledge. The discourse analysis used here has mostly been influenced by Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001). In what they call discourse theory analysis, they see the world not as a reality existing out there, needing to be uncovered in order to be understood. Instead, they see us as constantly creating an understanding of what is real and true in our talk, text and actions. They call this creating objectivity.

One might argue that the formulations quoted as examples of discourses in this chapter are not much different from articulations in, for instance, the news or other media. For discourse analysis, there are no hierarchies between documents – official documents as well as internet discussions are equally valuable as materials since they are all constructed within a discourse (Börjesson & Palmblad, 2007). Just like other materials, however, textbooks are not only constructed within a discourse, they also reproduce discourses. With this in mind, the fact that school textbooks are distributed to and read by all students in Finland make them powerful as producers of what is seen as objective.

As an example of how objectivity is created, one might consider how some of the school textbooks in geography portray “culture spheres” that are marked by circling
areas that divide the world into fixed culture categories. In one textbook, the students are asked to color a world map according to these culture spheres. In doing so, the textbook creates objectivity – the clear distinctions between culture spheres as objective knowledge. However, other geography textbooks portray a completely different view of the concept of culture, such as suggesting that all cultures are made up of mixes of meetings between people. The need for a critical examination regarding the concept of cultures is further discussed by Schatz and Niemi (in this volume).

**What is Europe? What is the “West”?**

Europe is dominated by Western culture, which often highlights equality between people and people’s possibilities of acting freely, of their own will. It is part of the Western culture that people have the right to a high standard of living. This means, among other things, that people have access to enough food, good healthcare and an opportunity for a good education. This is the case in many European countries (*Jäljillä 5*, 2008, p.127).

Even if the concepts “European” and “Western” could be described and discussed at length as separate phenomena, they are often taken to mean the same thing in the studied textbooks. An example is the quote above, which states that equality, freedom and a high standard of living are typical for Western culture. Many textbooks are not this clear in their explanations of what Western or European values entail. In addition to the textbook descriptions of what Western values mean, it is interesting to analyze how these values are linked to the concept of West. The following is an attempt to map out what values the concepts of European and Western point to, and how. To
start with, the discussion in the textbooks about the enlargement of the EU can be taken as a case in point. The following quote is an example of how the difference between the “East” and Europe can be portrayed:

Turkey’s roots are in the East, but its gaze is turned towards Europe. This is expressed, for example, by Turkey’s wish to become a member state in the European Union EU (Koulun biologia ja maantieto 6, 2005, p. 103).

The quote suggests that having one’s “roots” in the East and aspiring to become European is somehow problematic. However, what this all means remains unexplained, even though the quoted geography textbook is used for grade 6 (12–13-year-olds). Other textbooks have more detailed descriptions of what this difference entails, such as the following social studies textbook (grade 9):

Turkey has not yet been accepted as a member, even though it has expressed its wish to join for years. Turkey does not yet fulfill the criteria needed for new members. Turkey has sought to improve its human rights situation and abolished the death penalty (Yhteiskunta NYT, 2008, p. 225).

And this grade 8 geography textbook:

Turkey has sought to develop its social conditions, such as freedom of speech and gender equality, so that the country could become a member of the European Union in the future (KM Maailma, 2010, p. 135).

One thing that the three quotes share is the notion that Turkey “wants” to become either “European” or a member of the EU, but is not quite there yet. This suggests a possibility for countries not considered European to become European by adopting the right values. Bonnett (2004) shows how the borders of the West have been
fluid, and even includes the vision that the whole world could be “westernized.” The following two last quotes offer definitions that can be seen as examples of what being European or Western means, in the form of criteria needed for EU membership. Human rights, the abolishment of the death penalty, freedom of speech and gender equality are tangible concepts. A social studies book describes the values of the EU in concrete terms, as peace, democracy and human rights:

The member states are not alike, but instead they vary greatly when it comes to history, culture and the structure of society. Still, they are committed to the same basic values; peace, democracy and respecting human rights (Yhteiskunnan tuulet, 2010, p. 131).

Connecting the above-mentioned values with the EU member states is in no way surprising; they are the same values echoed in the founding principles of the EU (European Union, 2012). More thought-provoking is the way the values are related to the countries. In this particular quote, the countries are said to be committed to these values. Some textbooks, however, seem to assume that rather than a commitment these values are inherent for EU members, and part of what Europe or the West “is”. Consider how the following grade 5 history textbook creates an image of what ”Westernness” means and how it is depicted as a success story from Ancient Greece to today’s Europe:

We are all partly Greek (headline). Of the ancient peoples, the Greeks have affected our lives the most. We, too, are in many ways ”Greek.” We believe that democracy, the power of the people, is right. We vote, go to the theater at night, admire sport heroes and beautiful works of art (Kauan sitten - matka maailman historiaan, 2006, p. 54).

