

A Preliminary Survey of the Teaching of History and Social Studies in Maltese State Primary Schools.

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Social Studies is the study of man in society

Man emerges as a central figure in all the work in Social Studies. The aim of this brief study is to check *if and to what extent* current ideas on the teaching of the subject are being actually implemented in Maltese State Primary Schools from Year 3 to Year 6 so that they will fit adequately into the concept and definition of Social Studies as described above.

The survey

This study was carried out in 11 Maltese Primary Schools during the scholastic year 1983-84. A desire for a balance between schools in urban and rural areas was kept in mind. The sample was made up of information collected from 100 teachers representing a good cross section of the teaching population in Malta, with a span ranging from 1 to 40 years teaching experience. The dates when teachers finished their teacher training varied from 1946 to 1983.

Aims and objectives of Social Studies

When teachers were asked to state aims and objectives of Social Studies teaching in the Primary school, 52% said that the main aim was that of understanding the environment. Although this is a general statement one could assume that it implies the awareness of a fundamental aim of Social Studies teaching i.e. the objective of providing children with an opportunity of acquiring knowledge and understanding of the society in which they live. Other aims stated were: the creation of moral, social and national awareness (i.e. the formation of good citizens) and the increase of general knowledge, which, besides being a vague objective, indicates that the major concern of teachers is that of presenting chunks of information through factual knowledge. However, in the modern

approach, the emphasis should be on where to find out the necessary information and how to achieve "learning to learn" skills rather than on "haphazard memorization". This is a fundamental current concept which should be immediately implemented in Social Studies teaching.

Whatever the aims and objectives, stress should be laid on concept development rather than on facts. Results of the present survey show that in 52% of the sample, emphasis is mainly on presentation of factual knowledge. This necessarily leads to a compartmentalised syllabus, simple source information, memorisation and recitation. On the contrary, the stress should be on discovery, analysis, rational thinking and initiative on the pupils' part.

It is interesting to note that 12% of the teachers state that "increasing an interest in nature" is a major aim in the teaching of Social Studies. This is a clear indication that a good number of teachers incorporate Nature Study with Social Studies rather than with Environmental Studies. This should not be the case since Social Studies is centred on *man* while Environmental Studies is centred on *nature*.

Social Studies in the School

The Curriculum

All teachers in the survey agree that Social Studies should have a place in the curriculum. However, when asked whether it should be given more importance in the curriculum of the school, 65% of them were opposed to this idea. A good number of teachers argue that Social Studies can be mediated through incidental teaching during other lessons by integrating it with Reading, Religion, Languages and so forth. In addition, according to these teachers, Social Studies should aim at the widening of children's general

knowledge. These two main reasons given by the teachers to justify their stand, however, clearly show that in this respect they are not up-to-date with current ideas about the aims of Social Studies, since we know that current literature about the teaching of Social Studies stresses the fact that, as P. Mathias states, "a knowledgeable person is not necessarily educated" (1973). Moreover, although integration with other subjects is encouraged since, according to D.G. Watts "history lends itself readily to illustrating and supporting other subjects" (1972), the teacher should not rely completely on incidental teaching of Social Studies as the tendency will be that it will be discarded and most of its importance for the children's education will be lost.

The Syllabus

The data emerging from the survey shows that not all teachers work from a Social Studies syllabus. The great majority suggest a better planned, more "open" type of syllabus with new and varied topics. They suggest that such a syllabus should enable the children to develop, with the teacher's help, crucial techniques (e.g. criticism, discussion, inquiry, problem-solving skills and so on) that will not only render Social Studies more appealing to children but also help them acquire a better understanding of man in society. This is, after all, the ultimate aim of Social Studies. The request for a clearly defined syllabus indicates that the great majority of teachers are up-to-date with current ideas about the teaching of Social Studies. As Ian Steele states: "There is the need to define the common elements and the distinctive qualities of the various areas of study. If the character of these can be established it will become much simpler to make decisions about the shape and content of the school syllabus and about the teaching strategies that should be employed in the classroom" (1976).

Social Studies in the Time - Table

In the Primary School time-table, 3 hours a week are reserved for Social Studies. However, it seems that not all teachers give it this importance in matters of time, since 76% devote 2½ hours or less per week. (See Table A). This is because of the importance given to the three main subjects - English, Maltese, Maths - especially in Year 6 classes preparing for their Junior Lyceum examination.

The hours devoted to Social Studies should be organised in approximately 1½ hour sessions in which multiple activities and varied presentations should be carried out. In half-hour sessions (which are still being employed by the majority of teachers), the main activity would probably be note-taking, which is detrimental to the aims of Social Studies.

