Textbook Controversy

Constance Holden's article of 2 January on the "textbook controversy" (News & Comment, p. 19) misses some of the basic issues involved—issues that much of the nation's media do not address. The media like to make fun of fundamentalist rejection of such "classics" as *The Wizard of Oz*. But Jews have long been offended by Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, feminists strongly reject *The Taming of the Shrew*, and blacks find Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* insulting. If the positive treatment of witches or mocking treatment of the idea of God in *The Wizard of Oz* offends fundamentalists, then their protest seems no different in principle from what other minorities have objected to.

Holden's references to the results of my study (*1*) on the treatment of religion in public school textbooks are somewhat misleading. I found an *almost* total absence of references to *contemporary* American religious life in social studies and history textbooks. The very few such references I did find were to the Catholic or Jewish religions; Protestantism was completely excluded. There were, however, a modest number of references to religion in the colonial period. Even these, however, tended to make religion seem old-fashioned; and the period of the last 200 years of American history was virtually devoid of reference to religion. In addition, the basic religious character of American society, long acknowledged by historians, was not noted.

In addition to the facts of any subject to be taught, there is always a sectarian interpretive framework derived from values and presuppositions. The very sectarian character of American public schools today and since their founding has been ably demonstrated by many scholars (*2*). The public schools once had a general Protestant sectarian character. As a result Catholics, Orthodox Jews, and others set up their own schools. Today our public schools have a different sectarian character, one based on strong secularist assumptions. This change is not surprising considering that the social sciences have largely shaped public education in the last 50 years. The deepest issue raised by the textbook controversy, therefore, is that it questions the legitimacy of the present public school monopoly.

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Holden poignantly demonstrates how the presentation of information in textbooks can be diluted or omitted because of the increasing conservative demands placed on textbook publishers. However, in attempting to emphasize this point, she makes use of a disturbingly uninformed example as conveyed by Donald Eklund of the Association of American Publishers: "it may be better to omit any description of Mormonism rather than to say the religion accepts polygamy."

In fact, Mormonism does not accept polygamy. The practice of polygamy and its acceptance as doctrine by the Mormon Church (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) were ecclesiastically abolished in October 1890. Indeed, practitioners of polygamy are denied membership in the Mormon Church, and those members who take up the practice face excommunication.

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Homelessness

R. J. Wyatt and E. G. DeRenzo (Editorial, 12 Dec., p. 1309) make a valuable point about the need for systematic research on policy alternatives for the homeless. The growing shame of homelessness in our nation's largest cities is not, however, the product of deinstitutionalization, nor can the problem be solved by returning the mentally ill to institutions. Homelessness has complex causes, including a changing economy, joblessness, and the loss of low-rent housing in cities. The absence of adequate housing has led to critical problems in developing community services for the severely mentally ill. We need effective strategies for stimulating appropriate housing opportunities, as in the recent initiative by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (*1*).

A major problem in community mental health is the large number of younger individuals in the age groups at high risk of developing schizophrenia and of abusing alcohol and drugs. In addition, significant numbers of young mentally ill people reject treatment. Financing of services for the severely mentally ill is seriously deficient, and these services are fragmented and often inaccessible. Concerted efforts must be made to revitalize the public mental health sector and to develop systems of mental health care with clearly defined lines of authority and accountability among the many responsible agencies and levels of government.

A better balance in financing between inpatient and outpatient services must also be achieved. Two-thirds of state mental health budgets support hospitals despite the presence of most severely mentally disabled persons in the community. Inpatient and community services must be more closely linked, and financing strategies should make it possible to reallocate funds consistent with the largest anticipated benefits (*2*). Modifications of Medicaid—the single most important federal financing program affecting the care of the severely mentally ill—are acutely needed.

Mental health services research is of high priority. Over the past decade there have been impressive developments in such research and a significant number of controlled studies. Randomized trials have demonstrated that community care for the severely mentally ill, when properly organized, is feasible and often superior to traditional programs of high quality (*3*). We must do more research, but also be aware of and disseminate the result of excellent studies in the literature.

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The editorial by Wyatt and DeRenzo closely links homelessness to the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill. Although there are certainly many tragic examples of premature discharge from hospitals, we must be cautious in oversimplifying the causation of a complex social problem like