And:
The Greeks also thought differently from the Egyptians or the Mesopotamians. They wanted to feel free and they wanted to choose for themselves who governed them... A free man thinks for himself, they used to say (Kauan sitten - matka maailman historiaan, 2006, p. 61).

Not only are “we” the readers expected to identify with the Greeks (or, to be precise, to the free adult male citizens of Athens), but the Greek mindset is presented as radically different from that of the Egyptians or Mesopotamians. Can anyone really prove that they did not like to think for themselves? The same textbook goes on to describe the war between Ancient Greece and Persia (for a more detailed analysis, see Mikander, 2012). This war is described in the grade 5 history textbook as a very decisive event for the whole concept of “Westernness,” as can be shown in the following extract:

If Persia had won the war, the way of life in the Greek city-states would have been over. Many of the inventions, artworks and buildings of the Greeks would never have been born. The thought of democracy, the right to think and speak freely, would have been forgotten. The world would have become very different without them (Kauan sitten – matka maailman historiaan, 2006, p. 74).

The above-mentioned quote clearly suggests that only in the West could values such as democracy and human rights have emerged. The image of Westernness as a success story of democracy and human rights leaves out the dark side of what Europe or the West has stood for throughout history; this includes colonialism and fascism. These are not seen as part of what is essentially Western in the way democracy and human rights are.
Another way of describing the link between values such as democracy and Europe is seen in the following geography textbook for grade 5:

It is seen as important to take care of things together, or democratically. The standards of living vary between different states and regions of Europe. The European Union stresses the importance of human rights. Examples of human rights are the right for everyone to a home, to food and to a possibility of going to school. The rights of children to play, go to school and live a happy life also need to be defended (Pisara 5, 2010, p. 57).

At first glance, the quote looks quite similar to the other descriptions of European values. However, the very last words of the quote create a different image of the relation between the EU and the values mentioned. By referring to the values not as inherent, but as important to defend, the message is clear: there is a need to be active to defend the rights; they cannot be taken for granted to represent the West.

**Western values and meeting with the other – then and now**

The section above discussed how the West is presented in explicit terms. However, what is considered Western can also be implicit. This can be seen in the description of its opposite, as in meetings between the West and the rest of the world. History textbooks are obviously full of these descriptions, not least because the portrayal of the world outside Europe is often linked directly to the confrontation between other places and Europe, such as events that are still often called “voyages of discovery.” While there have been attempts to turn the focus in history textbooks toward the treatment of colonized peoples, the “discoverers” are still seen as heroes; importantly, there are very few links drawn between the atrocities of colonization and
the continued extraction of natural sources and exploitation of labor in the South performed by “Western” multinational companies today. As an example of how it is possible to mention atrocities performed by the West but turn the focus to something different, consider the following quote, a text accompanying a picture in a grade 7 history textbook:

In addition to the violent conquests, the Europeans made contracts with African chiefs. They served as local chiefs under the Europeans. Samson Dido from Cameroon assumed a European style of clothing all the way down to the walking stick (Kronikka 7, 2008, p. 147).

The text is accompanied by a picture which shows the person in question, Samson Dido, dressed in European clothes. One can ask what thought the three sentences leave in the mind of the reader – is it the initial mentioning of violent conquests, or is it the local chief dressed in “funny” European attire? The picture and the text can be seen as amusing, belittling colonial violence and its consequences. The fact that the local chief Samson Dido was dressed in European clothes could obviously be there to show an example of how colonialism deprived some peoples of their culture and tradition. However, here that point is not made; his clothes are rather seen as a comic element. The same textbook offers a similar belittling attitude in the following description of Japan:

The Europeans had been a little amused by the Japanese people’s intense desire to become European. The Japanese sought to become more perfect than the Europeans themselves… To solve their shortage of raw material, the Japanese decided to adopt the European model: Japan began to acquire colonies (Kronikka 7, 2008, p. 162).
This description can hardly be seen as an attempt to teach students about the horrors of colonialism. Instead, one can expect the students to laugh along with the Europeans described in the text. The second sentence, about being more perfect than the Europeans, seems to entail some kind of sarcasm that may be difficult for young readers to perceive. It is not easy to see the purpose of such descriptions.

