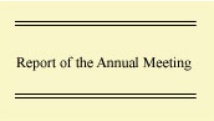
Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association
Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada



International Education through the Social Studies in Schools of the United States

Howard E. Wilson

Volume 24, numéro 1, 1945

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300273ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/300273ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)
1712-9095 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Wilson, H. E. (1945). International Education through the Social Studies in Schools of the United States. *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association / Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada*, *24*(1), 75–82. https://doi.org/10.7202/300273ar

INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION THROUGH THE SOCIAL STUDIES IN SCHOOLS OF THE UNITED STATES

By HOWARD E. WILSON
Harvard University

IT is difficult to present a clear picture of education in the United States because of the extraordinary variety in school programmes, in curriculum, in institutional administration, and in community school relationships which exists throughout the United States. Not only does each of the forty-eight states have its own educational system, but within each state there is the greatest degree of variation among towns and cities and rural districts. In spite of this variation, however, it is desirable and possible to present briefly a cross-section description of the present status of the social studies in the schools of the United States. Against a background of that common denominator of present practice may be traced certain significant trends affecting education for international relations in the United States.

The social studies programme of the primary grades in United States schools is essentially an activity programme. It deals with home and school and neighbourhood life, adapting from these areas topics appropriate to the maturity of primary grade pupils. About grade III the programme is likely to become more systematic and "on the average" in the United States, to deal with "ways of living in many lands." The grade III work is increasingly a series of type-studies of life and customs under differing geographic conditions throughout the world. In the fourth grade pupils are likely to study materials dealing with their own region—the Middle West, the Pacific Coast, New England. In grade V this is expanded to study United States history with particular reference to the colonial period. In grade VI a study of the old world background of American life is fairly common. In all of grades I to VI the typical pupil studies a good deal about elementary geography.

It becomes much easier to trace the pattern of social studies instruction as one deals with the secondary school. In grade VII the pupil is likely to study geography, ending his formal study of that subject at about that grade level. In grade VIII he has a year's instruction in United States history which is primarily a narrative account of the settling and development of the country. In grade IX, the least certain year of the secondary school, the most commonly taught subject is social civics, a functional approach to local, state, and federal government. In grade X world history is commonly offered as an elective. In grade XI United States history is almost universally a required subject of study. In grade XII the social studies programme is climaxed by a year devoted to the study of modern problems and current affairs.

I should repeat and emphasize that this general picture of the social studies courses of study is a low common denominator of actual practices. Many schools are engaged in experimenting with closer adaptation of the programme to pupils' needs and to community characteristics. This widespread variety and experimentation, which are primary qualities of the American school system, I think, make the school programme more sensitive and flexible; from them emerge what may be fairly standard practice in the years that lie ahead.

The United States, like all other countries in the modern world, is undergoing extensive readjustments in terms of its international relations. These

readjustments are political and economic and cultural in nature. Education is no less free from the world current and trends of our time than is any other aspect of American life. Under the impact of war and the hopes of coming peace certain marked trends in the social studies curriculum may be discerned. They represent an American attempt to face world responsibilities more realistically and to prepare a generation of citizens informed and understanding in the international field. I should like on this occasion to point out certain of these movements in the social studies field.

The first of the trends that I should like to point out is that of making the story of United States history somewhat less ethnocentric than it has been in the past. There have been in recent years many studies of textbooks and courses of study leading to recommendations for increased understanding of the international relations in which the United States operates, of the cross-currents of world affairs. There have been attempts to lift the horizons of pupils beyond the confines of national boundary lines in order better to understand the nation itself. These attempts are inherently readjustments in the story of national history. They are efforts to teach our pupils more understandingly about the myth of isolation and the realities of United States relations with other countries. They are motivated by the highest type of scholarship and are not, except in very rare cases, influenced by pressure groups from outside the United States. The trend toward revising United States history in order to see the United States more adequately in its world setting is indigenous in current American scholarship and offers, I think, great possibility for improving the quality of intelligent and far-sighted patriotism among young people. There are within the United States certain professional patriotic groups which seek to interpret United States history in terms of belligerence toward other nations. But those groups are not the dominant ones in terms of present trends.