Table A

Time allocated	%
1 hr	16
1½	22
2	22
2½	16
3	12
3½	6
5	2
No answer	4
Total	100 %

Teaching Approaches and Methods

Separate or Interdisciplinary Approach

From the two basic approaches i.e. the separate or compartmentalised approach, and the integrated or interdisciplinary approach, the former seems to be the most applied either directly by calling Social Studies as History, Geography, Civics or by taking such subjects separately even though referring to the whole chunk as "Social Studies".

Teachers reason that they prefer the traditional compartmentalised approach because of its convenience, logicity and simplicity. Some argue, however, that there are more pedagogical justifications for the use of the interdisciplinary approach. It is more interesting for young children since the topic approach is closer to real life situations are therefore more motivating. M.A. Crutchfield (1983) points out that in the traditional separate approach the teacher looks upon the student as a "sponge" to soak up facts which he must recall on demand. In the new Social Studies approach the teacher sees the learner as an inquirer who examines information from different sources and uses problem-solving methods in acquiring concepts.

Expository or Guided-discovery Methods

Most teachers in the survey prefer to use a combination of the Expository (teacher-centred) and the Guided-discovery (learner-centred) methods in the teaching of Social Studies since such a combination helps children, as Mathias points out "to acquire a method of work and develop a sense of inquiry through discovery" (1973). Teachers have also clearly indicated that it is the kind of topic to be dealt with, the resources available, and the aptitudes and skills of the pupils that determine the method of teaching they have to

adopt. This idea is in line with what Ian Steele states: "The methods employed by the history teacher are bound to reflect the aims and objectives in teaching the subject... Increasingly teachers are concerned with the attitudes of their pupils towards the subject, and with the pupils' acquisition of the skills involved in the study. Inevitably this has important implications for the teaching techniques employed" (1976).

Media and Activities

Sources and Resources

Sources and resources can be classified as first, second, third and fourth order ones. First order resources are those which are immediately available to the teacher such as the blackboard, oral work, etc. Second order resources are the written and spoken words i.e. books, family and oral history, etc. Third order resources are the mechanical aids, such as films, slides, etc. Fourth order resources are those found outside the school such as museums and historical sites.

Table B

Source	Order Type	%
teacher/blackboard	1	90
discussion in class	1	74
textbook/handout	2	24
books/magazines	2	20
relatives/friends	2	12
T.V./media	3	24

In this survey, first order resources (66%) scored the highest percentage. Second order resources totalled only 24%, whereas 10% of the teachers use third order sources. No fourth order resources were mentioned (See Table B). This clearly shows that in the use of sources and resources, current ideas are not much implemented in our schools.

Quite a good number of teachers still rely on blackboard work for teaching the subject, from which children then copy out notes. No mention has been made of time lines and time-charts (which are very important means in conveying to children the difficult concept of time), or of simulations and dice games. Documents, topic cards, etc. all registered a low percentage in this study (See Table C).

Table C

Teaching Aids	%
Charts	92
Illustrations	92
Maps	90
Old objects	52
Photos/Slides films	40
Work cards	28
Tape-recorder radio	16
Time lines	14
Documents	8
Topic Cards	8
Life lines	6
Family plans	0

Teachers interviewed argued that most activities depend on the resources available. Schools in general lack modern resources, thus often constraining most teachers to adopt traditional teaching techniques.

A limited number of teachers are not discouraged by the fact that some resources are not available at their school, and actually do their best to provide and use a variety of resources in their teaching (e.g. films, film strips, tapes, discs, simulated documents, work sheets and topic cards), to make Social Studies as interesting a subject as possible.

As regards books, most teachers are of the opinion that there should be a standard textbook. However such a textbook would have a number of setbacks: it can be excessively authoritarian, and often dull; there also runs the danger of it dictating the syllabus, or giving the wrong idea that history or some other subject in Social Studies exists only as one fount of knowledge; moreover it can provide one type of format and illustrations. It would be a better idea if instead of a textbook one introduces Educational packs/folders containing pictures, notes, handouts, etc. which are more appealing to children, more handy, and better suited to be updated from time to time.

