THE SUBJECT MATTERS AS CURRICULAR CATEGORIES:
A CRITIQUE OF PART 4 OF THE HANDBOOK,
"TOPICS AND ISSUES WITHIN CURRICULAR CATEGORIES"

LAUREN A. SOSNIAK, Washington University

Part 4, the final section of the *Handbook of Research on Curriculum*, is titled "Topics and Issues Within Curricular Categories." A reader probably would not guess from the title that Part 4 of the *Handbook* is about school subjects, the explicit substantive content of elementary and secondary education. It is in this section of the book that we come as close as the *Handbook* gets to the first of the two major kinds of writing Philip Jackson refers to in his opening paragraphs for the first chapter of the *Handbook*, the chapter entitled "Conceptions of Curriculum and Curriculum Specialists." Jackson begins this way:

A look at the entries under the heading "curriculum" in any of the annual volumes of *Education Index* reveals two major kinds of writing on the subject, one rather narrowly focused, the other quite broad. The more narrowly focused kind, which makes up the bulk of the entries [emphasis mine], is mostly about the installation or evaluation of specific subjects or topics within the curriculum of a particular school or set of schools. It deals with matters as disparate as the introduction of sex education in junior high schools, for example, to an evaluation of the new math in three counties of Tennessee; for another Much of it is detailed and technical. (p 3)

Jackson contrasts this writing with "the more broadly focused kind," the kind that "deals with topics like the construction of general theories and principles of curriculum development or broad perspectives on the curriculum as a whole or on the status of the curriculum as a field of study" (p 3). The more broadly focused writing is what Jackson emphasizes in his chapter and what most of the authors of the first three parts of the *Handbook* emphasize.

Part 4 of the *Handbook*, the subject matter section, is the longest of the four parts. It runs 358 pages, a book in its own right. It is about 15 percent longer than Part 2, "How the Curriculum Is Shaped," and about twice or almost twice as long as the other two sections. This is not as large proportionally as Jackson's opening comments about curriculum literature would suggest it might be. Jackson's comments, after all, indicate that this section might well deserve to be the bulk of the *Handbook*. Still, there is a lot here
There are 10 chapters in this section. Their titles and authors balance the predictable with choices that might provoke an initial reaction of “interesting.” The titles and authors are as follows:

Chapter 25—Curriculum Research in Writing and Reading (Judith Langer and Richard Allington)

Chapter 26—Literature and the English Language Arts (Arthur Applebee and Alan Purves)

Chapter 27—Problematic Features of the School Mathematics Curriculum (Thomas Romberg)

Chapter 28—Science and Technology (Peter Fensham)

Chapter 29—Social Studies (Gerald Marker and Howard Mehlinger)

Chapter 30—Research in Foreign Language Curriculum (Myriam Met and Vicki Galloway)

Chapter 31—Vocational Education (George Copa and Caryl Bentley)

Chapter 32—Becoming Knowledge. The Evolution of Art Education Curriculum (Dennie Palmer Wolf)

Chapter 33—Physical Education (Mary Steinhardt)

Chapter 34—The Extracurriculum (Laura Berk)

Of course, the only reason I can speak about chapter titles and authors as being more or less predictable is because we have a history of subject-specific chapters placed at the end of one educational handbook or another. The first Handbook of Research on Teaching, edited by Gage (1963), includes 9 chapters at the back of the book under the section heading, "Research on Teaching Various Grade Levels and Subject Matters." 1 The Second Handbook of Research on Teaching, edited by Travers (1973), includes 10 chapters at the back of the book under the heading "Research on the Teaching of School Subjects." 2 The third Handbook of Research on Teaching, edited by Wittrock (1986), includes 11 chapters at the back of the book, the heading this time, "Research on the Teaching of Subjects and Grade Levels." 3 The recent Handbook of Research on Teacher Education, edited by Houston (1990), includes 11 subject matter chapters in section H, under the heading, interestingly enough, "Teacher Education in the Curricular Areas" [emphasis mine] 4

These comparisons call to mind two questions. First, do we really need another set of chapters on the subject matters? Second, what should we make of the fact that a handbook of research on curriculum gives the same place to chapters on the subject matters as, for example, a handbook of research on

---

teaching or a handbook of research on teacher education? Let me address each question, briefly, in turn.

