

Reviews

What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?

Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr.
New York
Harper & Row, 1987

—Reviewed by Thomas R. McDaniel, *Converse College, Spartanburg, South Carolina*

The short and sad answer to the intriguing title question seems to be "not very much." In the results of an assessment funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the authors find that "our eleventh graders as a whole are ignorant of much that they should know" about history and literature. High school juniors could answer correctly only 54 percent of the history questions and 52 percent of the literature questions. Fewer than one student in four was able to locate Abraham Lincoln's presidential term in the proper 20-year period (that is, between 1860 and 1880); only 36 percent knew that Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*. And so it went.

Colleagues Ravitch and Finn, well-known and articulate proponents of conservative "excellence reforms," provide a range of fascinating (if distressing) data to support this indictment of education in America. This 1986 survey, conducted with the help of National Assessment of Educational Progress staff, confirmed the authors' long-held suspicion that all is not well with humanities education.

They make no bones about their bias. Ravitch (perhaps best known for *The Troubled Crusade*) and Finn (a Bill Bennett protégé in the Department of Education) are critics of Progressive ideology and supporters of a traditional, Essentialist philosophy of education. Like Albert Lynd, Arthur Bestor, and Hyman Rickover of an earlier era and E. D. Hirsch, Allan Bloom, and Mortimer Adler today, they believe that education's primary purpose is the preservation and extension of culture, the development of a critical intelligence, and the advancement of academic excellence. And they make a strong case for their

position, deftly avoiding rancor and recriminations.

They argue that history and literature (not social studies and language arts) are "the essential studies of the humanities because they interpret for us the human experience." They conclude that "neither our culture, our politics, our civic life, nor our principles of equal opportunity can be satisfactorily maintained if large numbers of youngsters enter adulthood with little knowledge of this kind."

Their study revealed not only an abysmally low level of general knowledge about common facts, events, people, authors, and ideas in history and literature but also important information about our 17-year-olds themselves. Background questions answered by students provided a host of correlations (not necessarily cause and effect), patterns, and study habits of interest to educators. Students did better on the two tests when they had attended preschool, lived with both parents, came from white or Asian backgrounds, and had highly educated parents. No surprises there. Boys did much better on the history test than girls did, while girls did slightly better than boys on the literature section. Girls did more homework overall than boys and read much more in their free time. Perhaps surprisingly, two-thirds of the students in this representative sample of 7,812 students said they spent only an hour or less a day on homework, with half that number saying they spent less than half an hour a day doing homework.

These, and many other findings of this first national assessment of history and literature, lead the authors to conclude that this "snapshot in time" shows a generation "at risk of being gravely handicapped by that ignorance," unable "to make sense of what they see and hear . . . , separate what is important from what is trivial . . . , interpret the significance of the day's news . . . , discern patterns in trends and events . . . , 'stand on the shoulders of giants' if they do not know who are the giants and who are the pygmies."

Of course, Finn and Ravitch have solutions to the problems their survey identified. They would devote much more time to history and literature in school and would opt for texts, curriculums, and teachers steeped in that content. They argue for a "core curriculum of history and literature" that would be taught "to all students at every grade level." They want students to master material before moving on; and they would stress chronology, classics, and coherence; they criticize the current tendency to teach skills in isolation instead of in context and urge educators to work together to build a local consensus on the curricular canon. And they want to democratize traditional content by extending it beyond the college prep curriculum: good literature and history should not be limited to the elite.

Those who share the philosophical premises of Finn and Ravitch will find *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* splendid ammunition to fight for this last frontier of "excellence" reforms: schoolwide, content-strong, value-laden studies in history and literature. Those who wonder if such studies are crucial for all (or any) students or who fear that such reforms will lead us back to boring, irrelevant, memory-focused curriculums will have to look elsewhere for solace.

Available from Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 10 E. 53rd St., New York, NY 10022, for \$15.95.

