

PRINCIPLES THAT SHOULD UNDERLIE THE FORMATION OF A SENIOR PRIMARY HISTORY SYLLABUS

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The author believes that too many Senior primary teachers implement the prescribed syllabus in a mechanical way. Teachers should first reach clarity in their own minds concerning the principles that should underline the syllabus before they attempt to teach it. Once they decide on their underlying principles they would know how to approach a syllabus and how to implement it. At senior primary level it is not the content of the syllabus that is important, but rather the way in which it will be taught.

The following ten principles reflect the author's viewpoint concerning any senior primary syllabus. Comments and criticism will be most welcome.

These principles are not arranged in order of importance as they must be applied as a group.

1. *The syllabus must be based on the concrete, which pupils can see, handle and feel. This implies the first-hand investigation of a wide variety of primary source material that will ensure that the child becomes actively involved.*

Between the ages of eight and twelve children are physically at their most energetic. They are interested in everything around them and like to work with their hands. In history teaching too much emphasis is placed on mere talk. Children will respond, if given the chance to the opportunity to use more than one book, handle photocopies of documents, to do their own researches and record and analyze material in varied forms. Children from the age of ten years onwards are only starting to enter the stage that Piaget calls the "concrete operational level". They can only deal in the real and the present and can reason only from material that they can see, touch and use.

The sound history syllabus must therefore enlist these capabilities by making use of source materials that are concrete, visible and involve them actively. For history to be alive and memorable first-hand contact with the primary sources is essential. Pupils with reading problems will greatly benefit from source material that does not depend on written text alone.

2. *The syllabus must be relevant to the children and their situation in this day and age. The syllabus, as far as possible, must therefore move from the present as starting point to the past to see how the present came about.*

The story of the wheel, the ship, aviation etc. are topics of interest. They illustrate well the development sequence behind features of present-day life and also serve to establish a chronological framework. The relevance of history must be stressed from a very early age, before the pupils come to see the subject as only being concerned with the "dead" past and irrelevant for their present situation. Already at standard 2 level local history can bridge this gap between the relevant present and the "irrelevant" past. The location of business areas, old buildings still being used etc. can show how the past influences the present. Because the primary pupil is concerned with the present, the present must be used as a starting point for his journey into the past.

3. *The syllabus should have room for varying approaches so that, for example, the patch of history, the line of*

development and the era approach can be introduced at regular intervals.

If a syllabus is flexible, teachers will be encouraged to choose an approach that will satisfy the interests of the pupils. Local factors or current interests may also make such a deviation from a set course desirable. The primary school teachers at Graaff-Reinet have a large number of local opportunities for teaching, for instance, the Great Trek. At Daniëlskuil in the Northern Cape the history of the Griquas can be taught by making use of local material. Both topics cannot be taught at the same school by making use of local material. At present a topic on "Boycotts and Sanctions" will be of great current interest to the pupils.

Each of the different approaches has advantages and limitations. No single approach can satisfy the needs, interests and requirements of the subject, the pupils and the teacher. If the syllabus makes provision for these different approaches (patch, era, line of development etc.) a large number of the problems in the three areas mentioned above can be curtailed or eliminated altogether.

4. *The content of the syllabus must be interesting to the primary pupils to stimulate them and create a love for history. It must therefore be possible for the teacher to teach the syllabus in an exciting way in order to realize this aim. The really good syllabus should bring about a creative teaching situation.*

Too much school history is dull because it is not taught correctly. Children will respond positively to varied methods of teaching. The syllabus must therefore actively make provision for exciting ways to teach history. The average, minimum qualified teacher in the primary school does not have the historical background to realize the opportunities for this unless it is clearly provided for in the syllabus. Davies and a large number of other authors stress the importance of the well told story in the primary school (Davies, 1972, p. 55; Unstead, 1967, p. 10). The syllabus must therefore make provision for interesting stories to be told. If we accept the educational theory put forward by Kieran Egan and supported by Joan Blyth, the story must dominate in primary school history teaching (Blyth, 1982, p.13)

According to Egan the 10 to 12 year old goes through the "romantic" stage where they are fascinated by the limits or extremes of the "real" world. The kind of stories that are the most engaging at this stage are those that allow the hearer to romantically associate with a hero or heroine who is both bound within the constraints of reality but who is able to transcend those constraints. Qualities such as courage, power, beauty etc. which are in conflict with the threatening real world will engage the student's interest. (Egan, 1982, pp. 157 - 158). The content of the syllabus must therefore make it possible for the teacher to tell this kind of historical story.

