

OVERVIEW

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WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW

A lot of educators are tired of hearing about curriculum content and cultural literacy. They acknowledge that E. D. Hirsch (p. 18) has performed a useful service by emphasizing the role of background knowledge in reading comprehension, but they think his pedagogical prescriptions are naive, and they resent the accusation that they do not care enough about content.

In the 1988 ASCD yearbook (Brandt 1988), I said that most educators believe both process *and* content are important, but I conceded that we talk a lot more about process—and for good reason; we want content taught in a way that helps students learn it. Perhaps another reason is that generalists cannot possibly know every subject area as well as the specialists. Still, we know that *what* schools teach is important—and we play a pivotal role in the making of content decisions.

A few years ago I visited a 7th grade remedial class to watch a lesson taught by an excellent teacher. Unfortunately, the substance being taught so well was, in my opinion, not worth teaching. Do you remember the four types of sentences? I make my living occupied with language, but I hadn't thought about the four types of sentences since my own school days. Yet here was a class of slow learners trying to remember the terms *declarative*, *interrogative*, *exclamatory*, and—that's right—*imperative*.

On another occasion I engaged in a friendly discussion with an elementary teacher about whether her 6th grade health students needed to learn the names of the bones of the body. With all the interesting and relevant information available about nutrition, exercise, illnesses, and care of one's teeth, I assign low priority to the tibia and the fibula.

I know there are good reasons—including vocabulary development—for teaching esoteric terminology, but these justifications need to be made explicit and tested against arguments for other possible content. Generalists may assume that the experts regularly conduct such evaluations—and they sometimes do. For example, the American Academy for the Advancement of Science is

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP



Competing demands for attention often cause us to lose sight of the connections within the curriculum as well as an overall picture. As we weigh choices carefully, we do well to keep in mind a balanced and cohesive image of what schools should teach. Design by Al Way.

currently engaged in an ambitious project to define the aspects of science that nonscientists need to know (Rutherford and Ahlgren 1988), and three distinguished groups are at work preparing guidelines for changes in mathematics curriculum (O'Neil 1988).

Valuable as they are, though, such pronouncements are seldom the deciding factor. Textbook publishers, whose products are often more influential, feel

obligated to include a certain amount of conventional content simply because they know buyers will expect to see it.

Schools can decide what to teach by deferring to expert opinion or by adhering to tradition, but Ralph Tyler (Brandt and Tyler 1983) has long advised instead that we select content from the various disciplines in accord with sound objectives, which in turn should reflect not only the established disciplines but also the needs of society and of students.

These sensible guidelines set the ground rules, but they leave much room for debate. Which objectives are most worthwhile? ASCD members are the ones who must moderate the discussion: asking questions, ensuring participation by all those who have a right to be involved, and offering informed opinion when a rational voice is needed. It is not enough, in other words, to preside over the process; to offer curriculum leadership, we ourselves must know something about the various elements of knowledge that students may reasonably be expected to learn. □

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