A Brief History of the Elementary Curriculum

By Ruth Wattenberg

The basic treatment of content in the elementary grades has not changed for decades. *A Nation at Risk*, the 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education,\(^1\) decried "disturbing inadequacies" in American education, including the wholly inadequate content offered to students.

That report helped launch several decades of education reform, aimed at rectifying, however inadequately, the problems that it found. Among the changes were stiffer high school course requirements in the core subjects;\(^2\) subject-matter exams in a growing number of states (as opposed to minimum competency tests);\(^3\) increased numbers of students taking more-advanced courses (though students are not always learning more as a result);\(^4\) and state adoption of academic standards in major subject areas.

Thirty years after *A Nation at Risk*, a new infrastructure—in the form of state-mandated requirements, standards, and exams—is in place, with the potential to support, encourage, and monitor greater learning at the high school level.
But, *A Nation at Risk* had a glaring omission: reflecting the nation's long-standing lack of interest in content in the early grades, the report's authors barely mentioned elementary schools. Unsurprisingly, as a result, the post-1983 education reforms barely touched them. Here is the crucial fact about the teaching of content in the elementary grades, then and still: too much time is spent on reading and math, especially reading, and too little on history/social studies, science, literature, and arts—the content subjects that build a student's foundation of knowledge.

Even before *A Nation at Risk*, the 1977 National Survey of Science, Mathematics, and Social Studies Education found that K–3 teachers spent 95 minutes per day on reading and a total of 38 minutes on both science and social studies together—2.5 times as much on reading as on both other subjects. In grades 4–6, when students have presumably learned the basic reading skills and in-class reading time can be substantially cut back, teachers spent 66 minutes per day on reading, 28 on science, and 34 on social studies—with reading still getting more time than the two other subjects combined.

Was there any academic content or knowledge taught in those hours devoted to reading? The best way to find out is to look at the textbooks used to teach reading, commonly known as basal readers, which for many years have served as the spine of the reading curriculum. In 1983, William Schmidt and his colleagues at the Institute for Research on Teaching analyzed 34 basal readers for the second, fourth, and fifth grades, from eight major publishers, for a total of 1,959 different selections. Here is what they found:

- 42 percent had no subject-matter content at all (defined as covering theories, facts, and information from typical elementary subjects, such as math, science, and social studies);
- 20 percent had content that was of a language arts nature—how words were formed, etc.;
- 20 percent had social science content (a third of which was "social themes," concerning "enduring problems of individual and social life," such as growing up, living with family members, etc.).
12 percent had science content; and
Less than 6 percent had content in any other major subject-matter area, including art and music.

And, the lower the grade, the emptier it was of content. In second-grade books, 52 percent of the texts had no subject-matter content at all. Some 11 percent had science content and 14 percent social science. Taken as a whole, U.S. elementary schools in the 1980s were woefully thin on content.

Since then, that has not changed. The content-poor curriculum remains a staple at the elementary level. In contrast to secondary schools, most of the reform energy at the elementary level has focused on beefing up instruction in basic reading and math skills, with no infrastructure for driving improvements in the content areas. Even the academic content standards developed by states were typically weakest in the elementary grades. The Fordham Institute has evaluated state standards in science and history periodically since 1998. Its reviewers have often aimed their greatest criticism at the early-grade standards, finding that they contain virtually no content, are repetitious across grades, and fail to address either sequencing or rigor.

Like standards, textbooks have continued to neglect the content that underlies reading comprehension. For example, 20 years after Schmidt's study of basal textbook content, Kate Walsh, now director of the National Council on Teacher Quality, in 2003 reviewed the first- and second-grade texts from five top-selling basal-reader series. She found that they offered "mostly incoherent, banal themes that missed opportunities to develop word and world knowledge by offering and exploiting content-rich themes."

