

Webster's Spelling Book: A Product of Language-in-Education Policies in the United States in the Early 1800s

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Abstract : Noah Webster was a lexicographer and a language reformer and is considered the 'Father of American Scholarship and Education' because of the exceptional contributions he made as a teacher and grammarian. The goal of this study is to show that the success of his plan can be explained by the fact that it matched the language-in-education policies of his time. To accomplish that goal the present study analyzes the Massachusetts School Laws of 1642, 1647 and 1648 and compares them to the preface of the first edition of The Grammatical Institute of the English Language. The referred laws were three legislative acts enacted in the Massachusetts Colony and replicated almost identically in the other New England colonies. The purpose of those laws was to eradicate pauperism and poverty, on the one side, and to disseminate the idea of right citizenship, on the other. However, until the Declaration of Independence in 1776, all the primers used in the colony were printed in Britain. In 1783, Noah Webster published the first part of his Grammatical Institute of the English Language. In this book, the author states that his goal is to promote the republican principles that guide the civil rights of that time. The material included many texts taken from the Bible to inspire aversion to inadequate behavior and preference for service and good manners. In addition, its goal was to present 'a new plan of reducing the pronunciation of our language to an easy standard,' and in that way, create a unified language to abolish ignorance and language corruption. The comparison between the laws and Webster's Spelling Book shows that the book is the result of the historical and political situation when it was conceived and it satisfied the requirements of the language-in-education policies of the time.

Keywords : American English, language policy, the Massachusetts school laws, webster's spelling book

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