

The View from the Trenches

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Like many who entered the teaching profession in the 1970s, I entered a profession that was in transition. Over the more than 30 years I spent in the classroom, I have had a front row seat during this evolution. It has been a roller coaster ride at times, but I believe our schools will emerge stronger for it.

Who we teach, what we teach, how we teach—these are areas that have seen the most extensive changes. The students who sit in our classrooms are a far cry from those of the past. They have been shaped by the political and social events of the last three decades. The *Brown* decision brought into the open the issues of segregation in our schools; the Vietnam era protests, the civil rights movement, and the women’s movement all led to a student population that questioned more and accepted less. To quote a veteran teacher, “In 1960, I left teaching after 2 years, raised my family and returned 14 years later... I left a class of 30+ respectful, attentive students to return to classes of 20 self-centered, disrespectful students. Yes, that was the 70s.” I know all of us have had thoughts like these!

When I interviewed in Dallas in 1977, I was asked if I had any problems teaching black students. The question took me by surprise, because (a) it had never occurred to me that someone would refuse to teach a student because of race and (b) if I really wanted the job, I wondered what the interviewer expected me to say! I had done very little research into the Dallas schools before that interview, so I didn’t realize that court ordered busing had gone into effect the year before, a move that would change the face of Dallas schools forever. In what would become an urban phenomenon across the country, first whites and then middle class minority families fled the cities, leaving in their wake a student population that was often mired in poverty and a diminishing tax

base that was ill equipped to support the needs of the school system.

Immigration would also shape who we taught, as the twentieth century drew to a close. Refugees from wars around the world brought students from Eritrea, Vietnam, Somalia, and Kosovo, to name just a few. The lure of economic advancement brought people from the Americas across our borders and spurred the often-heated debate over just who should attend the public schools. The vision of religious freedom—a constant in U.S. history from the time of the nation’s settlement—brought to our schools those escaping persecution for following their own beliefs. Teachers now faced classrooms where many of the students were not fluent in English, and whose

languages and customs were far outside the experiences of the past. The effect of immigration is nothing new for educators; the schools have been vehicles for assimilation into American society for over 100 years. What has changed is our approach to teaching these students with the advent of bilingual education and a shift in attitudes away from the one-size fits all mentality of the melting pot.

The last major shift in student population came with the increased inclusion of students with special needs in classes. For both educational and fiscal reasons, the inclusion of these students in the traditional classroom became commonplace. Most classroom teachers, even today, have had precious little training or experience in dealing with differentiating lessons, following Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), or handling students with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or oppositional defiance disorder. Social studies classes are often the ones chosen for students who will be only partially self-contained. Since the inception of Public Law # 94.142 in 1974 on the education of students with disabilities, the expectation of who is taught in public schools has changed dramatically—and for many teachers, it has been a difficult transition. All of us have heard at one time or another the lament, “If I’d wanted to teach special ed, I would have majored



in special ed!” As the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) increasingly delineated how these students were to be included in traditional classrooms, we all became special education teachers to some degree. Today, IEPs are the normal part of teaching from kindergarten to college.


What we teach has also changed dramatically over the last 30 years. Although this is an area over which individuals have some control, based upon what their chosen major is in college, the growing standards movement has sharply outlined what is taught in the schools. The advent of high stakes testing has radically changed the landscape as well, especially in social studies, as we try to gain a secure foothold in a world increasingly obsessed with English and math.

When I started in Dallas in the “good ole days,” I was handed the Teachers Edition for the U.S. history book—no ancillaries yet, just the book—and something called the Social Studies BASELINE. This was a six-inch binder

of suggested activities for social studies classes. There was some attempt to divide them by content and grade level. When I asked my dean of instruction if there was a content guideline to follow—standards, to use the modern term—he tapped the textbook, looked at me quizzically and said that most teachers would be insulted if they were told what to teach. I was coming on at mid year, hadn’t been in a classroom except to sub since I had done my student teaching five years earlier and I was definitely on my own. Being a transplanted Connecticut Yankee, my students got a very good grounding on the colonial period. I’m not sure that my interpretation of the Texas Revolution was quite up to par, however! Even more questionable events developed several years later, when I found myself teaching 7th grade language arts. In the early days of my career you were “allowed” to teach one or two classes outside of your discipline. Unfortunately for me (and my students), someone had actually checked my transcript and discovered that I had

completed a major in English, as well as history. Combined with an involuntary transfer three weeks into the year due to dropping enrollment, all of a sudden I was teaching language arts as well as Texas history! This was more often the fate of social studies classes, farmed out piecemeal to whomever might be handy. It wasn’t until the rules began to tighten in the 1990s that this travesty lessened.