Activities

The commonest activity in class is still note-taking (74%). It seems that teachers do not believe that children are able to compile their own notes. In 86% of the cases, information is recorded in copybooks. 42% use scrapbooks (adding percentages total more than 100% since in some cases both copybooks and scrapbooks are used),

which are surely more suited for Social Studies. Very often notes are distributed to the children. On the other hand typical of the new model of teaching is the case where children's work, like written work, drawings, three dimensional objects, etc., are stuck on a large board in the classroom. In 80% of the cases, writing is not the only activity. Teachers mentioned sticking pictures and drawing as additional activities.

Quite a large number of the teachers (32%) do not use activities such as games, role playing, model making and drama/mime. Only 18% use three or more of these activities. Games and action maps are the least used (12%) and 6% respectively and drama is the most used (48%).

58% of teachers succeeded in holding an exhibition of children's work during their teaching career. However, some of the topics chosen e.g. "Homes in the Fiji Islands", seem to be too far removed from the children's experience.

74% of the teachers never had a "Things of the Past" table in their class. Moreover, for the remaining 26%, the "History corner" seems to be merely a demonstration place with no labelling, descriptions, or proper use for incidental teaching. Only 6% of the total sample have a miniature museum in the school.

Educational visits

Quite a large percentage of teachers (88%) took their class out at least for one visit during the scholastic year in which the present study was carried out. The rest claim that red tape, lack of time and lack of pupils' appreciation are factors which impeded them from doing this type of activity.

Table D

Type of preparation	%
a) Few words (max. 1 lesson about places/things about to be visited.	46
b) Series of Social Studies lessons	30
c) Oral discussion about place and what to look for	8
d) Reading on textbooks/showing them pictures	6
e) Reading story of place	4
f) accustoming children with handout or worksheet to be filled by children on site	4
g) Following route on map of historical places to be visited	2
Total	100%

In 92% of the cases there was some form of preparation before the visit. Table D shows that only in 30% of the cases there seems to be a valid continuation of the teaching programme between class teaching and visits. Current trends are only very slowly being introduced.

As regards the visit itself, 70% of those interviewed rely on the guide or on their knowledge for information. Students are little encouraged to listen and observe during such visits and instead they are left to the passive activity of hearing and seeing most of the time. There was some sort of follow-up in 90% of the cases though most of this follow-up consisted only in sentence writing or drawing.

A limited number of teachers (8%) managed to bring resource-persons from outside the school to conduct or participate in lessons. All this shows that the teacher and the textbook still seem to be the only resources for the learning of Social Studies in some classes.

Pupils' Initiative and Participation

When teachers were asked their method of selecting topics in Social Studies, a very large number (70%) clearly showed that they do not take into consideration children's preferences of topics. Most of the teachers claim that the syllabus is the determining factor when it comes to choosing topics. 94% of the teachers state that most children participate during the Social Studies lesson in some way or other. Discussion and conversation (46%) is the most widespread of these forms of pupil participation. Other forms of participation include the bringing of books and pictures (36%), writing and drawing (24%), and the raising of questions on the learners' part (24%). Only 58% of the teachers allow discussion about controversial subjects or ideas which arise during lessons.

General Comments

1. Current ideas are being implemented in Maltese Government Primary Schools, but to a very limited extent. By and large, things seem to progress slowly since the traditional model is still the main component of Social Studies teaching.
2. The main causes behind all this seem to be the slavery to the syllabus and the examinations. These appear to be forcing the teacher to adopt the traditional way of teaching (this idea was expressed by many teachers).

Examinations seem to be leading to note-taking in the classroom in order that pupils would find something concrete on which to rely when revising for examinations. Moreover, learning

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becomes susceptible to cramming since there is pressure to cover all the syllabus for the final test. What is required of pupils in order that they will pass this test-hurdle is just memorisation of some facts. This method is detrimental to concept formation and skill acquisition.

3. Besides, examinations (especially those for entrance into the Junior Lyceum) put more emphasis on Maths, English and Maltese, and this approach deals another blow to Social Studies teaching in the Primary sector. Results of the present survey show that many teachers do not allocate all the hours allotted for Social Studies in their personal time-table.

4. It seems though that in the present framework where examinations are the focal point of learning and teaching there still could be some changes in Social Studies teaching.

Regular meetings between members of the staff to discuss Social Studies teaching could become more frequent and regular.

Teachers should be given concrete hints on the modern trends through in-service courses. A

seriously planned syllabus should be compiled. A copy of this should be given to each and every teacher and then some way of supervision should ensure that it is being adequately implemented.

Only through such a professional approach will teachers be able to raise and revive their methodology. The teaching of Social Studies should not deteriorate from the moment the teacher leaves his training institution. It should not be based solely on note-taking. The teacher must make of it a pleasant activity for the learners.

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