

Reading, Writing, and...History

by Joy Hakim

Editor's Note: When advocating a history-centered curriculum, we often are asked, "How can I fit anything else in? I can't get everything in as it is. And the reading and writing proficiency tests are always hanging over my head." We make the case that history is an important part of every student's education and deserves its time in the school day. In this piece, however, NCHE member Joy Hakim reminds us that history does not take time away from reading and writing. They enhance one another.

I used to be a newspaper reporter who wrote often of schools, and visited a whole lot of them. After a while, I came to feel that I could sniff the air in a school and tell if it was a good place to learn.

So last spring--when I entered a public school in Norfolk, Virginia--I knew right away, it had the right aromas. First graders were sitting at computers happily writing. Children's paintings and projects filled the hallways. And the ebullient principal greeted by name each child who walked past us. I was impressed.

This was a much-lauded school proud of its reading and writing programs. I'd been invited because I'm a local author. My destination was a fourth grade. I'd brought a few stories to read. One was about George Washington, and, before I began, I asked the 9-year-olds, "What do you know about George Washington?" I looked out at a sea of blank faces.

Finally, a bright-eyed boy raised his hand and said, "He was the 16th president."

Remember, this was Virginia, where we take our history seriously. By state mandate, Virginia's children study state history in fourth grade. It was April.

Later, after I'd told them about George, and also about the man in the tall hat who was the 16th president, I asked the teacher, "Don't you teach history in fourth grade?"

"Yes," she said, "and there are the books." She pointed to a stack in the corner. "I've been meaning to get to them, but I have to stick to the important subjects." Oh, my! Could it be that while we've been busy telling schools all the reasons they should be teaching history, the American public has been focusing on the important subjects: reading and writing.

We're a pragmatic people--and desperate. We know that, despite an incredible amount of energy and much good intent, our schools are failing a major part of our population. A Department of Education study, released last year, showed a whopping ten percent decline nationally in reading proficiency among high school seniors since 1992. Those barely-reading high school students are not going to find decent jobs in the marketplace.

When we were an industrial nation and had lots of assembly line work, it didn't matter much if you were a skilled reader or not. But, in our Information Age, reading is an essential survival skill.

So what does this have to do with us historians and history educators?

We have a key to the nation's reading crisis, and we've been ignoring it. We aren't sharing what we all know: when it comes to critical reading, history shines. Hardly anything approaches it in its demands for analysis and thinking. Besides that, history is a natural with children. It's filled with adventures, battles, heroes and villains; they all just happen to be true. Told as stories, history is a subject children love to read.

But how do we teach history in most schools? With tedious textbooks that are litanies of facts demanding memory and little thought. We bore kids, and teachers too, with routine teacher's guide exercises that allot only a small amount of time, if any, to probing the mind-stretching, intriguing questions that history asks. We destroy a great subject. I know firsthand. When I go into classrooms and get introduced as a historian, the reaction is usually immediate. "History, yuck!" is what the kids say. When I get introduced as a storyteller, they settle back and smile.

And, as for reading, mostly, it's fiction-reading that we teach. Being able to read *Romeo and Juliet* will enhance your life and broaden your perspectives--and we shouldn't do any less of that--but it isn't likely to prepare you for the kind of reading our technological age demands. History will. Today, most of our adult reading is nonfiction.

That's the kind of reading our 21st century children will need to be able to do skillfully. And we don't teach them how. Nor do we teach them to think and research and organize and write non-fiction--and respect the process and the product.

Non-fiction is the literary form of our time and some of its best practitioners are historians. Jean Fritz tops my list of those writing for children. David McCullough's *Brave Companions* can be read--and cherished--by middle and high school students. Paul Horgan is a model for anyone wanting to learn to write. I don't need to go on with the list--I'm sure you have your favorites. But we should be making our schools aware that history is literature, as anyone who has read Thucydides or Macaulay knows.

That it is rarely considered in that light may be because few teachers, or students, get to see good writing in social studies books. What they are faced with are committee-written texts--with little or no claim to literary worth. Something else: our teachers too often are still trained to think in narrow disciplines. Even in the early grades, where teachers tackle every subject, they usually segregate those subjects into separate boxes. When you teach history, you don't usually think in terms of teaching reading, or writing, or critical thinking, or those nebulous things we call values.

When I suggest to social studies teachers that they use history to teach analytical reading, they often look at me quizzically. They haven't been prepared to do so. Our children need to learn history. They need to know who they are and from where they've come. Democracies are fragile institutions; they demand informed citizens. But it isn't easy to sell that idea. Reading comes first.

Arguing for more history in schools because it is mind-enhancing, intrinsically enchanting, and citizen-necessary, seems to make some people yawn--even though it happens to be true. Will history make Jane and Bob better readers? You bet. Now that, I believe, is something we should consider.

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