This change coincided with the twin growth of the standards movement and high stakes testing. Increasingly, what was to be taught was being defined not by the classroom teacher, but by local district officials, state legislatures, or education agencies. For the classroom teacher, the change came slowly, almost insidiously, so that we were almost unaware of the loss of control, at least at first. In many respects it was advantageous to teach social studies because, with attention so focused on math and language arts, we escaped with our creativity intact! As we entered the twenty-first century and the era of No Child Left Behind, the issues



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of what got taught became more strident. Classroom teachers were given strict parameters; deviation from the standard curriculum was greeted with skepticism as to how this supported the inevitable high stakes testing. For elementary teachers, this was especially difficult. They were often told directly or by inference to skip social studies and focus on “what was important.” The Center for Education Policy documented a 45-50 percent decrease in elementary social studies education by 2010. The recently released National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores in U.S history, civics, and geography represent the inevitable result of that decision. Just recently, an elementary school principal in Dallas was placed on administrative leave because she told teachers not to teach science or social studies, effectively signaling that grades in those areas were to be faked.

What we do in the classroom has probably changed the most dramatically over the last 30 years. Consider the typical classroom from the 1970s:

- Desks in rows
- Chalk board
- Overhead projector (if you were really lucky!)
- Teacher desk (usually front and center) with the grade book on the corner
- Purple passions—handouts from the Risograph machine
- Student textbooks and wall maps

Compare that to the classrooms of today:

- Desks in groups, horseshoes or tables
- A bean bag chair or two in the corner
- Smart board

- Desktop computers, laptops, I Pads, Smart phones
- Xerox copies
- Teacher desk/computer, usually off in a corner
- Textbooks, ancillaries, primary sources, newspapers, projects
- Personal and school websites - Internet
- Online grading; parental access to assignments and grades
- Data, data, and more data!

For the veteran teacher, the advent of technology has been at times daunting, as our students usually knew far more about manipulating it than we do. For social studies teachers, it put the world at our fingertips, allowing students to scale the pyramids and examine the flooding of the Nile, watch Congress in action and see reenactments of history, all with the click of the mouse. For preservice teachers, the opportunities to watch multiple teachers and techniques gives them a significant advantage in developing their own teaching style. Sharing ideas and activities has become instantaneous. Where once my friend Linda Massey and I faxed lessons across town (and felt quite “advanced” for doing so, I might add!), we now share with colleagues around the globe through email and websites and social media. Students contact teachers—and each other—for help on the spot. The school day doesn’t end at 4 anymore.

The training in how to teach has also changed rather dramatically. I graduated from Central Connecticut State College in 1973, an institution that began its life as a normal school in the nineteenth century. It was considered one of the best teacher preparation institutions of that time, yet I did not see secondary students or have any methods classes per se until the semester in which I student

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taught. Compared to the preparation that preservice teachers receive today at Central, now a full university, or at other schools of education, my preservice training was wholly inadequate. Preservice teachers today are in the schools in their sophomore and junior years, gaining practical insights as well as theory—a much more thorough background.

However, the traditional Preservice training is not the only path to the classroom these days. Programs like Teach For America attract some of the brightest college graduates into education; alternative certification programs open their doors to adults who are considering changing careers after they have graduated from college. In an experience that roughly parallels mine, they are dumped into a classroom with real students, with minimal theoretical and practical training, and often in the most challenging of teaching fields like special education or in urban districts.

So overall, how does it look from the trenches?

- Cutbacks in funding are forcing teachers as a whole to restructure how they teach
- Social studies classes in the elementary schools are being impacted tremendously
- The lure that teaching once had as a career in which one could exercise one’s creativity and uniqueness within the security of the system has faded over time
- The emphasis on technology has closed the door of personal interaction to a degree, yet opened the door to possibilities unknown before
- The social movements like the civil rights movement and the women’s movement of the latter twentieth

century have impacted who chooses to go into education—our “best and brightest” students are not as likely to choose education for a career. And sometimes we are our own worst enemy, actively discouraging them

- Preservice training programs are erratic; and new teachers, from traditional or alternative programs, need more support and more practical experience

On the bright side –

- We are interacting with more students than ever before in our history—and giving them all an opportunity to be successful. Bottom line, kids are still kids and most of the time, we still like them!
- Our classrooms have become living history laboratories as students from other countries and other cultures share their knowledge and learn from ours
- The increased availability of data and standards means that all stu-

dents are receiving a thorough education that is based on research as well as the individual teacher’s preferences

- More of our students than ever are going on to some form of higher education or career training
- The concept of social studies permeates the individual disciplines. Our students now see more than ever how history and geography and government and economics interact—that each does not exist in isolation—and that they have an obligation to be a participant in the world, not a bystander.

We may still have dragons to slay, but the fight goes on and the students are the winners. 🐉

SUE BLANCHETTE is president of NCSS. She recently retired after 32 years working in both middle school and high school with the Dallas Independent School District (ISD), Texas. She has written curriculum and provided staff development for Dallas ISD, and has received numerous teaching awards.

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