

History Teachers' Forum  
SOCIAL STUDIES IN THE HIGH SCHOOL TODAY  
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I am well aware that one of the shortcomings of scholars in any subject or field is that they frequently believe that their specialty is the hope of the world. However, it is necessary occasionally that we assume as detached an attitude as possible toward educational problems, which in the last analysis are the world's problems, and attempt objectively to evaluate tendencies and trends both in education and in the world at large. In this spirit let me for a moment refer to the *importance* of the social studies in the high school curriculum of the present day, the *amount* of work in the social studies that seems necessary for an adequate treatment of these things in the secondary school, and the *kind* of social studies which gives promise of accomplishing the ends which are regarded as valid in the teaching of the Social Studies.

I think it would be agreed as we look about us that there are today two crying needs of American civilization or rather two groups of needs. These are public health and social adjustment. It is certainly a matter of major importance that more attention be given to health, particularly mental health, in these days of mounting rates of insanity. I would also point out to you in this connection that health is in large measure a social matter. As to the other need, all one has to do is to catalog the matters of mal-adjustment in American life which now vex and bewilder both citizen and public official to see to what extent these troubles are social in their nature. International peace, relations between capital and labor, distribution of wealth, public control of industry, unemployment, the making of vocational choices, respect for law, housing, and the use of leisure time—these are some of the matters which are now receiving much attention, and all are social problems.

The need in education is to throw light on these things. Education has progressed far in the last century, but as we contemplate the accelerated rate at which society is undergoing change before our eyes, we must admit that the school must make new adaptations to conditions which will dwarf those of the past, if it is not to become hopelessly antiquated and utterly impotent before the realities of life around us.

These unsolved problems are a challenge to the school. They are a challenge to the high school, primarily, because it has become the people's college, reaching at least four times as many persons as do colleges and normal schools. These unsolved problems are on a large scale. Education must prepare the citizens of the future to deal with them effectively, on pain of the collapse of our civilization. In order to give this preparation properly, the schools and their courses of study must face these realities and not turn their backs upon them in favor of outworn subject-matter which neither properly instructs nor adequately inspires.

Many of our high school youth are quick to see when education falls short of the living realities of the day. They are ready for high resolves. They want wrongs found and corrected. They are willing to experiment when positive knowledge is lacking. Above all they will soon be in power.

Natural science has in the past forged ahead. Knowledge of how to get along together has lagged. In my judgment, we do not need much attention to natural science except to maintain the present state of technological advancement and to enrich the possibilities of leisure time. Let the chemist and the physicist and the botanist in the high school teach students how to appreciate and enjoy the wonders of nature but not how to exploit them. Let these science teachers feed the larger life and find their justification in the secondary school not in objective utilitarian ends but in human culture.

In technology we have progressed from the ox-cart and the stagecoach to the transcontinental airplane and the radio. In human relationships we are still in the age of the spinning wheel. I believe it would be a boon to humanity if it were possible to divert the energy now given to the attainment of materialistic ends to the study of better human relations. This means more attention to the social studies. If this were done, progress would be made where it is needed and our civilization would be less out of joint.

This is the challenge to the schools and to their administrators. Already the social studies are regarded by many forward looking thinkers in the field of secondary education as the core of the curriculum. English and literature should be more and more socialized. Science and mathematics should be given a social turn, and the social implications of scientific

work more and more stressed. Americans in the past have feared the social expert. Possibly at many periods the imperfections in his outlook made this a wise attitude. However, it seems that in the future we must have more attention given to social engineering. In my opinion, we should in the future give somewhat the same confidence to the trained social expert that we for long have given to the trained natural scientist.

As to the amount of social studies teaching, the importance of the subject in contemporary life seems to warrant that ample time be devoted to it. When we remember that students are leaving the high school in each year of the course, we cannot assume that all will graduate and build our curriculum on that assumption. The high school that meets its obligation is the one that so arranges its work that no matter when a student drops out the time already spent in school shall have been most profitably used. This principle necessitates the placing of social studies instruction upon different levels adapted to junior high school and senior high school years. In the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades, the work might well be extensive and excursive, rather than intensive. The student should be given some insight into the complexities of modern society and its broader aspects both through some historical treatment and through a study of contemporary affairs in the social, political, and economic fields. In this way if a student leaves school at the end of the compulsory period, he still has some equipment for performing his duties as a citizen. In the senior high school each year of work should have some characteristics as if it were to be the student's last, and on the whole these years should build upon the junior high school beginnings by more specialized study.

As to the kind of social studies necessary, in my opinion, we need more government, civics, sociology, and economics, taught in such a way as shall throw light upon the problems of today. High school children have the ability and the reasoning power to make progress in understanding the problems of society. The challenge to the school is that it measure up to this high responsibility. It must make knowledge of social things central in the mind and training of youth. Only thus can it justify itself.