However, the following two extracts from other textbooks about the same topic make clearer statements about the ugliness of colonialism and the world view that allowed for it:

The Westerners were complacent and thought that their way of life was much better than those of people overseas. Because of this, they started educating people in the colonies on the Western lifestyle. The people in the colonies were not seen to have the same human value as the conquerors (Kaleidoskoooppi 7, 2010, p.98).

And:

The Europeans justified their conquests by civilizing indigenous peoples. They saw them as inferior since the countries lacked industries and the people didn’t have Christianity, the “right” customs or culture. The idea that Europeans were superior to peoples of other continents and that they thus needed to civilize others is called the white man’s burden (Aikalainen 7, 2009, p. 122).

The quotes show how the arrogant attitude that was prevalent in Europe during the age of colonialism can be described in a school textbook. Interestingly, the Europeans are here referred to as “they”, while they were known as “us” in one of the earlier quoted descriptions of (democratic) Ancient Greece. These are portrayals of
Europeans hundreds and thousands of years ago. However, there are also descriptions of Europeans meeting “others” in today’s world. As an example of how non-Westerners can be portrayed differently from Westerners, consider the following two quotes from a textbook describing the borders of and within the EU.

Since the border crossings have become more flexible and there is less control, there are now worries that terrorists, drug smugglers and other criminals will take advantage of this and move about more freely in unlawful business (Uppdrag Europa, 2009, p. 37).

And:

Finland and Austria will also have to act as gatekeepers. When there is instability, there is always somebody taking advantage of the opportunity to become rich in illegal ways, such as by smuggling weapons, drugs or people. This becomes sad for those who are labeled as criminals simply for the sake of their looks or their nationality (Uppdrag Europa, 2009, p. 78).

What the two quotes from one geography textbook have in common is the implicit notion that people who come from outside of the EU can be seen as potential criminals. However, there are many things said in the quotes that need some additional disentangling. For instance, the first quote involves a statement on being worried about “terrorists, drug smugglers and other criminals.” The sentence is impersonal, leaving out the actor. Who is worried or supposed to be worried? The Finnish state, Finnish citizens, or who? Leaving out the actor creates a sensation of a norm; it makes sense to be worried. In Ahonen’s study (2000), this is typical for Finnish textbooks in social studies: events are simply portrayed as taking place; there are rarely any active subjects,
either in terms of institutions or groups of individuals. Moreover, as Ahonen shows, values are also being transmitted in the name of this kind of “objectivity.” Here, the value transmitted is that “we” are always potentially at risk of being abused by “them.” Also, the last sentence in the second quote about criminality can be seen as a way to blame racism in Europe on the “criminals from the outside.” It suggests that racism (labeling some people as criminals because of their looks or nationality) is to be seen as a product of “their” bad behavior and not, for instance, on institutional racism in receiving countries such as Finland. Earlier research (Mietola, 2001) shows how textbooks portray racism in Finland as a marginal phenomenon related to criminality, not to Finnish society.

The notion of Europe being a “good player” in the world is not hard to find in the following quote:

Most of the European countries are wealthy. Some typical things for the continent are a high standard of living, good healthcare and a high quality of education. Europe is one of the world's economic powers, and the aid it provides for many developing countries is important (Jäljlillä 6, 2008, p.45).

Development aid is often brought up when it comes to economic inequality in the world. Trade agreements or the extractions of raw materials from poorer countries, which consist of much larger volumes, are not mentioned. The concept of “us” being good players in the world is also shown in the following quote about UN peacekeepers. Consider how differently the reasons for sending troops can be described depending on the sending country:
Finnish peacekeepers have been involved in Suez since the beginning of the peacekeeping operations in 1956 …. Finland's active involvement was based on our country's international status as a non-aligned and neutral country …. Most of the peacekeepers come from developing countries such as India and Nigeria. The developing countries like to send out peacekeepers because the United Nations pays retroactively for the costs related to peacekeeping (Yhteiskunta NYT, 2008, p. 79).

The active Finnish presence in peacekeeping is described as a virtue, while the reason for India and Nigeria to send peacekeepers around the world is to earn money. These small, subtle articulations in the texts can be seen to create and uphold a vision of “us” as more socially responsible than “them.”