Another aspect of American education which has influence on international relations is the treatment of world history in our schools. As already indicated, world history is very widely taught at about the tenth grade level. Too frequently in the past, world history courses in the schools have been encyclopedic arrangements of factual materials hopelessly crammed and uninteresting for pupils. Today among teachers of world history there is a marked inclination to deal with fewer major topics in world history, but to deal with topics which are selected more adequately and effectively. The world history course is increasingly for young people an interpretative course in which the basis of organization and focus of attention is on such significant aspects of world affairs as the rise of nationalism, industrialization, democracy, and imperialism. It seems fair to say that young students of world history today have a deeper understanding of the basic forces of modern times than was possible for them a few years ago.

Closely connected with both United States and world history is another trend of marked significance in the United States—that toward the increased study of certain world areas which have been neglected among us. In recent years there has been a heavy increase in the study of Latin America as a force in world affairs. Parallelling that there is a rapid rise of the study of Asiatic matters. Many of our schools recognize that the great streams of Occidental and Oriental culture have never been completely separated and are now flowing closer and closer together. In addition to increased study of Asia, there is rising interest in the study of the Soviet Union. There

are many influences today tending toward increased study of Canada in the schools of my country. This study of "neglected areas" such as Latin America, Asia, Russia, and Canada, does not mean necessarily diminishing interest in the more standard areas of study. It means only that the concept of world history and of the framework of national history is increasingly global in scope.

With the coming of the war, there was greatly increased study of geography in American schools. Part of this geographic instruction has been animated by interest in aviation geography and part of it by new techniques of map projection and consciousness of the importance of geographic factors in the war. But more than being a war phenomenon, the study of geography is of long range importance. There is every indication that in the years that lie immediately ahead some of the geographic material now widely taught in our elementary schools will be moved upward in the school curriculum and that geography will occupy a stronger place in the secondary school. There are many who believe that our ninth grade course in civics will shortly give way to a substantial geography course taught at that grade level, dealing with the earth's natural resources, their location, distribution, and control.

Another effect of the war has been to increase the time and attention given in the school programme to the study of current events. There is, in our schools, more attention to newspapers and magazines and to the far flung events of global conflict than we have ever had before. It is probable that the time spent on current affairs in schools will not greatly diminish with the end of the war. There is a marked tendency to tie the materials of the school programme closer and closer to the events and movements of current affairs. Since so many of these current affairs are of world importance the study of current affairs is in effect a means of increased study of international relations.

One final trend should be noted. It is concerned with teaching pupils more about the actual techniques of international relations. We have in the past, for example, in most of our history courses dismissed the making of an important treaty with a short summary of the terms of that treaty. Today we are more inclined to discuss how the treaty was made. Analysis of the place of public opinion in the shaping of international policies, analysis of the principles and practices of the League of Nations, of international law, of the World Court, and now of the United Nations charter, is increasingly an aspect of our school programme, especially in the final year of our twelve-year system.

These trends all lead to the conclusion that education in the United States—and especially the teaching of the social studies in our schools—are deeply influenced by the international crises in which we have been living. There is a strong moral conviction among the great body of American educators that such a conflict as we are now enduring must not come again. There is conviction that the efforts of schools must be bent toward creating an understanding of world factors and movements in the largest possible number of citizens. There is every effort to integrate this intellectual understanding of world affairs with deep respect for friendly nations. In these trends which have been noted is the effort to build a sound foundation for international understanding and respect. Such a foundation is the school's chief contribution to the maintenance of peace.*

*For the discussion on this article see page 81.

THE TEACHING OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN CANADA

By Charles E. Phillips
The University of Toronto

In this short paper I shall deal only with teaching in the elementary and secondary schools, or in what some provinces call the junior and senior high school grades—VII to XIII. There is proportionately more teaching of international relations in adult education and in university education; but the public elementary and secondary schools have a special importance because they are attended by nearly all people, and the extent and nature of their teaching is relatively easy to discover and define.

