

History in Secondary Schools 1976

A YEAR'S SURVEY

LAST year, as a teaching fellow in the Department of History at the University of Waikato, I carried out a study of the condition of history as a subject in New Zealand secondary schools. The study was intended to establish, statistically, whether history was a subject in growth or decline, to discover the extent of any trends, and to investigate their causes. The study initially involved an analysis of the entry statistics in the School Certificate, University Entrance, University Bursary and Scholarship examinations from 1969 to 1975, comparing trends in history with those of other subjects. Subsequently, thirty-one secondary schools were contacted, mainly in the Waikato—Bay of Plenty region, and representing both urban and rural catchment areas; fourteen of these contacts were personal visits, the remainder being by mail. Some 2000 pupils completed *questionnaires*, approximately 75 per cent of these pupils being fifth, sixth and seventh formers, and the remainder largely fourth formers. The *questionnaires* were designed to test a range of pupil opinions about history and also social studies. Both structured and unstructured *questionnaires* were used, and these were administered to both history and non-history classes. Where schools were visited personally, there were also abundant opportunities for discussion with students after the completion of the *questionnaires*. Moreover, history and social studies staff from some fifty schools assisted the inquiry with statements of opinion, as did approximately 300 students from Hamilton Teachers' College and the University of Waikato.

It is evident that history is in fact a declining subject at fifth and sixth form level in secondary schools, a trend which stands in marked contrast to the overall growth in senior school rolls. The 7 per cent fall-off in entries for history in the School Certificate examination, 1971-75, must be viewed against a 14 per cent increase for aggregate entry in that examination. University Entrance presents a similar pattern, a 1 per cent retardation against a 12 per cent growth rate. Only in the seventh form is history holding its own, and in fact at Scholarship level shows a percentage rise in entry double the average for that examination.

In the fifth form, the subjects showing rapid and consistent development are mathematics, science and the technical and trades subjects, including

home economics and typewriting for the girls. Maori also shows a dramatic rate of expansion, although the statistics are flattered by the small beginnings from which the subject is working. Art, biology, mathematics and technical drawing flourish in the sixth form. In the Bursary and Scholarship Examinations, accounting and economics show an explosive growth rate although, as was the case with Maori, the statistics are distorted by the recent beginning of the subjects, and in future years the pace of their development may be expected to slacken. Geography at all levels is maintaining an approximate parity with the increase in school rolls.

Not all subjects show consistent patterns of acceleration or retardation. Of the sciences, only biology in the sixth and seventh forms continues to mirror the popularity of School Certificate science. Physics and chemistry are stagnant, except in the Scholarship Examination, where they are aerated by a possibly spurious reputation as channels through which high marks may be obtained. One area where the rate of collapse is both consistent and catastrophic is in the field of traditional language studies, Maori not included. French, German and Latin at all levels show relative losses ranging from 19 to 71 per cent over the last five years. Thus, the history teacher may rest assured that, although history has lost ground both in relative and absolute terms during recent years, the position of the subject is far from hopeless. There are others which face very much greater problems.

School pupils, when asked to comment on the apparent decline of history, frequently explain the trend in terms of the 'unimportance' of the study. To more than 50 per cent of school children, English is their most important subject. Mathematics commands the loyalty of some 30 per cent more. Further behind come the sciences and then the technical and trades subjects. Foreign languages and art trail the field. Consistently, male and female students evince differing perceptions regarding subject importance. Girls are 50 per cent more likely than boys to favour English as a subject, while boys show a commensurate preference for mathematics and the sciences. History pupils favour English more than non-historians do, and history is 60 per cent a girls' subject. Of ten common secondary school study areas, non-historians commonly rank history seventh and historians rank their subject fourth or fifth in importance. Since most School Certificate candidates study only five subjects, clearly many history students must regard the option as their least important choice.

'Importance', for more than half of school pupils, is judged by criteria which are explicitly vocational, and career considerations are implicit in the comments of 25 per cent more. The children feel that they are under pressure, both from their parents and from the mass communication media, to obtain vocational qualifications. This applies right across the socio-economic spectrum. The children also feel that vocational pressures are reinforced by the secondary schools. Girls no less than boys show a high degree of career motivation. Thus, if employment factors play any role in the differing subject preferences shown by male and female students, these factors must concern type rather than degree of employment motivation.

Alas, however, girls are no more inclined than boys to see a career in history: this is not the explanation of the female preference for historical studies.