**The strength of the West**

Only 11% of the world’s six billion inhabitants live in Europe. We often see the world in a very “Euro-centered” way. In the future, the world's economic and demographic center of gravity will be shifting beyond Europe and the United States (Aikalainen 8, 2009, p. 158).

While focusing on a valid point, the quote above raises some questions. It shows how intertwined the textbook sees Europe and the US – first, only Europe is mentioned, then the US is included in the argument. The shift in the “center of gravity” of the world is presented in a pragmatic, not alarming, light. Bonnett (2004) shows how Western civilization has been simultaneously pronounced to be all-conquering and defeated, unstoppable and doomed, for instance, in academic literature throughout the last hundred years. In the quote above, the “center of gravity” concerns economy and people – not, for instance, military power. However, several of the textbook quotes that discuss
the concept of Western values are found in chapters that describe military conflicts in today’s world, such as the September 11th attacks in New York and the following wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The history textbook descriptions of these events seem to offer a new arena for the discussion about Western values and the future. Some books construct an image of Western values being under attack (see Mikander, 2014). One textbook does this in a very explicit way, by linking the concept of Western values with capitalism, as in the following about September 11th in New York:

The attacks led to the death of 3,000 innocent people, people from many different countries belonging to several religions and language groups. But the attacks did not manage to crush the Western world. Within the economy, “business as usual” still rules. Even though the aerial industry suffered hard losses, stricter control made it safer to fly (Historia 1900-talet, 2008, p.267).

Here, the victims of the attacks are first described very broadly, as people from “many different countries” belonging to several faiths and language groups. Still, the next sentence presupposes that the target was indeed the “Western world.” By referring to the prevailing economy and aerial industry, it shows that the Western world was not “crushed” by the attacks.. This particular history textbook makes a strong connection between the West and capitalist economy in another chapter, too. Describing the fall of the Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union, it concludes that:

It was not with the help of weapons that the Western world became the winners of the Cold War. It was the Western economic system, capitalism, or the market economy that turned out to be stronger than the communist planned economic system (Historia 1900-talet, 2008, p.161).
Here, the key to what is Western is not democracy, human rights or equality, but capitalism. Bonnett (2004) has pointed out how the linking of the West with capitalism is a fairly new phenomenon (one hundred years ago, socialists saw the revolution particularly as a Western project). He also suggests that the idea of “Western triumph through neoliberal capitalism” is “a utopian political discourse” (Bonnett, 2004, p. 123). His examples include Russia and China, capitalist countries that lack democracy, but he also points out how democracy is being compromised in the “West” today. Another history textbook discusses the same events but concentrates more on the development that has taken place in the West in the aftermath of 9/11, focusing on the diminishing respect for democracy, as in the description of how the fact that people opposed the war in Iraq did not stop their governments from going to war:

However, the governments did not heed their citizens. For instance, Spain sent its troops to Iraq, even though almost half of the Spanish people opposed the attack (Kaleidoskooppi 8, 2008, p. 178).

If the West is to be defined as a center for democracy, freedom and human rights, the weakening of these and the need to defend them should be mentioned. The last quote offers an opening into this kind of thinking while the ones mentioned earlier, focusing uncritically on the West as “winners” in the world, can hardly be seen to do so.

Conclusions

The way school textbooks create objectivity matters. Through descriptions of events ranging from ancient wars via colonialist clashes to today’s conflicts, and from descriptions of the Ancient Greeks to today’s EU states, the attempt here has been to analyze how textbooks discuss the concepts of Western values. In the textbook
examples discussed here, there is a notion that democracy and human rights can be
taken to be part of what it means to be “Western.” The risk attached to this is that these
values are taken for granted, overlooking the fact that they need to be defended, over
and over.

It would be important for students to thoroughly learn about the dark side of the
history of Europe. This would mean not only presenting facts about historical periods
such as colonialism or fascism but also to look at how they are presented. This chapter
has shown that Westerners can be described as “us” when the focus is on developing
democracy, but as “them” when the focus is on colonialism. This suggests that there is a
need for a more critical presentation in history textbooks of not only history but also the
present. The fact that “us” sending out peacekeepers is seen as a good deed while
“them” doing the same thing is seen as a way of earning money is shown as an example
of this. Textbooks should ask critical questions, not provide statements that consolidate
old stereotypical views of the world. This, together with the suggestion made in the
introduction of this volume, that teachers in training should be taught to analyze
textbooks critically, is crucial for providing students with the knowledge and skills that
they will need in their future lives.
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