Do we really need another set of chapters on the subject matters? Isn't it sufficient to be able to turn to the subject matter chapters in, say, the recent *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, or the *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*? Those were questions I asked myself as I sat down to read the chapters. I have an answer now. We need these chapters. You should read these chapters. Your students should read these chapters.

The chapters are, on the whole, well written, some are even lively or provocative. The chapter on the extracurricular clearly is innovative, as well as quite interesting. But these aren't the reasons I recommend the chapters. Principally, I recommend them because they offer a view of the subject matters that we don't typically find. These chapters provide other ways of knowing school subjects.

They are chapters with a difference—a difference visible simply by examining the references the authors draw on. Comparing chapter bibliographies in this volume with appropriately matched chapters in the third *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, for example, excluding references that would not have been available for authors in 1986, the overlap still is astonishingly small. The authors for the different volumes are drawing on different sources, signaling there is indeed something distinctive about curriculum work—even in the one instance where the same author wrote for the two handbooks.

One of the more obvious differences apparent in a quick reading is that these chapters call special attention to the history of their subjects as school subjects and the history of the subject as a researchable venue. The Editorial Advisory Board for the *Handbook* apparently asked authors to provide as much of a historical perspective as was reasonable given constraints of space, time, and the availability of appropriate material, and the authors of the subject matter chapters took that charge seriously. The presence of historical perspective is essential to our field and should serve us all well with newcomers or outsiders who choose one of these chapters as their introduction to curriculum studies.

Perhaps less obvious in a quick reading through the chapters, but no less notable, are the efforts to study each subject from multiple perspectives. These are not, principally, studies of subject matter through psychologists' eyes. The chapters pay significant attention to philosophical and sociological considerations, as well as the more typical psychological perspectives.

These are chapters that strive for a curricular vision, to borrow Zumwalt's language. They attend to questions of purpose and to questions of activity—

---

or, if you prefer, to means and ends in education—and to relationships between the two.

These chapters strive for a curricular vision not only in the study of intentions, activity, and their relations, but also in the study of the multiple levels of curriculum work. The authors draw on the statements of the grand old men, state legislatures, and various policy organizations. They also draw on the research into classroom practice—the work of teachers and the experiences of students, especially with materials and classroom tasks. Frequently, the authors conclude that the big conversation about curriculum—its desirable aims and practices—does not connect very well to life in classrooms.

The chapters work toward an integrated focus on aims, content, materials, and method. They strive, as I said earlier, for a curricular vision. That isn’t easy, as the chapter authors themselves note.

Langer and Allington, authors of the chapter on “Curriculum Research in Writing and Reading,” conclude: “We know a good deal about reading and writing in general, but the paucity of curriculum research in these domains is astounding. The kinds of studies that address what needs to be taught to whom, under what conditions, and in response to what impetus or sequence, have yet to be undertaken” (p. 717).

From Marker and Mehlinger, authors of the social studies chapter, we hear, “existing social studies research fails to answer the fundamental curriculum questions faced by classroom teachers, supervisors, and administrators. What should I teach? in what sequence? to whom? and in what ways?” (p. 846)

Applebee and Purves, authors of the chapter on “Literature and the English Language Arts,” express similar concerns, but they are pleasantly hopeful as they do so. They speak of what they believe is important and accessible work in the area of literary criticism and note that its merit notwithstanding, the work “offers little help with the details of day-to-day curriculum decisions, nor does it provide practical guidelines for the overall shape the curriculum should take” (p. 745). Applebee and Purves continue, “Instead (like much contemporary scholarship) it offers broad principles about the nature and purpose of literary study against which the details of any new curriculum can be evaluated.”

