

# WHY TEACH SOCIAL STUDIES?

---

By Bonnie M. Planck

---

**R**ecently U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett warned that "major reform is needed" in the current "expanding environments" method of teaching social studies in American elementary schools. He further advocated "that social studies be transformed. It should teach the knowledge and skills needed for life in a democratic society through the interrelated disciplines of history, geography, and civics."<sup>1</sup>

---

*Bonnie M. Planck teaches the fifth and sixth grades as well as seventh- and eighth-grade social studies at Indianapolis Junior Academy, Indianapolis, Indiana.*

Bennett sees the current social-studies program as an "odd, amorphous social science grab bag."<sup>2</sup> Similar criticisms have been voiced by many thoughtful observers of today's schools.

Books such as *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* and surveys of American young people reveal an appalling lack of knowledge about geography and history as well as widespread hostility toward these subjects. For example, one-fifth of 12-year-olds tested were unable to locate the United States on a world map, and one-third of 17-year-olds do not know in what century Columbus discovered America or the

Declaration of Independence was signed.

How did we arrive at this sorry state? Finn and Ravitch point the finger at the reform movement's excessive emphasis on skills. "When we began the march back to basics, we mistakenly began to equate skills with education. Along the way, we started losing sight of knowledge and wound up paying too little attention to content."<sup>3</sup>

In addition, reform efforts have centered on mathematics and science while "the rest of the academic curriculum has been almost entirely ignored."<sup>4</sup>

Bennett suggests that "the im-

provement of elementary education requires fresh approaches, better incentives, and inventive leadership."<sup>5</sup> This issue of THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION addresses the challenge of improving the social-studies curriculum in Seventh-day Adventist schools by analyzing the problem and suggesting some strategies for improving the teaching of social studies, history, and geography from elementary through college level.

### Why Teach Social Studies?

First of all, we must ask ourselves, Why do we teach social studies? What do we hope to accomplish?

During the Depression years, when the current primary curriculum was organized, planners believed that social studies should teach economic, social, and political values. The expanding environments curriculum, which is still in use, began with ideas already familiar to a child and then expanded to encompass additional information.

The expanding environments curriculum has survived for nearly half a century. However, the rationale for using it has varied over the years. In the 1950s educators justified using this approach by saying that it taught citizenship and community responsibility. By the 1960s and 1970s the curriculum was defined on the theory that the self-esteem of primary students was enhanced by studying about themselves first.

This leads us to realize that any curriculum, indeed any human exploit, develops from the values that its originators deem most important. Based on their values, people choose methods that they think will meet their goals. If their values change, then their goals and methods also change.

Consequently, in analyzing social-studies teaching, we must ask what values we want to convey to young people, and whether the present curriculum meets our goals. However adequate it may seem to us, if students hate the subject and lack basic knowledge—as surveys currently indicate—then they are not learning as much as they should. Therefore, some changes would seem to be in order.

### Present Curriculum

The subjects currently offered in each grade are these:

- K-3: Home, Family, Neighbors, and Local Communities
- 4: State History
- 5,8,11: American History
- 12: American Government, Economics, and Civics
- 6: World Cultures
- 7: World Geography
- 9: Civics or World Cultures
- 10: World History

We can gain some insight by

### New Guidelines

Recent studies by the Organization of American Historians have led them to suggest a set of specific guidelines for the K-8 social studies curriculum.

By the end of the eighth grade . . . children should know the basic chronology of the main events of U.S. history and be able to place in order and roughly date the major periods of world history. They should be able to explain the significance of the most important events. They should recognize and place in context some of the important men and women in U.S. history. And they should have read and understood the essential significance of such documents as the



comparing this program with the way earlier social-studies classes were organized.

Before the advent of expanding environments, there was an elementary school curriculum for the early grades in history, geography, and civics. . . . 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.<sup>6</sup>

Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech.<sup>7</sup>

To this list, Secretary of Education Bennett adds a knowledge of "the sources of our form of government in the Greek, Judeo-Christian, Roman, and Enlightenment traditions; the contours and locations of

*Continued on page 32*

# WHY TEACH SOCIAL STUDIES?

Continued from page 5

the physical world and the major features of the international landscape; essential facts about the major nations of the world; and our rights and obligations as American citizens."<sup>8</sup>

## Where to Start

*First Lessons*, a major study of U.S.

primary education, cautions that children must first become acquainted with the culture of their own nation "before embarking on comparative studies of other histories, cultures, societies, and governments. Otherwise, they will have no basis from which to understand important similarities and differences."<sup>9</sup>

History teaching in the United States is unique because America is the only country "that isn't defined by a common ethnicity, a common religion, or a common language.