School pupils generally have very limited ideas regarding history's vocational possibilities. Few fifth formers see the subject as leading to anything but teacher training. Most fifth forms, pooling their knowledge, can list no more than six careers to which a study of history might be relevant. At sixth form level, half the male and two-thirds of the female history students see no personal vocational application in the study.

History's relatively lowly ranking in the tables of 'importance' poses problems for teachers of the discipline. Subjects such as English, mathematics and the sciences, whose value seems self-evident to the pupils, give the teacher a far better chance of getting away with bad teaching. The historian is denied this luxury. The past may offer interest and romance, or may offer insights into the present situation, but these benefits can only be communicated through the personality of an effective teacher.

When school pupils are asked to focus specifically on history, rather than to evaluate the relative importance of all the main subjects in the curriculum, their replies again show differing emphases according to the pupils' sex. Boys are twice as likely as girls to stress the concept of history's 'irrelevance' or to be in the position of 'never having considered the subject', and are twice as prone to expressing uncertainty regarding the nature of history. Boys also show a tendency to regard social studies in an unfavourable light, although this is far less marked than in their attitude to history. Moreover, boys far more than girls anticipate that history will probably be a difficult or 'time-consuming' option. Consistently in this year's survey boys showed a preference for easy outlets. Girls are noticeably less likely than boys to reject history out-of-hand; rather they are prepared to consider the option, but they tend to discard it in favour of geography. This is especially true at fifth form level; the School Certificate geography entry exceeds that for history by 250 per cent. For the average pupil it seems that neither geography nor history is a high priority career subject. Both tend to be evaluated for their convenience as examination makeweights, and in this capacity geography is the popular choice.

Certain other factors which militate against history weigh equally with both sexes. A fifth of all pupils state that the school option structure was a major factor in preventing their taking history. A third of the pupils imagine that historical studies would be 'boring'. Some justify this opinion by quoting evidence from their friends. Of the non-history pupils whom I questioned last year, one in seven or eight had studied the subject previously and since discarded it. For some, it had never been more than a 'filler', abandoned as soon as convenient. For a larger group, the study was simply dull. For many pupils, dullness seems to be equated with fact-orientation, and difficulty with rote-learning. Such children imagine that content is taught as an end in itself and have never achieved an insight into the value of history.

Social studies, as it operates at present in the third and fourth forms, is not assisting young people to gain such insights. As fourth formers consider their

overall range of options for the following year, they are guided principally by vocational considerations. Approximately half of them also give heavy weighting to previous successful or enjoyable experiences of subjects, with success mattering rather more than enjoyment. Only a third of the pupils questioned give much thought to the likely future interest of the subject; fewer still pay close heed to parental or teacher advice.

Since most secondary school third and fourth form pupils do not study history as a separate discipline, they can only achieve some understanding of its nature through the medium of social studies. The majority of fourth formers feel that social studies gives them an insight into the process of change and into world problems; such perceptions should warm the history teacher's heart. But these same pupils tend not to perceive the significance of the relationship between social studies and history or geography, with history faring worse than geography in this respect. In large numbers, pupils noted in supplementary comments at the end of their *questionnaires* that history was an 'irrelevant' study, yet frequently these same pupils had assessed social studies highly for the insights it gave into the process of change; they seemed unaware that a study of change presupposes a comparison between two points in time, and thus by definition presupposes a study of history.

Fifth and sixth form pupils, looking back over their experience in the lower forms, were fairly emphatic that their social studies training had led them to geography. Of the sixth formers questioned, 52 per cent felt that social studies had given them insights into the nature of geography, 25 per cent that it gave them insights into history, and 22 per cent that it assisted an understanding of neither subject. Probably a majority of heads of social studies departments in New Zealand secondary schools are geographers. However, the fifth and sixth formers who criticized social studies did not imply that the subject actively proselytizes for geography; they complained rather that their course had left them ignorant as to the nature of history, and also that the study had tended to be superficial.

The new social studies syllabus, especially at fourth form level where the emphasis is on 'social change', demands in fact a historical interpretation which, clearly, it is not receiving. Perhaps staff are confused by the concepts of a 'pupil-centred study' and an 'inter-disciplinary course', to the extent that they feel guilty if they utilize historical material or historical method. Such a misinterpretation of the requirements of the new social studies syllabus can only work to the detriment both of history and of social studies.

