

## **Learning History in Schools: The Impact of Course Work and Instructional Practices on Achievement**

According to the 1994 NAEP and other recent achievement tests, today's secondary students appear to be lacking basic knowledge of their nation's history. This has resulted in the development and implementation of state and national assessments, as well as an increased focus on ways to increase student learning. Within this broad research area Niemi and Smith focused their attentions on social studies instruction, specifically the correlation between course-taking and achievement.

Niemi and Smith identified three approaches to school reform and improving achievement scores. First, an increase in required classes will increase students' "opportunities to learn" and thereby increase student learning. An increase in graduation requirements is necessary—many students will only take additional classes if required to do so. Second, reform on course content is required. Current research reflects, "...those concerned with a national identity emphasize content that provides a broad view of central events and views" (20). Niemi and Smith believe that the relationship between content coverage and student achievement has not received enough research attention. Lastly, there is strong evidence that improvement of instructional methods will increase scores. "Whatever the content, it is argued, learning can be enhanced if more active approaches, requiring more student talk, reading and writing are used" (21). Niemi and Smith organized their investigative research around these three approaches and posed a fourth question: What are the combined effects of these three approaches?

Data was provided by the 1994 NAEP and student transcripts. Although the test was given in grades 4, 8, and 12 (both public and private schools were included), Niemi and Smith limited their analysis to grade 12. The rationale for this decision was based on the fact that seniors would have recently completed a junior-level American history course. Family effect on student achievement was also addressed. Niemi and Smith provided detailed charts and tables on their findings, and several expected observations emerged: significant television watching (three or more hours per day) resulted in consistently lower scores, students with college-educated parents had higher test scores, and although girls did better in knowledge of different cultures, they scored significantly lower in current international events.

Major results of this study included a strong correlation between the number of history classes taken by students and their test scores. Interestingly, there appeared to be little effect on the nature of the courses taken—topical or survey. The authors also found, "The strongest effect of the history curriculum is tied to the nature of instruction. Methods that involve the increased use of complex writing tasks, in-depth reading, extensive use of student discussion, and the use of learning tools, are strongly related to higher student scores" (33-34).

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