What defines us are our common values."<sup>10</sup>

As we decide the Who? What? When? Where? and Why? of social studies, then, we must keep in mind the interaction between values, society, and education. In a Christian school this interrelationship has special significance. Social studies offers numerous opportunities for discussing the relationship between cause and effect in historical events, the leading of God in history, the importance of understanding different cultures in ful-

## EXAMPLES OF INFLUENCES OF VALUES ON HISTORICAL EVENTS DURING 1600s

VALUE	PERSONS	TIME	ACTIONS	EFFECT
1. Believed in unity of church and state	Puritans	1st half of 17th century	Intolerance	People were actually banished: Roger Williams—1635 Anne Hutchinson—1638 Baptists & Quakers—1650s
2. Covenant or federal theology belief	Puritans	1600s	Taught state is responsible to agreements with people	Produced American idea of constitutional government
3. Believed in religious freedom	Minority groups	1600s	Relocated	America became colonized
4. Lack of respect for others	Slave owners	1619	Slaves forced to work	Loss of human dignity
5. Desire for wealth	England	2nd half of 17th century	Acts of Trade and Navigation	Colonists smuggled goods or ignored the laws

## EDITORIAL *Continued from page 3*

Few of us realize how much we are prisoners of our own culture, yet most of us will at some time meet people with different value systems and customs that seem odd. History and its allied disciplines, geography and sociology, provide insights into why the values of Europeans, Africans, or Americans differ from those of Latin Americans, Asians, or Russians.

As our students dutifully learn about "cause and effect" we can help them see the broader application of the principle of "sowing and reaping." All our choices have consequences. This is true of churches and nations as well as individuals. When Elizabeth I decided against marriage to Philip II, she knew that he might retaliate by hurling the military power of Spain against England. And she prepared for that possibility.

Today's parents (and many students) are not happy with a value-free education. Where better can young people build a Christian value system than in social studies classes? In these classes teachers can play a part in shaping today's youth for useful service to their community and citizenship in Christ's eternal kingdom.—Richard W. Schwarz. □

*Dr. Richard Schwarz is Professor of History at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, and Past President of the Association of Seventh-day Adventist Historians. He authored a college denominational history textbook entitled Light Bearers to the Remnant (Pacific Press, 1979).*

filling the gospel commission, and biblical principles for harmonious relations between peoples and nations.

## Cause and Effect

Social studies should help young people understand that the values people view as important influence their decisions. This can help students comprehend the ways that their own lives will be influenced by their values and decision-making.

At every level, social studies should emphasize the trends and forces that helped shape society. In studying the Colonial period of American history, students should learn about the underlying values that caused people to seek freedom to govern themselves, to worship as they wished, and to fight a war to establish their liberty.

The same questions about values should be applied to other periods in American history. What values did Americans in Andrew Jackson's

## EXAMPLES OF INFLUENCES OF VALUES ON HISTORICAL EVENTS DURING 1700s

VALUE	PERSONS	TIME	ACTIONS	EFFECT
1. Decline of religion	English evangelists: John & Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, etc.	Climaxed 1740s	A. Prosperity B. Religious intolerance C. Spirit of Deism & enlightenment D. Decline of religion	A. Concern for material things B. Reaction against all religion C. Stressed rationalism & skepticism D. Revival movement—The Great Awakening
2. Inventiveness of the Enlightenment	Benjamin Franklin	1768	Leading scientist & foremost inventor of his time	Prime founder of the American Philosophical Society
3. Desire for freedom	Colonists	April 19, 1775 May 1775 July 4, 1776	Lexington & Concord Second Continental Congress Declaration of Independence	Minutemen & royal troops fought Continental Army established
4. Belief in both strong state and national government	Writers of Articles of Confederation Writers of Constitution	1776-1781 1788-1789	Wrote a national constitution	Developing conflict over the division of powers between individual states and the central government

day hold in common? What choices did they make based upon these values? These questions could lead to a discussion about the westward move of the populace and the spread of democracy.