A comparison between the *questionnaire* replies of fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh form pupils not only sheds light on the social studies background, but also shows how the maturation process of the teenage years affects attitudes to history, although it must be admitted that a single year's inquiry into this area cannot have the scientific accuracy of a longitudinal survey. Granted this limitation, fifth, sixth and seventh form pupils do seem to demonstrate different patterns of mental operation, for example in their analyses of the difficulties of studying history. Proportionally, fifth formers show themselves to be twice as concerned with rote-learning as sixth formers are, while the

sixth form's pre-occupation in this direction exceeds the seventh form's by a commensurate amount. Many fifth formers stated simply that they could not understand history. Girls especially found politics incomprehensible, and wished that they could study people. Sixth formers saw their difficulties less purely in terms of remembering events and more in terms of perceiving the relationship between events. The seventh formers' main concerns lay in the area of study skills, and of motivating themselves to tackle a syllabus which some of them felt was irrelevant.

Some older pupils with whom I discussed these issues were able to look back and analyse the growth processes which they felt they had experienced. They declared that they had moved from a preference for the security of the concrete and tangible to an enjoyment of venturing into the realm of the abstract. When fifth form history had presented them with a level of abstraction which they could not handle, at that stage they had retreated into the shelter of rote-learning. Unfortunately, for history's casualties the shelter seems to become a tomb.

When pupils are asked to switch their attention from history's difficulties and to state their preferences regarding syllabus content, differences according to age and sex are again manifest in their replies. There appears to be a 25 to 30 per cent demand from teenagers at all levels for a study of ancient history. The demand appears to reflect the romance of the remote and the lure of the unknown. Geography capitalizes on it, successfully, by offering insights into foreign countries and exotic cultures. While the 'relevance' of ancient history may be questioned, the reply need not necessarily be negative. If democracy is indeed the form of government most suited to New Zealand's present condition, and if public apathy is the enemy of democracy, then a study of the history of ancient Greece could prove salutary for our population.

Pupils showed considerably less interest in medieval history than they did in ancient history, and such interest as there was in this direction emanated largely from the girls. A sixth of the fourth form girls warmed to the idea of history as a study of kings and queens. They seemed drawn by the pageantry of court life and the romance of chivalry. But the girls' major orientation lay towards history as a study of people. Female students placed twice as much emphasis as the boys did on biography, and ten times as much emphasis on social history. The boys, on the other hand, showed themselves twice as likely as the girls to favour 'recent world history', and were more tolerant of political approaches than the girls. Our school syllabuses bear the unmistakable marks of male planning.

When *questionnaire* replies are compared on an age rather than a sex basis, the results seem to negate the concept of 'walking backwards into history'. Among both history and non-history pupils, it is the sixth and seventh formers rather than the fifth who demonstrate a predilection for recent world history, showing a 200-300 per cent swing in that direction. Sixth formers complained to me that they would really have appreciated the fifth form syllabus this year, and I found seventh formers asserting that they had been

robbed of current issues just when they were of an age to come to grips with them.

However, the present School Certificate and University Entrance prescriptions do operate satisfactorily for many staff and pupils. They can be used with considerable flexibility, and the new form five format has been particularly well received. Many of its themes deal with colourful, dramatic events. Moreover, it offers many opportunities for a biographical or at least 'people-centred' approach, and such an approach greatly helps the teacher in interpreting a mature study to an immature clientele; the abstract can be hung upon the tangibles of biography.

Student responses to *questionnaires* concerning teaching method imply that, already, the new form five syllabus is having an impact in this area. A greater flexibility is manifest in history teaching methods at fifth form than at other levels. School Certificate history groups mention the use of charts, the analysis of statistics and of documents, the employment of films and participation in drama rather more frequently than other groups do. On the other hand, seventh form pupils give far more prominence to seminar work.

In assessing techniques for effectiveness, pupils opt with tremendous consistency for a discussion approach, be it an informal class discussion, a group situation or a set debate. The preference is expressed by pupils of all ages and both sexes, though more markedly by girls. Classes imply that discussion helps them to clarify concepts and to establish coherent mental patterns. However, pupils are by no means contemptuous of more traditional teaching methods. They rate written work second in their list of necessary teaching techniques. Older pupils at present are more tolerant of conservative teaching methods than the younger are. It is form seven which shows the greatest preference for written work and the sixth form which places the greatest reliance on teacher explanations. It is the non-history pupils who denigrate traditionalism and who show the greatest predilection for the research and group-centred approaches which they have learned through social studies. History students do, however, dislike dictated and pre-duplicated notes. They feel they derive far more benefit either from their own written research projects or from seminars. In defence of pre-duplicated notes, staff assert that a story time takes a good deal of time to establish, and some pupils admit that the sheer pressure of the syllabus drives their teachers to take such short cuts.