Our Children and Our Country

William J. Bennett
New York

Simon and Schuster, 1988

—Reviewed by Louis Goldman, *Wichita State University, Kansas*

In this book, Bennett addresses such issues as what makes good teachers, what makes good schools, what our curriculum should be, and how we should handle drug problems. One of the central themes is that moral education should be taught through the study of exemplary men

and women of the past. This technique provides a fusion of intellectual and moral education—one of the great rationales that Bennett offers for emphasizing the study of history and Western civilization.

Bennett is simplistic about most issues, however. In his discussion of global education, for example, he speaks of the world as the United States and its allies on the one hand and the "evil empire" of the Soviet Union on the other. There is no mention of Third World concerns or environmental problems. Further, when he speaks of the drug problem, he says that all schools should kick out those individuals who use or peddle drugs. This solution is shortsighted indeed. Keeping these individuals in school and trying to deal with them there may in fact prevent more long-range problems for society.

Finally, Bennett likes to solve problems by talking, not by doing. We must praise good teachers, he asserts; we must praise good schools. Unfortunately, we do not create good schools or good teachers simply by praising some of them.

This book is enlightening because it portrays an important presence on the American political scene who will continue to influence American education. The picture we get is a mixed one: Bennett adheres to noble principles but lacks any clear program for strengthening those principles in American life.

Available from Simon & Schuster, 1230 Ave. of the Americas, New York, NY 10020, for \$19.95.

Mathematics, Teachers and Children

David Pimm, Editor
United Kingdom

Hodder and Stoughton, in association
with the Open University, 1988

—Reviewed by Stephen S. Willoughby, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona

This collection of 32 articles (most

IN THE DECEMBER/JANUARY ISSUE . . .

Cooperative Learning

Educational Leadership presents a survey of several different models of cooperative learning, along with tips from practicing educators for how to make it work. Look for:

★ Spencer Kagan's conversation with Ron Brandt about how structure affects student collaboration in the classroom,

★ Robert Slavin's description of mathematics and reading programs that build in the concept of cooperative effort,

★ David and Roger Johnson's suggestions for teaching the social skills needed to make a cooperative model work,

★ Anne Ratzki and Angela Fisher's fascinating case study of a German school's grassroots effort to use group work in every subject throughout the school day,

And in our Contemporary Issues section: the pros and cons of corporate influence on the schools, including new guidelines developed by the ASCD Task Force on Business Involvement in the Schools—ready to photocopy for your staff.

COMING IN FEBRUARY: "Connections"—an exploration of new combinations of seemingly disparate ideas educators have blended together, including cooperative learning and mastery learning, for example, or Hunter's Essential Elements and learning styles.

of which were written for this book) describes procedures and problems associated with carrying out the reforms advocated by the 1982 Crockcroft Report, which recommended sweeping changes in the mathematics education of British children. *Mathematics, Teachers and Children* will interest people in the United States because the Crockcroft Report's philosophy is quite similar to that of recommendations made in this country from 1975 through 1989 and our experiences are often similar.

The book includes illustrations of how to implement the Crockcroft Report and discussions of technology, research, evaluation, and other issues that affect the mathematics curriculum. The many ideas and anecdotes may help American educators do a better job of implementing much needed changes in the mathematics curriculum of this country.

Available from Hodder and Staughton Ltd., Mill Rd., Dunton Green, Sevenoaks, Kent, United Kingdom.

Literature-Based Reading Programs at Work

Joelle Hancock and Susan Hill, Editors
Portsmouth, N.H.
Heinemann Educational Books, Inc.,
1988

—Reviewed by Rosemary Barton Tobin of Emmanuel College, Boston, Massachusetts

A compilation of essays by experts advocating change in reading instruction, this book is full of conviction and good ideas—a compelling combination. Authors include elementary and secondary teachers (both veteran and neophyte), reading coordinators, administrators, and librarians.

Emphasizing that reading is its own reward, the book offers a step-by-step primer for those who have found the basal approach inadequate. The book's philosophy suggests that change emanates not from curriculum materials so much as from individual belief systems and the impact of those beliefs on the curriculum.

Available from Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 70 Court St., Portsmouth, NH 03501, for \$12.50 paper.

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