Few of the other chapter authors seem as comfortable with this way of thinking about the contributions of scholarship. More typically, chapter authors call for more research that might help answer questions faced by classroom teachers, supervisors, and administrators. It isn’t always entirely clear what is being asked of the research community.

Marker and Mehlinger, for example, question what they perceive as an emphasis in social studies scholarship on “more philosophical writing”—“books and articles on the rationale and purpose of social studies” (p. 846). They argue for less philosophical discussion and more empirical studies of actual practice. Yet such studies would be hard pressed to answer big questions these very authors worry about. What should we teach? And to whom?
Much important curriculum work revolves around issues of purpose, value, and priority. It is hard to imagine how these themes can be best served by empirically derived and validated knowledge of the sort that frequently defines the word research. While the chapter authors generally argue for more empirically derived and validated knowledge, they themselves don’t seem constrained by this narrow view of scholarship.

From my point of view, the most important contributions of these chapters and their authors in defining the field of curriculum, especially for graduate students and other interested newcomers, are twofold. First, the chapters model an appreciation for studying subject matter with a curricular vision. This way of knowing hasn’t been well represented in our literature. Second, the chapters and their authors advocate specific research that might make thinking about subject matter from a curricular perspective easier in the future—that is, if the academic community takes these chapters seriously.

I’d like to return for a moment to the matter of the place of these chapters in the Handbook of Research on Curriculum. What should we make of the fact that a handbook of research on curriculum treats subject matter in essentially the same way as any other educational handbook?

To most lay people, the word curriculum calls to mind immediately the list of subjects students study in school or the list of topics included in a single course. Even to many professional educators, curriculum and the school subjects are one and the same. Witness the Handbook of Research on Teacher Education including its subject matter chapters under the heading "Teacher Education in the Curricular Areas."

Perhaps most interestingly, in the volume prepared by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (1991) and published at almost exactly the same time as the AERA-sponsored book reviewed here, discussion of the subject matters is the bulk of the book, not the back of the book. In the ASCD volume, language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, foreign languages, visual and performing arts, health and physical education, and vocational and technical education each have their own sections. The ASCD handbook is intended to serve a very different audience from the AERA handbook.

Those of us who study curriculum in research-oriented universities seem to have moved some distance from subject matter in recent years. I say "seem to have" because I am conscious of Jackson’s comment that the kind of writing that subject-specific chapters might draw on does make up the bulk of the entries in the annual volumes of Education Index.

The approach we have taken to the treatment of subject matter in this first Handbook of Research on Curriculum needs to be examined carefully before the second edition takes shape. We need to ask seriously how much the

---

explicit substantive content of elementary and secondary education matters to us, and bow it should matter to us. We need to give some serious thought to the dichotomy we have created between “curriculum” and “subject matter.” And between now and a second edition of this volume we need to give serious thought to the dichotomy between curriculum as prominent members of AERA write about it and curriculum as more school-oriented folk such as those who belong to ASCD care about it.

We may decide, even for a second edition of this volume, to treat subject matter much as was done in this Handbook. I doubt that we will ever choose to make the subject matters the bulk of our book, further, I do not believe that is necessarily troubling on the face of it. A case can be made, I’m certain, that our concerns are rightfully bigger than those having to do with courses students take and the content and manner of instruction for those courses. Still, if we do treat subject matter in essentially the same way, by including chapters on specific school subjects at the back of the volume, it seems essential that we recognize and be explicit about what we are doing and why. We need to communicate to our audience the nature of the decisions we are making, the alternatives we have considered, and the reasons why we believe the decisions we have made are more defensible than any of the alternatives. That is, we need to understand and explain our decisions as matters of curriculum deliberation.

For the next edition of the Handbook, even if the subject matters are presented in individual chapters at the back of the book, we might reconsider the nature of the subject matter section. In its current form, the section on subject matter makes it difficult to ask, no less to answer, some very important subject-oriented questions.

Although the subject-specific chapters are informative and they encourage important conversations, they do so in an essentially conservative fashion. These chapters promote the quest for knowledge within the frame of the school subjects as they are currently conceived—as separate school subjects, and as subjects strongly influenced by disciplinary perspectives.