The events of Abraham Lincoln's era offer insights into why the nation chose a strong central government, how a democracy came to be involved in a civil war, and why slavery was abolished.

Events of Woodrow Wilson's era show that a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the welfare of the common man was willing to fight for justice throughout the world and lead nations into peace.<sup>11</sup>

This does not imply that only one set of values shaped a particular era or group of people. In teaching American history, the values of many groups of people need to be examined. These include people as diverse as the adventurous explorers, profit-seeking merchants, oppressed minorities, persecuted religious groups, immigrants from various backgrounds, and those who found expression in a common culture.

American history is the story of a nation's development from a small group of squabbling colonies to a strong, united world power. The story encompasses the country's failures as well as its successes.

In planning the social studies curriculum, teachers need to evaluate every area of history from the perspective of the cause-and-effect relationships that grow out of a country's value system.

The accompanying charts use some examples from American history to illustrate how events in a particular era related to the American value system at that time. The chart can be expanded or revised to include material appropriate to any social studies class in any country.<sup>12</sup>

### In Conclusion

The social studies curriculum should integrate the history, geography, and values of people who lived at different times and in different places on our earth. This will help students develop a sense of where they fit—both historically and geographically. It will also teach them to live as citizens of both a local and a global community as they prepare to take their place in God's eternal kingdom. □

### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> William J. Bennett, "First Lessons," *Phi Delta Kappan* (October 1986), p. 127.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>3</sup> Chester E. Finn, Jr., and Diane Ravitch, "Survey Results: U.S. 17-Year-Olds Know Shockingly Little About History and Literature," *The American School Board Journal*, 174:10 (October 1987), p. 31.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> Bennett, p. 126.
- <sup>6</sup> Diane Ravitch, "Tot Sociology," *American Scholar*, Vol. 57, No. 3, Summer 1987, pp. 343-354.
- <sup>7</sup> Bennett, p. 127.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> Quoted by Bennett, p. 128.
- <sup>10</sup> "Values, Pluralism, and Public Education," a speech by John H. Buchanan, Chairman, People for the American Way, April 3, 1987, at a conference in Washington, D.C.
- <sup>11</sup> Corinne Forsee, *U.S. History Can Be Fun* (Portland, Me.: 1956), pp. 3-5. (Reprinted from Allan Nevins' forward to *America, Land of Freedom*, textbook published by D. C. Heath and Co.)
- <sup>12</sup> Idea of charts developed by Judy Ronk. Information on charts drawn from Harvard Sitkoff, *American History to 1865* (New York: Monarch Press, Inc., 1965).

## AMERICAN HISTORY ALIVE!

*Continued from page 8*

offer fascinating insights into historical events. Conflicts between sources can be used as a basis for developing higher-level thinking skills. Here are some examples:

a. The differing accounts by Americans and British of such events as the Boston Tea Party, the Boston "Massacre," and the first shots in the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord can be used in many ways.

The key to effective research to require students to give a *creative* presentation, not simply read the reports verbatim. Students can prepare radio or television reports summarizing the varied perspectives, or compile newspaper stories that attempt to distinguish fact from opinion. Students can examine a variety of textbooks to discover which views were accepted by the authors.

b. Students can research varying accounts of the reasons why certain colonists emigrated to America. They can then participate in role-playing exercises such as these: (1) You are a Pilgrim leader trying to convince a group of your followers to migrate to America. (2) A Puritan meets a Scotch-Irishman on the street where they compare reasons for coming to America. (3) A Quaker discusses with a group of Indians his need for land in America. (4) A slave in the solitude of her lowly shack on a plantation expresses her thoughts about America.

c. Have students read various primary sources dealing with different perspectives dealing with slavery in Antebellum times. Then have them role-play what they have read. For example, a freed slave tells what slavery was like and compares it to his life now. An abolitionist talks to a group in the North. A traveler from France gives her impressions of a visit to the South.

d. Ask students to share the perspectives of Woodrow Wilson, William Borah, and