5. *It must be child-centred as opposed to the traditional method of a body of knowledge that must be learned (Subject-centred).*

History is a subject that appeals to children of all ages and all mental abilities (In a natural historical way: what was it like when grandfather was young, how did the first car look? etc.) If the syllabus make use of and provide for this natural historical interest of children, history will not be seen as a subject but as an enjoyable activity like art or

physical education. The major factor in deciding the content of the syllabus must therefore be the ability and interests of primary school pupils and not the demands of adult, professional historians. Ten different, unrelated but interesting stories from the Great Trek period are more value than an outline history: the Great Trek 1834 - 1854.

Boyce says that the syllabus is not so much a matter of arranging a course of lessons as the selection of suitable experiences that are very real to the children (Boyce, 1968 p. 53). The child-centred approach will enable the child to learn through its own activity. We must know what these activities are that are natural for the primary age child and provide for them the syllabus. Enough studies have been done so that we can list these activities and provide for them in the syllabus (the primary age child is active, loves stories, has a sense of adventure, etc.)

6. *The content of the syllabus must be about individual people and their activities. The history of everyday life should form an important part of the work, although important events, trends and changes must be included but where possible tied to the actions of individuals.*

Children are interested in individual people and there are many advantages they can derive from studying people and their activities. Primary school pupils have little ability to understand the theoretical and the abstract. Children can appreciate the problems and situation of Oliver Twist as an individual but the social conditions of the poor during the 'Industrial Revolution' are too abstract for real comprehension. The biographical approach must play an important part in the primary syllabus, but the individuals studied must be carefully selected, so that by studying them as many as possible of the principles previously mentioned can be realized. For example, if the pupils in standard 4 study Piet Retief, the following principles can be realized: numbers 3, 4, 6, 7, 9 and 10.

7. *The syllabus should not attempt a chronological outline of South African and General history as this is little suited to the senior primary child's way of thinking or level of time development. The syllabus must not be fashioned with an eye to the needs of the secondary school. It should not be arranged with the intention of reaching a certain chronological point, ready for the secondary school to take over.*

The concept of time is one of the main problems for pupils in the primary school. To arrange the syllabus according to a chronological outline will therefore be self-defeating. As long as a brief outline frame of reference is given at the beginning of the year of each section, the basic facts are quite enough as far as chronological arrangement is concerned and no further attempt should be made to time-order the various topics and features of the syllabus for the primary pupil.

8. *The syllabus must make provisions for enough different topics to prevent loss of interest.*

Children between the ages of ten and twelve are eager and inquisitive, but their powers of concentration are usually short. They are busy, active and industrious as long as their interest is held. The very detailed, long drawn out study of one topic will bore them very easily. An attempt must therefore be made to cover different aspects by means of different topics. This also emphasizes the need for different approaches and different methods - principles 3 and 4.

9. *Historical method, thinking and attitudes will be more important than facts.*

To serve a valid educational purpose the syllabus must

make provision for the children to develop attitudes, train minds, weigh evidence, make judgements and develop skills. Although primary children cannot master the skills of the adult historian, they can learn these skills in a limited sense through limited practice at working with source material. The study of history should be an intellectual exercise which trains the mind to think systematically. It ought to develop scepticism and critical judgements. History must be viewed as a process and not just a body of knowledge.

Certain topics must be specifically included in the syllabus that will bring about the above-mentioned ideas. Too many teachers and pupils still regard the facts as the most important aspect of history in the primary school. How these facts came about, how they can be arranged and their significance, are lost on teachers and pupils. Many history teachers still don't realize that: "Schools should be educating for the understanding of principles rather than facts, in order to develop a thinking population prepared to spend the rest of their lives learning." (Green as quoted by Trümpelmann, 1983, p.37)

10. *The content of the syllabus should be based on national history but closely related to local and world history where possible.*

The primary school pupil does not have the clear understanding of many different countries and new foreign names that are needed to study world history. The story of their own ancestors and own country will be much more meaningful for the primary pupil. To study their own country will be much more relevant for the pupils - see principle 2 - than studying foreign history. Where world history influenced South Africa - e.g. the Napoleonic Wars and the Second British occupation of the Cape - this must be pointed out and briefly explained to the pupils. Care must be taken that they never see events in South Africa in isolation from international events, but the bulk of history content must be from South African history.

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