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IF I HAD MY WAY

Social Studies — for Fun

by H. A. NOBLE

Higgins: I've grown accustomed to her face . . .

THE compilers of the syllabus for Social Studies saw in it a means of achieving the whole aim of education; the development of the individual with a zest for knowledge and a critical mind; a happy mature member of society, living in harmony with it, but aware of its faults and eager to remedy them — the ideal citizen.

It is too early to know if the starry-eyed builders of a New Jerusalem are right or not, but we can see that as in all teaching the results will depend on the quality of the teacher. Fortunately, in spite of what is said about our teachers, there are inspired men and women in the profession who will make a success of any task given them.

For the less able and less energetic teachers, who thought in their innocence that the new method would relieve them of a good deal of work — the idea was surely that the children would work on their own — Social Studies have been an unpleasant shock. For those efficient and hardworking teachers wedded to formal method, Social Studies have been a great strain. In their view results have been disappointing and unsatisfactory and these teachers cannot adjust themselves to the sprawling untidy subject.

Social Studies have several unfavourable features. Too many boys and girls are let loose to wreak havoc with their scissors on books and pamphlets in the belief — held by some teachers too — that sticking in pictures is part of the learning process. Some produce beautiful albums, but are pictures of any value to the paster-in if he does not write or say something informative about them? Are the pictures not more meaningful in their original setting?

Much of the suggested subject matter seems trivial. "Some village Hampdens" have been fished out from obscurity and raised overnight to the status of historical characters worthy of study, while recognised figures in history are barely mentioned. Small country towns and villages are treated as subjects of serious study but whole continents are left out.

However, in spite of much that irritates, I favour the retention of Social Studies in the primary school. Teachers on the whole have been won over even if they are critical of the content, and should we return to geography and history, as separate subjects, I think the majority will use the methods they have learnt in Social Studies. The idea of making the child a working partner in the task of learning instead of the recipient of predigested information has met with a favourable response from pupil and teacher. Teachers have been shaken out of a rut and have on the whole enjoyed it. The children have taken to the new approach with enthusiasm and their obvious pleasure in the work is the strongest argument for the retention of Social Studies.

What we must guard against is the danger of the teacher once again falling into a rut. We can make social studies as stereotyped and sterile as any other subject. We must also guard against the ease with which Social Studies enable the lazy and ignorant to cover up their tracks. Beautiful albums can be produced without much learning being done; group projects enable one to dodge work. It is the old story that large classes are the most expensive way of economising in education. The greatest single reform in education would be reduction of the size of classes.

The content of the syllabus must be widened extensively. South African history is almost part of current politics and so charged with emotion that I do not want it treated more extensively than it is in the present syllabus. I would have a little less on the Great Trek and more about missionaries and road and rail builders. South African history is a story of exploration and pioneering and the taming of a savage land. Let us have more history of Western Europe, particularly of Britain from where most of the civilising influences in this country have come. Greece and Rome are the basis of western civilisation, therefore every child is entitled to know the stories of Ancient Greece and Rome and to know what

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they bequeathed us. The Renaissance in art and literature; the opening of the seas; the Industrial Revolution and its continuation until today, are all subjects which will fascinate children and are of value.

On the geographical side, we must take children outside South Africa, and not leave it all until the Standard Five year, which in the present syllabus is so overcrowded. In each year from Std. 3 to Std. 5 one aspect of South African geography could be handled and in the same year, something outside South Africa.

I want to see the library more and more the centre of the school. Most schools have good libraries, thanks to the Departmental policy, and they have a wealth of material in them but not as a rule on South Africa. The material on South Africa is hard to come by, and yet we are asked to restrict ourselves to it. By widening the syllabus we shall have a better chance of making full use of our libraries, and Social Studies will be one of the chief means of getting our children to use them. That is another reason why I want Social Studies to be retained.

IF I HAD MY WAY

English — for Taste

by L. PROCTOR

IT is one of the paradoxes of history that increased literacy has brought in its wake a corresponding deterioration in standards of literary taste. Whereas formerly literature was purveyed for and by an intellectual elite or social coterie, the present age is witnessing rapidly-increasing facilities for "education" (the word is used advisedly) but at the same time an alarming debasing or prostituting (there is no other term) of the written and spoken word. The reasons for this decline are multifarious, not the least being the narcotic effect on the present generation, young and old, of such mass media as radio, cinema, radiogram, television (carpe diem) and the various forms of advertising.

It is therefore the urgent task of present-day teachers to try to arrest this deterioration in standards of taste and judgment, or at least to try to divert these influences into useful channels. Although these words are intended to apply to the study of English, they do nevertheless apply virtually to every other subject in the school. Admittedly, English as a subject is wide enough to admit of a thorough examination of these problems, but surely no teacher is worth his salt who does not refer directly or indirectly to the need for adopting and maintaining certain standards in, for example, matters of dress, behaviour and etiquette.

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But it is upon the teacher of English, especially in the High School that this supreme task falls, because of his training, his status and the breadth of his outlook. The influence of the teacher of English upon his individual pupils and upon the school as a whole ought to be and must be considerable. It is not in the choice of suitable books, or in matters of pronunciation that this influence should be felt, but rather in helping the pupil to decide for himself what is spurious and false in the spoken or written word, be it a political speech or a slogan boomed out on the "C" programme, or a "True Love" picture story.

There are many obstacles that militate against success in the above task. The system of breaking up the time-table into water-tight compartments and the English lesson into various unrelated divisions — language, composition and the rest, produces in most children, even in the Matriculation Class, the idea that the part is more important than the whole.

But it is the role of the teacher himself that makes a delicate and diplomatic approach to the problem of taste imperative. To the "Booneager", the teacher is ex officio a "square", a person whose views and tastes are automatically old-fashioned and therefore suspect.

It is not suggested, however, that adult tastes should be superimposed onto the school child. That would be tantamount to putting Fisher coach-