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History in the European schools

The place occupied by history teaching in the European Schools is a surprisingly small one. Recent changes in the new observation cycle and the proposals of the comité de réforme for the 6th and 7th years suggest that it may become smaller still.

I'm not concerned here to go into the arguments concerning the decision to introduce social studies into the observation cycle in place of the separate subjects of history and geography. No sound arguments were ever advanced beyond those related to the administrative and pedagogical convenience of one teacher teaching a class for three hours rather than two teachers teaching a class for two hours and one hour, respectively. The argument was in any event valid only in certain linguistic sections. Be that as it may, social studies has come, presumably to stay, as one of the tangible consequences of the reform. The last Bulletin Pédagogique gave us three examples of the programmes at present being tried in three of the schools. My concern in this article is to draw attention to the dangers that may result for the teaching of history from such programmes. As I see it these are mainly three. In the first place it is quite clear that less time will now be devoted to the teaching of history in the observation cycle. The same phenomenon could occur now that history has been subsumed beneath the panoply of the untranslatable (and probably meaningless) « activités d'éveil » in the primary school. In the second place there is a real risk that history in the new programme will be seen merely as a vehicle for an explanation of the present and not also as a study of historical periods in their own right whose object as far as teaching in schools is concerned is to interest pupils in other periods and other people, to introduce them, in short, into other worlds that are different from ours, worlds which were not in any meaningful sense simply half-formed expressions of the present. The social science approach to history which the new programmes encourage attempt after all to establish continuities and similarities whereas a major part of a historians' job is to point to disjunctions and to explain the unique. There is a third danger that stems from this and that is that the history elements in the new programme may emphasise a line of development approach such as the « Development of farming through the ages » which apart from containing a heavy in-built element of boredom may more importantly lead to an omission of the study of personalities and of events. Young children are interested in the historical individual — the 'great' personality or the 'common man' — and are capable, within obvious limits, of making the imaginative leap necessary to get to know people of different historical periods. This cultivation of the child's imagination should indeed form a major part of history teaching at this level.

It is certain then, the social studies approach contains dangers for a real study of history. Perhaps even greater dangers for the study of history lie in the proposals so far formulated by the 'comité de réforme' for the 6th and 7th years. These allow 2 hours only for history in both of these years. The sciences humaines commission has asked that this should be increased to 4 by adding 2 more hours in the 'cours complémentaires'.

It is truly extraordinary that the European Schools should allow so little time for the study of history particularly at this senior level. It is the one discipline that at the same time can allow pupils to address themselves to salient aspects of their national origins and also, within mixed classes from the third year, to their common European background. As such it can be one of the truly European disciplines offered in our schools. The comité de réforme has also somewhat offhandedly suggested that the civics courses established recently in the 6th year should now simply be incorporated in the history course — with no increase in hours to make this possible. I don't think it is any argument to point to national practices to justify a simple allocation of 2 hours to a discipline which in any event enjoys a far larger allocation in Britain, for example, for those pupils who choose to study it at this level. History and geography are the only academic subjects in the European Schools which are at no time in the 4 final years of the upper secondary school given more than 2 hours of study time. And yet they are perhaps the subjects that can form the basis for a European approach to teaching and learning within our schools. They are the two subjects that constantly invite the attention of outside visitors and which could, with more time to develop new programmes, contain the real key to the Europeanisation of our pupils.

The decision to accord only 2 hours to history rests in part on an ignorance about what is or could be taught in history classes in the senior school. The new approaches to history teaching depend heavily on the use and interpretation of primary sources to study particular problems. Pupils are asked to approach a problem through contemporary documents rather than to merely absorb some sterile, pre-digested textbook. From these documents they can be asked to build up a narrative account of events, to sketch the personality of a principal participant in the event under study by an analysis of the motives of his action and above all to formulate questions concerning the event and to build up a rigorous piece of analytical writing in response. There is no doubt that most pupils in our seventh years are capable of this in a langue vehiculaire and in writing, but the training must begin in the fourth year. Here fairly simple problems can be raised but an argued answer must be required, an answer moreover which must display some knowledge of a limited range of documents at this stage offered to the pupils. A further extension of this work with primary sources should be the introduction of pupils to the elements of historical controversy, to the notion of the tentative nature of historical judgements. A good current illustration of these different approaches could be the problems surrounding the origins of the first world war. What better problem do we as Europeans need to understand? Here a specific problem concerning the German decision to support Austria-Hungary in her punitive measures against Serbia can be studied very well through primary sources. We have different accounts of the meeting when the Austrian envoy HOYOS met Kaiser Wilhelm on 5th July — from Hoyos himself, from the Prussian war minister VON FALKENHAYN among others. We can form some sort of a picture of the personality of the Kaiser from this, of the constitutional role within Wilhelmine Germany of the Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg and from more recently discovered documents such as the diaries of Kurt Riezler, secretary to Bethmann Hollweg, some idea of the private workings of Bethmann Hollweg's mind during the July crisis. This is what history is about surely. Certainly many students find this contact with the sources fascinating. This same problem can also illustrate well the nature of the debate among historians as it is possible to initiate students into certain important elements of the Fischer debate, a debate which had profound consequences in Germany during the 60's and a debate which shows clearly what historians argue about, why they disagree, how they use evidence. In the particular example of the Fischer debate

we can ask pupils to make their own judgement concerning the significance to be placed on the so-called War Council held at Potsdam in December 1912 and on which Fischer places so much — I think too much — importance in support of his thesis that German leaders were bent on a pre-meditated expansionist policy in central Europe at least since that date.

The point is that history is about this kind of approach and such an approach needs time to organise discussion in class where the teacher must guide rather than instruct, to promote seminars in which pupils can test their ideas against each other, to direct reading of a certain number of secondary sources and in some instances even to simulate actual events in class usually through participation in specific international conferences and congresses. Examples of such simulation exercises that I have tried include the negotiation of the Polish problem at the Congress of Vienna, the discussion of the Iranian and Afganistan issues at the present EEC Council of Ministers as well as 2 years' of participation with a section of my 6th year civics class in the Model United Nations' sessions at the Hague in which each participating school has to prepare students to represent a particular country in the various bodies of the U.N. — from Security Council to committee on disarmament and decolonisation.

This is what history teaching is — or should be — about but how can these new and, I think, exciting approaches be adopted as fully as we would like with the present 2 hour allocation a week ?

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