In two or three years' time, as the present fourth and fifth forms reach senior levels, fresh demands on the teacher may be expected to emerge. Already, in the sixth and seventh forms, there exists an appetite for group work and for documentary analysis which is largely unsatisfied. History students, reared on the new School Certificate history prescription, will expect their fifth form experience to spiral into University Entrance and Bursary work and will be disappointed, because many schools lack the resources to sustain such a sequence of development. There is need for a wide range of historical resources to help the senior school teacher to build on the foundations laid in form five, and to cater for the increasing variety of ability

and maturity now found in the sixth form and beyond. This need will become more acute every year, as the results of the introduction of single subject passes in University Entrance become more apparent in the composition of the senior school.

In the face of the difficulties that beset the secondary school history teacher, what further steps should be taken? Some history teachers have given up the struggle. Since 1971, more history graduates than geographers have passed through the secondary teachers' colleges. However, in the schools, some history teachers have found the motivation of mixed ability groups to be too daunting a task and have switched to the teaching of geography or mathematics. They find that children respond with more enthusiasm to these subjects. Some staff find that the precision or concrete nature of these subjects makes them easier to teach. Staff say that they find it easier to identify the precise point of need of individual pupils in these subjects, and so they feel that they can handle mixed ability groups with more success. They also feel that these subjects are easier to evaluate and demand less preparation.

Because of the diminishing clientele for history, some history graduates, for promotion's sake, end up as heads of English, liberal studies or even of geography departments. Also, because of the limited number of senior history classes in many schools, the history teacher is often called upon to teach social studies, English, geography, languages, or to fill any slot in the timetable that lies inconveniently vacant; alternatively, the school's administration may regard history as being a subject of minor importance and, consequently, entrust it to the care of a non-historian. Either way, the result is to scatter the teacher's preparation time over a wide range of subjects, and the history teacher finds it difficult to maintain the knowledge, develop the skills or amass the resource library that a successful teaching of the subject ideally would demand.

Adequate teacher training is thus important for the future of history in the schools. Staff whom I questioned wished that their training had given them more insights into the mixed ability situation. They would have valued a wider experience in the classroom during their training. They wished that they had been given more chance to develop a resource library while under training college supervision. Perhaps four years of concurrent academic study and educational training would allow more time for the trainee teacher to develop skills. Perhaps staff should return to the training college after a year or two's practice in the classroom. Perhaps the training college should be empowered to provide a follow-up service for its probationers in the schools. But, certainly, the present 'end-on' structure allows the college little room for manoeuvre.

It is also important that the history staff at present in the schools, especially the heads of departments, should have access to retraining. This might take the form of in-service courses. Staff would also benefit from a more frequent observation of each other's lessons, and from teacher exchanges between the schools. Now that the abolition of grading has limited

the freedom of movement of the inspectorate, it would be helpful if experienced staff could be seconded to the inspectorate on a regular basis to reinforce its advisory arm. Since financial stringency would hamper any official programme, all forms of self-help and co-operation between the schools in the direction of retraining deserve encouragement.

As regards the history syllabuses themselves, they need to be flexible, to cater for a wide variety of intellectual and emotional development. A longitudinal study of teenage maturation could provide useful guidelines for future syllabus development, in other humanities besides history. It would be desirable for the School Certificate Examination Board and the University Entrance Board to co-ordinate their planning, in phase with teenage patterns of mental and emotional growth. Within the history area, biographical approaches and units on social history merit consideration. History is a popular subject in situations where the pupils see it as being concerned with people. Children who are bored with the fifth and sixth form courses complain that their studies are 'all politics'. This is especially true of the less able sixth formers. It is difficult for an immature school pupil to develop a mental image of 'social welfare' or 'imperialism'; it is far easier to visualize Seddon, Savage or Cecil Rhodes. At fifth form level, 'International Relations 1919-41' and 'Leadership' are consistently popular topics because they can be hung upon the life stories of Hitler, Mao Tse Tung and Sukarno. Units on ancient history and historical geography could also figure usefully in any future syllabus extension, combining as they do the ingredients of romance, the lure of the visual and the appeal of biography.