The recent policy emphasis on reading skills has led schools to further increase the time devoted to the English language arts block, leaving even less time devoted to history/social studies, science, and the arts than in earlier years. As shown in the table below, according to the National Survey of Science and Mathematics Education, the total time spent in grades K–3 on both science and social studies dropped 45 minutes per week from 2000 to 2012—from 3 hours and 40 minutes in 2000 to 2 hours and 55 minutes in
2012—meaning just 19 minutes per day for science and 16 minutes per day for social studies! (It had risen slightly between 1977 and 2000; it is now lower than it was in 1977.) In grades 4–6, the drop between 2000 and 2012 was 95 minutes per week.\(^\text{11}\)

In 2010, in a national survey of teachers conducted by Common Core* (an independent organization unconnected to—though supportive of—the Common Core State Standards), 63 percent of elementary teachers in self-contained classrooms indicated that social studies had been getting less "instructional time and resources over the past ten years" (or since they had begun teaching, if that was less than 10 years earlier). Fifty percent said that science had been getting less; and 49 percent and 37 percent, respectively, said the same of art and music.\(^\text{12}\)

The squeeze on content was even tighter for struggling students. When elementary teachers were asked during what time period struggling students received extra instruction in English language arts or math, 60 percent said that these students were pulled from social studies class, and 55 percent said from science class.\(^\text{13}\) The bottom line: for decades, elementary schools have neglected to build the content foundation that students need and that the Common Core State Standards require for success. This reality is now ingrained in decades of elementary school practice.

To provide students with the necessary content foundation, the elementary curriculum must be thoroughly revamped so that history/social studies, science, and the arts are taught extensively and coherently. This will require that these subjects get more time in classes of their own and, at least as importantly, that they be heavily integrated into reading textbooks and instruction. Once revamped, curricular tools (curriculum frameworks, course outlines, etc.) and
classroom materials that embody the new curriculum must be produced, and time, support, and training must be provided for teachers, so they can make good, smart use of the new materials.

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*Highlights from this survey by Common Core and the Farkas Duffett Research Group, sponsored by the Ford Foundation and the AFT, are found in Learning Less: Public School Teachers Describe a Narrowing Curriculum (Washington, DC: Common Core, 2012). (back to the article)

Endnotes


4. "Average Number of Carnegie Units Earned by Public High School Graduates in Various

6. Perhaps this inattention to other subjects was not such a great loss, considering the often trivial quality of the little that was offered. Diane Ravitch reported in 1987 in *The American Scholar* on the state of the elementary social studies curriculum: “[T]here exists a national curriculum in the social studies. Regardless of the state or the school district, children in kindergarten and the first three grades study home, family, neighbors, and the local community.” Yet this curriculum “is virtually content-free. ... It contains no mythology, legends, biographies, hero tales, or great events in the life of this nation or any other. It is tot sociology”—known more popularly in the education world as “expanding horizons.” Diane Ravitch, "Tot Sociology: Or What Happened to History in the Grade Schools," *American Scholar* 56, no. 3 (Summer 1987): 343–354.


8. Schmidt et al., *Educational Content*, 16.


12. See Common Core, "Learning Less: Public School Teachers Describe a Narrowing Curriculum," complete survey findings, [http://commoncore.org/maps/documents/reports/CommonCore-FDR-CompleteFindings-111208.pdf](http://commoncore.org/maps/documents/reports/CommonCore-FDR-CompleteFindings-111208.pdf). The figures cited here are from cross-tabulations that are not included in the public report or published dataset but were provided by Common Core.

13. It is important to note that 53 percent of these elementary teachers believe that, as a result of the extra attention and resources to English and math instruction, student learning in one or both of these subjects has "improved." These teachers are not saying that the English/math focus is an unmitigated disaster or a waste of time. Rather, they are saying that there are serious tradeoffs. These tradeoffs exist at all grades but are most palpable and extreme at the elementary level, where a single teacher is typically responsible for addressing all the subjects—English and math, plus all the rest. "All the rest" simply does not get a lot of attention in American elementary schools.

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The Cutting Room Floor (TCRF) is a website dedicated to the cataloguing of unused and debugging content in video games. The site and its discoveries have been referenced in the gaming press. The site started out as part of a blog but was reworked and relaunched as a wiki in 2010. The reworked site is considered by Edge to be a major catalogue of unused video game content.