

IF I HAD MY WAY

Social Studies — for Knowledge

by E. DUNCAN

HISTORY and Geography are so interdependent that there can be little objection to teaching them together in the Primary School and the logical application of the process of learning by the extension of the familiar to the unfamiliar, starting from the pupil's own position and ranging ever outward in space and backward in time is theoretically sound. The little experience I have had with Social Studies has shown me that, generally speaking, the teachers of the upper primary standards are in favour of the new presentation but that those of the lower classes are unhappy about it, and that most criticism is directed at the content of the syllabus rather than at the concept. Now it has been decided to keep Social Studies permanently on the list of subjects for the Primary School it seems that certain improvements should be made.

The inadequacy of the syllabus lies, I think, in a failure to realise the limitations of the young child's experience in the dimension of time ("Were you a little boy when van Riebeeck landed?"), and in the attempt to go into detail in the study of the surrounding area at too early an age. What appeal to the young pupil are stories of people, and qualities of integrity, patriotism, wisdom and heroism are to be found in the lives of many famous historical personages. If these are connected with our own locality or our own country they will have greater appeal but there is no need to deprive the child of stories of world figures to his disadvantage when he finds them referred to in literature at a later stage, in order to replace them with obscure local heroes.

If I had my way therefore, up to and including Std. I, I should limit the historical side of Social Studies to the stories of famous people, with little attempt to fit them into a time scale, and in Std. II make a start on simple Civics together with the history of the locality in rather less detail than the present syllabus. In Std. III I would bring

this into context with the geography and history of South Africa up to the Great Trek. In Std. IV the similarity of the three southern continents geographically fits in well with the Age of Discovery retraced for South America and Australia passing on to the continuation of South African history and the opening up of Africa. The final year would deal with the rest of the world, connected with South Africa by trade and historical associations.

With regard to method, group work and individual research are extremely difficult below Std. III. I should arrange short courses on methods and the practical teaching of Social Studies during term time, which should eventually be attended by all primary teachers, their classes being taken by a special group of temporary teachers. There is a great need in all standards for reference books written in a style easily read by young pupils. Even when such books are available the restriction to two copies in the library is very hampering in a large school. I should raise this to one copy per hundred pupils as far as short reference books for Social Studies are concerned.

I should also insist, from Std. II upwards, on an individual note book for each child, which would contain the summaries produced by the various groups under the guidance of the teacher, thus ensuring that a central core of knowledge was shared by the whole class which should be tested, so that "passengers" and those pupils who treat the Social Studies lesson as an additional Art and Craft period should be to some extent eliminated.

Furthermore I should arrange for Departmental buses, with drivers, at no cost to the pupils or the School Funds, to be available on a rota system, so that every child could be taken on an educational visit once a term, whether he lived in a poor or a rich district.

I am certain that with these innovations Social Studies would be much more effective, rousing interest in the pupils and giving them a sufficient background without going into such detail about South Africa that the High Schools would have nothing new to teach them.

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