Local history, too, may have a great deal to offer. Perhaps the aged social studies concept of the 'local study' should be taken off the shelf and re-dusted. Local history could prove beneficial to a pioneer society which is in the process of evolving its own culture. It could provide a constructive answer to the teenager who asserts that 'New Zealand has no history'. Youngsters with an exclusively modernist orientation could be given the opportunity of seeing themselves as part of history's unfolding pattern. Pupils who have little knowledge of history's methods or the stimulating variety of its sources could be constrained to meet people, and to find that they themselves and their families are historical resources. Pupils could become involved in first-hand detective work. Furthermore, local history could help to span the gulfs of immaturity by a vertical linking of the entire form three to form seven age range in common projects. Social studies could work demonstrably and fruitfully with history. Older pupils could help the younger to plan their fieldwork and process their findings. Perhaps, also, local history would help to tap the greatly under-used resources of the Maori pupil.

Lightweight vocationally though history may appear to students, it nevertheless possesses great strength in its power to interest. The vibrancy of the subject in schools where it flourishes proves that this interest is communicable to a teenage audience, and shows how fruitful the results of such communication can be.

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APPENDIX

Relative Status of Secondary School Examination Subjects

	Examination entry in 1975				Percentage rate of relative growth or decline 1971-75			
	SC	UE	UB	Schol	SC	UE	UB	Schol
Aggregate	59983	26143	6412	1351	+14	+12	+11	+25
Accounting*	N/A	6107	772	80	N/A	+47	+116	N/A
App. Maths*	N/A	N/A	1742	387	N/A	N/A	+28	+68
Art*	N/A	3218	463	23	N/A	+85	+279	N/A
Biology	13888	19516	3671	385	-6	+27	+34	+47
Bookkeeping	6668	N/A	N/A	N/A	+12	N/A	N/A	N/A
Chemistry	1950	9525	3394	647	-46	-3	-1	-35
Clothing	2250	N/A	N/A	N/A	+9	N/A	N/A	N/A
Economics*	N/A	N/A	1886	130	N/A	N/A	+143	+442
Engineering S ^k	3953	N/A	N/A	N/A	+34	N/A	N/A	N/A
English	N/A	N/A	5791	394	N/A	+12	+5	+24
French	8060	2913	925	158	-32	-36	-29	-19
Geography	34671	15732	2207	125	+10	+11	+26	+30
German	N/A	1059	338	61	N/A	-16	-33	-9
History	14436	9443	1986	211	-7	-1	+16	+61
Home Econ.	3176	N/A	N/A	N/A	+77	N/A	N/A	N/A
Latin	N/A	187	133	22	N/A	-63	-60	-71
Maori	1142	345	27	1	+209	+108	+208	N/A
Mathematics	44690	19688	5013	801	+43	+52	+16	+23
Music	N/A	547	98	8	N/A	+200	+32	±0
Physics	2368	9258	3153	589	-28	+16	±0	+27
Science	32605	N/A	N/A	N/A	+35	N/A	N/A	N/A
Tech. Drawing	11594	2798	N/A	N/A	+50	+89	N/A	N/A
Typewriting	9074	N/A	N/A	N/A	+70	N/A	N/A	N/A
Woodwork	4221	N/A	N/A	N/A	+63	N/A	N/A	N/A

*Subjects introduced in or after 1971; growth rates, therefore, can be expected to level off.

Subjects studied in combination with history (percentage of history pupils studying each subject).

	Form 5		Form 6		Form 7
English	99	English	99	English	95
Mathematics	75	Geography	79	Biology	58
Science	60	Biology	75	Geography	56
Geography	51	Mathematics	56	Mathematics	53
Biology	27	French	12	Economics	37
French	17	Art	12	French	19

Reasons influencing Form 4 pupils as they select their fifth form courses:

Replies by 505 Form 4 pupils, from 14 schools		Percentage of pupils for whom each factor is a major influence (as indicated by a '4' or '5' grading on a 5 point scale).		
		Boy	Girl	Overall
1	Association with friends	3	1	2
2	Previous success at subjects	52	51	51
3	Ease of subjects	9	6	7
4	Anticipated interest of subjects	38	36	37
5	Previous enjoyment of subjects	46	46	46
6	Advice of brothers or sisters	6	4	5
7	Challenge of the subjects	8	9	8
*8	Subjects contributing to an understanding of the world	11	11	11
9	Teacher advice	13	16	15
10	Parental advice	20	17	19
11	Career factors	69	73	71
12	Liking or respect for subject teachers	8	8	8

*Pupils who were intending to study history in Form 5 stressed this factor more than those who were not. Otherwise, there was little difference in emphasis between historians and non-historians.

It should be noted that the percentages are calculated according to the proportion of '4' or '5' grade responses made by pupils. Were '3' gradings, indicating a clearly positive though not necessarily decisive influence, to be included, the response percentages would be increased typically by a third to a half.