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Tot Sociology: What Happened to History in the Grade Schools?

by Diane Ravitch

Diane Ravitch served on the Bradley Commission on History in Schools, was an Assistant Secretary of Education, and is now on the faculty at New York University, co-director of the Educational Excellence Network, and a scholar with the Brookings Institution.

□□□ In 1982 I began to research the condition of history instruction in the public schools. The more closely I examined the social studies curriculum, the more my attention was drawn to the curious nature of the early grades, which is virtually content-free. The social studies curriculum for the K-3 grades is organized around the study of the relationships within the home, school, neighborhood, and local community. This curriculum of "me, my family, my school, my community" now dominates the early grades in American public education. It contains no mythology, legends, biographies, hero tales, or great events in the life of this nation or any other. It is tot sociology.

So widespread is this pattern in American public schools that one might assume that this particular sequence represents the accumulated wisdom of generations of educational research. Teachers believe that this sequence is there because it has always been there. Those professionally responsible for developing curricula believe that this pattern rests on a foundation of cognitive and developmental research. In fact, these assumptions are not true.

The current pattern in early primary grades has not always been there, and it is not derived from research into child development or cognitive psychology. As far as I can tell, it is there because no one has questioned why it is there. It persists today because it is the status quo; it survives because of a circular assumption that it wouldn't be there unless there was a very good reason for it to be there.

The present K-3 curriculum was introduced in the 1930s, as part of a new approach to the teaching of social studies. At the same time, historical literature and imaginative historical activities were ousted from the curriculum of the early

grades.

During the 1920s and 1930s, progressive educators led a national curriculum movement; at least 37 states and hundreds of cities revised their school curricula in accordance with progressive principles. The common goal of progressive educators, whatever their political orientation, was to make the curriculum less academic, more utilitarian, less "subject-centered," and more closely related to the students' interests and experiences. The new social studies curriculum eventually became known as "expanding environments," or "expanding horizons."

At the time the new curriculum was organized, the country was in the depths of the Depression. It was argued that children had an obligation to contribute to the solution of the great social and economic problems of the nation, not by merely understanding them, but through their social participation. Because the nation was in an economic crisis of vast proportions, there was no time for romantic escapism; these first, second, and third graders had to learn to contribute to the good of society.

The curriculum was the culmination of curricular trends that had been expressed in the 1916 report by the Committee on the Social Studies, which has long been considered the birth certificate of the social studies field. That report sought to make social studies in secondary schools more lifelike, more responsive to the needs of society, and less academic. However, the authors of the 1916 report never contemplated the elimination of historical content from the early grades. In fact, the 1916 report specifically endorsed elementary curricula in Philadelphia and Indianapolis that included a rich array of hero stories from the ancient and modern world.

Nonetheless, the expanding environments approach was an idea whose time had come, because it so well captured the social spirit of progressive education. In 1934, the American Historical Association's Commission on the Social Studies recommended that instruction in the social sciences should begin in the earliest years of schooling, not with the life and institutions of some people remote in time, space, and cultural development, but with the life and institutions of the surrounding community the simple social relationships of the family and the neighborhood and the modes of providing food, clothing, shelter, and medical care, education, recreation, cultural opportunities and security of person.

By the 1940s, the expanding environments approach to the early elementary grades had been adopted in almost every state and school district. In the 1950s, the expanding environments approach was justified as a linchpin in the teaching of citizenship and community responsibility. By the 1960s and 1970s, the rationalization became psychological; it was asserted that children would build self-esteem by learning about themselves first.

It is important to recall that the expanding environments approach was established not as a result of the findings of cognitive or developmental psychology, but as a result of specific social and political values.

The celebratory histories of progressive education would have us believe that children had been liberated by an innovative curriculum that permitted them to visit the supermarket and the post office. But from what had they been liberated? Before the advent of expanding environments, there was an elementary school curriculum for the early grades in history, geography, and civics. It differed from one school district to the next, but there was a common spirit in its essentials, an intention to introduce children to exciting stories of important events and significant individuals and to provide them with a basic historical and cultural vocabulary.

Today, children in most American public schools do not read fairy tales, myths, folklore, legends, sagas, historical adventure stories, or biographies of great men and women unless the teacher introduces them during the reading period.

In the course of my research, I was told by many educators that the present K-3 curriculum was based on years of educational research. No one was able to point to any specific research, but they assumed that it was validated by the developmental studies of Jean Piaget. However, Piagetian theory is about how children learn, not what they are taught. In fact, Piagetian theory permits teachers to teach virtually any content so long as they proceed from the concrete to the abstract.

Leading scholars in the fields of cognitive psychology, child development, and curriculum theory know of no research justifying the expanding environments approach. In fact, they make repeated references to the "vacuousness" and the "sterility" of the content offered to young children in their social studies classes. Imagine the plight of the typical first graders: They have seen television programs about space flight, wars, terrorism, foreign countries, and national elections, but their social studies textbook is about neighborhood helpers and family roles. No wonder surveys have repeatedly found that children consider social studies their least interesting subject and that the time allotted to social studies in the early grades has steadily diminished.

At most private schools, social studies are closely correlated with literature and, in some cases, with science instruction. It can probably be safely assumed that the children in these schools suffer no absence of self-esteem, do learn how to cooperate with others in group activities, and do eventually learn how to take part in civic and political affairs of their community. Very likely the main difference between them and their contemporaries in the typical public school program is that children in private school have a far more interesting immersion in history, literature, and art in the early grades and consequently develop a far broader knowledge of other cultures as well as their own.

Except in elite private schools and the homes of highly motivated parents, children are no longer reading or hearing the stories that are deeply woven into Western literature and history. They are more likely to read about Mr. T than about Martin Luther King, Jr., more likely to hear about Madonna than about Madame Curie, more likely to celebrate the exploits of Rambo than those of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

The consequences of these years of neglect of "content" in the curriculum were apparent in the first national assessment of history and literature. Substantial numbers of students professed ignorance of major historical figures and events, as well as of significant mythological and biblical allusions. Some critics of the study argue that it was ever thus. Thus it will surely remain unless the curriculum consciously strives to teach significant knowledge about the people, events, and ideas of the past.

It ought to be the rule, rather than the exception, that young children listen to, read, act out, and discuss fairy tales, myths, legends, folklore, heroic adventures, biographies, and stories from history. The teachers who bring "real books" into the classroom should be typical, not mavericks.