

Trends

Social Studies

WALTER C. PARKER

Both of the Above

What should social studies curriculum supervisors and department heads be most concerned about?

- A. Content.
- B. Instruction.
- C. Both of the above.

Advocates of the first response enjoy the limelight today. Their argument is a cultural and moral one: because our society is democratic, *everybody* must be educated. Furthermore, this education must have a common content core. Once they have acquired it, new members of a democracy (both children and immigrants) are equipped for continued learning and for responsible participation in the community life of the nation.

The central question of this view is, what knowledge is of most worth? Its most prominent spokespersons, Diane Ravitch and William Bennett, answer that question in a word: history. They point out that the demise of historical understanding among American youth has occurred as other social studies content (e.g., sociology, global education) has proliferated.

Advocates of the second view argue that the central problem of the social studies curriculum is not so much the lack of a common core as the lack of student learning. Little would be gained by identifying a core history curriculum, they contend, because as few students would learn it as learn the present curriculum.

Proponents of this view emphasize the "taught" but not "caught" problem: much history is taught to students—in fact, students in most states are taught American history three times, in the 5th, 8th, and 11th grades. While it is being "covered," however, many students are unable to make sense of it or are simply disengaged. The central question of this view is, what instructional practices might help more students learn what is taught?

Advocates of the third response argue that options "A" and "B" are both right when taken together but are both wrong when disconnected. Effective instruction is meaningless without content that is worth learning; and important content, if not made accessible and meaningful for learners, goes unlearned. School teaching is extraordinarily difficult because it requires teachers not only to be students of the content they teach but also to be students of instruction.

Advocates of option "A" are helpful to a point. They display a poor grasp of the conditions of classroom learning. Fixated on the content question, they skirt the difficulties of teaching in a media age to easily bored students, disruptive students, and culturally diverse groups of students. Advocates of option "B" also are only partially helpful. Fixated on child-centered instructional methods, they skirt the content question and, thereby, their responsibility for deliberating on the *ends* of instruction: considering the sort of society we want to create, what knowledge and virtues must children develop?

Like the two wings of an airplane, curriculum and instruction have no separate existence. The central question of the third view, then, is, what social studies content is of most worth, and how might students be helped to learn it? This question puts the atten-

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Trends

tion of teachers and curriculum supervisors directly where it is needed—on the intersection of content and learning. By doing this, we can expect three beneficial results. First, the curriculum emphasis will shift from breadth to

depth. Second, with the emphasis on depth, teachers and students can begin to notice and then grapple with the unique landscape of social study. And, third, approaches to teacher effectiveness that are less generic and

more content-specific can be taken seriously. □

Walter C. Parker is Associate Professor, University of Washington, College of Education, Seattle, WA 98195.

Reading

ROGER FARR

A Place for Basal Readers Under the Whole Language Umbrella

There is a growing belief among some educators that within the next decade whole language programs will replace basal readers. They argue that basal readers and whole language programs are incompatible and cannot coexist. This debate is, first of all, a matter of two ships passing in the night; that is, two different topics are being compared. "Whole language" is a philosophy that suggests that a variety of real language experiences and materials should form the basis of instruction. Basal readers, on the other hand, are a set of instructional materials that have been developed to exemplify an eclectic middle-of-the-road philosophy.

The concerns of whole language proponents are, however, not trivial. There are *aspects* of basal readers that are incompatible with the whole language approach. For example, the "separate skills instruction" of basal readers, resulting in workbook pages, ditto masters, and mastery tests, suggests erroneously that language development can be reduced to learning discrete skills. Another major issue is the lack of freedom of choice that is dictated by the lockstep use of the stories in basals. Often this linear march by teacher and students through the basal lessons and activities is mandated by administrators who feel that if certain pages or lessons are skipped, the students will fail to learn

essential skills. Indeed, the major problem with basal readers is this kind of lockstep misuse.

Although these aspects of basal readers are incompatible with the whole language philosophy, there are issues on which they coincide. For example, basals include excellent stories written by the nation's best children's authors. These stories are used as springboards to a variety of wonderful children's books. Moreover, most basal readers encourage teachers to choose from the stories and activities included rather than using all of them. In addition, writing activities and a wide range of creative applications are now standard fare in most basals—and all of these are also encouraged under the whole language umbrella.

Thus, basal reader authors and publishers are not out of step with the whole language philosophy. Nevertheless, basal readers are constantly changing, and they will continue to do so. The McGuffey readers of the 1800s are nothing like the Dick and Jane readers of the 1950s, which are distinctly different from today's basals, and they are often indistinguishable from literature anthologies. In addition, basals have to appeal to a broad audience of educators and students, and they can't espouse one philosophy to the complete exclusion of others.

At their best, basals allow for teacher choice. They provide ample activities and materials so that a teacher can use the materials within

the philosophy that guides his or her instruction. If they did not now exist, basals in some form would almost certainly be invented. They would grow out of teachers' needs for classroom or group sets of stories for children to share, teaching suggestions that promote and apply what has been read, and lists of library books that allow students to pursue ideas of interest. All of these needs are now met in good basal programs—and in whole language classrooms.

As teachers and administrators, we need to work together so that instructional programs are understood as being more than a particular set of materials. And those who prepare teachers must present more thorough treatments of how to use basals to complement rather than contradict program and teacher philosophy. Basals may then become what they were designed to be, not total programs but useful tools for helping teachers carry out effective reading instruction. Most important, if we are to improve instruction, we must always concentrate on what the teacher does. It is the teacher who must encourage, guide, and challenge students' ideas—and who must use a variety of materials so that students become active learners. □

Roger Farr is Director, Center for Reading and Language Studies, Smith Research Center, School of Education, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47401.

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