In Defense of History Advocates

I am puzzled by Stephen Thornton's attack on "history advocates" (November 1990), whom he accuses of ignoring teachers' "stake in and commitment to" curricular changes, the need for new methods of teaching the teacher's role as "curricular-instructional gatekeeper," and the "societal, school, and professional contexts" in which teachers work. Exactly to the contrary, the Bradley Commission's report, Building a History Curriculum (1988), which he cites, stresses all of these matters as indispensable to school improvement. He must also have overlooked several chapters in Historical Literacy (1989), which he also cites, that dwell on these issues.

Other of his remarks suggest hasty reading as well. Yes, we do say that historical-mindedness is central to political sophistication. Its opposite is amnesia, utter powerlessness in the face of propaganda. But nowhere do we say, as he charges, that "other mind-sets shortchange our youth." No doubt some would and some wouldn't. But since Thornton does not specify the mind-sets in question, no sensible argument can be joined.

Finally, he demands "evidence" that historical study will succeed in "producing either good citizens or good neighbors." But again, no historian has made such a patently silly claim or dared to define what a "good" citizen is. To be "good," does one conform or rebel, soothe or agitate? Human traits of judgment, moral character, empathy, and courage are hardly susceptible to tidy research.

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No Attack, Thornton Replies

I did not intend my remarks as an attack on history advocates. On the contrary, I have always considered myself an advocate of history in the curriculum, not its adversary.

I wanted, nonetheless, to draw attention to the growing number of groups and individuals who advocate teaching more history. I also wanted to point out that there is slim evidence about what students learn from studying history. The benefits often claimed for historical thinking are largely undocumented by educational researchers.

In addition, I wanted readers to consider whether curriculum reform is the most urgent need in social studies education. I did not mean that curriculum reform is unimportant, nor did I say that all the reformers had "ignored" school and classroom realities (as Gagnon implies). What I did say is that many previous reform efforts had not made it past the classroom door—and that understanding why may be the most urgent single need in social studies education.

Stephen J. Thornton
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Learning Styles Research Ignored?

I am concerned about Vicki Snider's article, "What We Know about Learning Styles from Research in Special Education" (October 1990). It lacks a solid research base.

Snider said that "regardless of student characteristics, some approaches worked and some didn't." Which learner characteristics did she match to instruction, and how did she determine those characteristics? Did she use a valid and reliable instrument, such as the Learning Style Inventory (Dunn, Dunn, and Price)?


Finally, in criticizing the validity and reliability of the Learning Style Inventory, Snider cites Stahl 1988. Nowhere in Stahl's article does he mention or question the reliability or validity of the LSI. In addition, Snyder needs to know that the reliability of most standardized achievement tests is far from 90 percent.

Snider urges educators to be skeptical of an idea supported by more quality research than most popular movements in education. Snider's article is neither a critical examination nor a comprehensive review; it is fraught with misstatements and bias.

Emmett Sawyer
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Political Power?

I read with interest Bruce Davis's description of the role of parental support in his decision not to discontinue the school Christmas program (December 1990/January 1991). He apparently failed to consider the fundamental issue: the separation of church and state.

Davis tells with pride how parents resolved the problem for him: A Chinese-American parent said, "That [a school Christmas program] is what you do in this country, and we want to be a part of what is done," and the audience applauded vigorously. Case dismissed.

I am well aware that any change in long-standing customs can be explosive and divisive. Yet Christmas programs raise legitimate concerns, particularly when they have strong religious overtones. As educational leaders, we ought at least to be aware of their potential effects on non-Christian children: embarrassment about singing praises to a deity they do not worship; feelings of alienation if they do not participate in choral singing; lack of respect for their own "less important" holiday traditions; and alienation from their parents, who may be "out-of-touch" with the mainstream school culture.

Quite possibly, Davis has a number of fine multicultural programs in his
school to deal with these concerns. If so, fine. But the article leads one to believe that political power was the primary mover in resolving a highly complex issue. I hope that I am in error.

JOSEPH M. APPEL
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Not at All, Davis Replies

At Emerson we celebrate every holiday or observance with vigor—Cinco de Mayo, Lunar New Year, and Japanese Boy's Day are some examples. But we play down the religious aspects taken, but we are alert to student needs and differences and ensure that students are not embarrassed. Political power was not part of this equation.

BRUCE C. DAVIS
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In New York, Chapter 1 Has Changed

The "Synthesis of Research on Compensatory and Remedial Education" (Anderson and Pellicer, p. 10) in the September 1990 issue is based mostly on information from South Carolina. The New York State Association of Compensatory Educators (NYSACE) refuses to let this information stand as fact when New York has moved past the broad generalizations and accusations in the article.

The authors contend that funding requirements have driven the program; the fact is that NYSACE, in cooperation with the New York State Education Department, has already made the instructional program the primary focus of Chapter 1 in our state.

The authors also contend that instructional support programs need to be more integrated into the total school program. In New York State, we are actively involved in the congruence and collaborative planning processes that integrate learning and help ensure student success.

Anderson and Pellicer also question the quality of instruction provided to remedial students, citing pull-out programs, reduced expectations, and lack of peer interaction. In New York, cooperative learning, effective schools, collaborative planning, restructuring, and congruence are ongoing practices that provide quality programming.

We have learned how to improve instructional support programs; we are integrating students into the mainstream. We will be content only when all students learn. The authors say, "Unfortunately, the grim reality is that there is no quality education for those who come from low-income families." In New York, the reality is that we are changing—and not getting what we got. Anderson and Pellicer should have asked us.

CHARLES MARANG
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Choice Is a Step Backward

Regarding the December 1990/January 1991 issue on "choice," let's not forget that the purpose of public education is to prepare citizens for choice. In a democracy that depends upon educated citizenry, choice should not come first.

Second, let's examine how well choice already works. Does choice bring about excellence in preschool education? Most preschool teachers are poorly prepared and poorly paid, and the curriculum is frequently developmentally inappropriate, in response to the wishes of well-meaning but misinformed parents. It is not uncommon to confront students who tell educators, "I don't have to do anything you say." Contemporary teachers and administrators have little enough authority. Choice would place them in a still weaker position.

If the Bush administration wants to extend choice, let them give money to the poor so that their children will have the choices the rich already have—in choosing ballet, swimming, and music teachers or summer camp.

Give every parent those choices before eliminating the one opportunity children from all cultures still have to learn to live in a democracy together. Choice is a step backward from our commitment to integration.

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Teacher Decision Making

As a staff development specialist who teaches the Hunter model, I was surprised that you chose to print such a shallow interpretation of the Hunter model as it relates to science education ("Hunter Lesson Design: The Wrong One for Science Teaching," December 1990/January 1991).

The term Hunter lesson design is an oxymoron. The term Hunter should connotate situational decision making. Lesson design connotes a structure to be used in all situations. These two points of view cannot co-exist. When teachers I know are asked about the Hunter model, they focus not on lesson design but on teacher decision making. The Hunter model will be implemented as it was meant to be when administrators become more comfortable in helping teachers analyze their decisions.

Any model that makes a teacher more reflective will increase the teacher's effectiveness. Hunter has provided a language that allows teachers to think in concrete terms about the process of instruction. This is the strength of the Hunter model. The term checklist is not in Hunter's vocabulary.

Furthermore, active participation, personalization of learning, and hands-on involvement are part and parcel of the effective teaching that Hunter espouses. This sounds like good science instruction to me.

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