

Europaskolen  
European School  
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LUXEMBOURG - BRUXELLES / BRUSSEL I & II - MOL  
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# Forum

## History in the European Schools : two points of view

### A REPLY

In his article « History in the European Schools » published in No 69 of the Bulletin, Mr. Farrar argued that his form has been treated as a poor relation in the curriculum of the European Schools and that the situation is likely to get worse rather than better with the introduction of secondary reform. I am inclined to take a rather less pessimistic view.

Before turning to the main thesis, I should like to draw attention to two statements in the article which seem to me to be misleading. Firstly Mr. Farrar argues that « no sound arguments were ever advanced (for the introduction of the human sciences in place of history and geography in the first three years) 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 fact is that the introduction to the document outlining the syllabus of the human sciences adduced numerous pedagogical arguments for this change. The Bergen document which accompanied this outline syllabus did so in even greater detail. The arguments referred to may not have convinced Mr. Farrar but they seem to have satisfied many teachers in the European Schools. They are also very much in line with current thinking in the member states. Mr. Farrar is obviously right in saying that the historical approach is significantly different from that of the social sciences, but the danger that history might be swallowed up by the social sciences in the observation cycle seems to me obviated by the very general nature of the syllabus which allows the individual teacher considerable freedom in the treatment of particular topics, including the study of historical personalities and the encouragement of pupils' historical imagination.

Secondly Mr. Farrar says that « the comité de réforme has 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 ». Anyone present at these meetings will be surprised to hear that this decision was taken « offhandedly ». On the contrary, it was thoroughly discussed and seemed on balance a better solution than the alternative, that is to leave history and geography with together only three periods per week thereby returning to the much and rightly criticised system of one period-per-week subjects.

And this brings us to the heart of the matter : the choice between giving both history and geography a modest but definite place among the common core subjects right up to the Bac or placing them, with a larger allocation of periods, among the options in the 6th and 7th year. The adoption of the first of these two solutions was based mainly on two arguments : that it is wrong to give pupils the option to abandon all contact with history and geography at the age

of 16, at the end of the 5th year, and that it is an essential feature of a European School that all pupils should offer some work in « langue véhiculaire » in their Baccalaureate exam. I believe these are sound arguments and will be shared by most colleagues. And if these subjects are to be part of the common core in years 6 and 7, then it is hardly reasonable, given the very strong demands of other subjects, to expect an allocation of more than 4 weekly periods for the social sciences in their totality: as everyone knows, the compulsory subjects claim already an alarmingly large slice of the curricular cake.

But, one may ask, how much can be achieved in two periods a week, especially when certain social science topics are added to the history syllabus? It is true that there is some overlap between the two subjects in the study of political theory and institutions but there is also a good deal of additional material. Moreover, Mr. Farrar seems to me absolutely right in what he says, in the second part of his article, about the aims and methodology of good history teaching, about the importance of studying primary sources and of considering different interpretations of historical events. But I fail to see why the approach he outlines could not be practised from time to time even on two periods a week. Nowadays one can find in most languages collections of documents and summaries of rival interpretations relating to specific historical events. Obviously this approach is more time-consuming than the traditional bird's eye view. It cannot be used all the time but it could be used some of the time, provided the syllabus is carefully reviewed and pruned, and opportunities are offered for studies in depth as well as for the broad sweep. The notion that all important periods can be covered will have to be abandoned, and content must be reduced in the interest of a viable historical approach and methodology. This reduction of the syllabus to reasonable proportions should be one of the main preoccupations of the human sciences commission at its future meetings.

M. HART  
(Luxembourg)

## A RESPONSE

- (1) History is one of the few school subjects which presents the student with a global and European dimension.
- (2) The increasing use of primary sources is vital to the development of critical and objective analysis and requires more time in senior school. Simple chronology and factual recall are low order skills in comparison with the development of critical techniques and an empathy « for other worlds that are different from ours ».
- (3) History is in any case an integrated study using sociological, statistical and geographical methodologies (to name but three!).

An intellectual tradition which has given us BRAUDEL, GOLO, MANN, CROCE, TAYLOR etc. etc. etc. is surely deserving of a major role in the education of the whole child.

Ray ALLARDYCE  
(Culham)