This section as currently conceived gives short shrift to the matter of integration. The language of “making connections” is very much a part of various subject matter discussions these days. But separate chapters discourage experimenting with, and studying empirically, potential relationships across the curriculum.

This section on subject matter as it is currently conceived gives short shrift to the matter of balance. These subject-specific chapters are written by advocates for the subject area, persons with vested interests. Each chapter argues for attention. The idea of the set of chapters, then, serves essentially to pit each subject matter against the others. “Make sure I am taught in school”

Make sure there is money for research for my subject." Where and how do we ask questions of balance and priority?

Most importantly, this section on subject matter as it is currently conceived gives short shrift to the matter of program. Discussion of the development of individual subject matters differs from discussion of development of subject matter itself in elementary and secondary education. Students' experiences are, inevitably, greater than the sum of individual courses. Isn't it our work in the field of curriculum to consider this matter, to plan and act intentionally in programmatic ways?

Smart and dedicated educators are raising serious questions these days about school programs as we currently know them. Two quite different examples are Ian Westbury's article, "Who Can Be Taught What? General Education in the Secondary School," in a recent NSSE yearbook, and Ted Sizer's work redefining secondary education with the help of the Coalition for Essential Schools. Westbury and Sizer, among others, call attention to the fact that the biggest problem with the way we are looking at subject matter now may not be, as many of the subject matter chapter authors argue, that we are straying too far from practice. Rather, the biggest problem may be that the very way we work perpetuates existing practice, even when we don't intend to do so. The nature of our current orientations may be retarding educational progress, rather than promoting advance in theory and practice.

Of course, in raising this issue in relation to the subject matter sections of the handbook, I am calling attention to a dilemma of long standing. Should researchers and policy makers frame their questions and ideas for reform within the limitations embedded in schooling and classroom instruction as it is currently understood, helping schools become more efficient and effective with "traditional" practices? Or is the future of education better served by encouraging dramatically new thinking about the structures and functions of schools and the nature of curriculum possibilities? The subject matter section of the current Handbook has opted for the first choice—trying to help us think more carefully and behave more effectively within current conceptions of curriculum. Either choice asks us to predict an uncertain future for elementary and secondary education, and, most importantly, for the students to be served by tomorrow's schools.

My criticisms notwithstanding, I have enormous respect for the work of the authors of the subject matter chapters, and the work of the editor and the Editorial Advisory Board for the first Handbook of Research on Curriculum. Defining our field—a field well known for being fuzzy at best and incoherent—

---

Lauren A. Sosniak

at worst—is a task of such considerable magnitude that criticisms of this particular product are inevitable. Now, however, we have something with which to work. The current Handbook challenges us to do our best thinking about the content and manner of elementary and secondary education. It challenges us to propose another way of looking the second time around. The first Handbook was necessary and will serve us well as a starting point for a most important conversation.

LAUREN A. SOSNIAK IS Associate Professor of Education, Department of Education, Washington University, Campus Box 1183, St. Louis, MO 63130–4899


This book is about the genesis and development of the vocational education movement for young women in the United States during the years 1900 to 1930. It traces the positions and influence of home economics, trade, and commercial education groups on the 1917 Smith-Hughes act, and outlines the post-1917 vocational curriculums for girls in these three areas and their effects. Only the commercial course had popular success.


Included in this 13-chapter ASCD Yearbook are chapters on supervision policy, history, theory, and empowerment of teachers, case studies of local school district practices, topics such as peer consultants, student teaching supervision, and professional inquiry, and two final chapters on the transformation of supervision and sources of authority for supervision policy and practice. Glickman and his yearbook authors suggest that the old order in supervision is passing away and new meanings and terminology are on the horizon.


This book describes Harmony Elementary School in Bloomington, Indiana. It reports a critical ethnography of that school’s approach to democratic education. The study is framed in a scholarly treatment of critical democracy from historical, intellectual, and pedagogical perspectives.