In the schools most formal teaching of international relations is carried on, if at all, in connection with the study of history. It is therefore worth observing at the outset that the study of history in Canada is weighted in favour of a relatively restricted field. This fact may be emphasized and explained by turning back to the beginnings of public education in this province.

In the early nineteenth century, when schools in Upper Canada began to increase in number, about the only attention given to international affairs in connection with them arose from a fear that republican influences from the United States might weaken allegiance to the British crown. Men of position and influence were constant in their denunciation of text-books and teachers from across the line. Egerton Ryerson, for example, considered United States text-books unique in their hostility towards the governments and institutions of other countries, especially Great Britain; he found it shocking that books patently republican should be tolerated in the schools and even favoured by some teachers; in his argument against them he called attention to their "occasional remarks, or hints, against the Holy Scriptures, or the Christian religion"; yet he took some comfort in the fact that no one had found it "convenient to come forth publicly" and advocate their use.[1] United States teachers in Canada were described as "anti-British adventurers," all the worse when superior teaching skill made them popular in spite of their subversive propaganda.

Shortly after the introduction of authorized text-books in 1846, the use of United States geographies, histories, and readers declined to the vanishing point. At the same time it became possible to enforce the requirement, enacted in 1816, that a teacher must be a British subject. Then alarm about the teaching of republicanism subsided. Nevertheless from that time to this loyalty to the British connection has been presented as a virtue which the majority without exhortation might be tempted to forsake. This attitude, whether founded in fact or imagination, has made it seem a patriotic duty to give particular emphasis to British history in the schools.

Accordingly, in the English-speaking provinces from Manitoba eastward about two-thirds of the time spent on organized history from grades VII to XII is devoted to the study of British and Canadian history. It is as if the pupil had two native lands with a prior claim on his attention—

[1] J. G. Hodgins, *Documentary History of Education* (28 vols., Toronto, 1894-1910), VI, 159, 283-4.

Canada and Great Britain. The consequence is that relatively little time is left for the study of other contemporary countries, especially if the claims of the ancient world have also to be satisfied. In the Province of Quebec, where less time is given to British history, a correspondingly greater emphasis is placed on certain periods and aspects of Canadian history, and again little time is left for the contemporary international scene.

Of course the study of Canada and Great Britain can be extended to a study of international relations. The interesting and informative little book by Professor George W. Brown, *Canadian Democracy in Action,* which has just been sent out for use in grade XII of all Ontario schools, has a last chapter on "Canadians as British and World Citizens." The new course on "Canada and the Modern World" for grade XIII in Ontario touches frequently on international relations. But the teacher in Canada cannot proceed with the same frank confidence in arousing an active student interest in world affairs because the Canadian public has not decided just how Canada may properly participate in the shaping of international policy —whether almost entirely by a share in determining imperial policies, or largely as an autonomous nation. Strong feelings on this matter make it more convenient to present international relations as a field in which Canadians are detached observers rather than shapers of events, with the result that no sense of responsibility is engendered.

The study of modern world history is the most obvious place for developing a broad interest in international relations. For reasons already stated not very much time can be given in Canada to this general field, and the loss is greater because it has been common practice to postpone such study until the higher grades (XI, XII, or XIII). The argument has been, of course, that we should wait until pupils have attained a certain maturity; but in practice this has meant waiting until a majority of pupils are no longer at school. However, in New Brunswick, Manitoba, and Alberta, world history now appears in the programme for grade IX. If it is not possible in this grade to arrive by a thorough study of recent history at a deep understanding of contemporary world problems, one should recognize that some knowledge and an awakened interest are better than the alternative in most cases—no study of modern world history at all.

It will be hard for members of a scholarly assembly like the Canadian Historical Association to admit the value of such a claim. But surely the purpose of teaching in the elementary and secondary schools is to produce, not just a few scholars, but a large number of interested citizens. For the average person knowledge is an ephemeral asset if he has not the attitudes and interests which will cause him to use and retain some of his information and make him willing and able to acquire more. A course of study and a type of teaching which might be excellent for a few mature and intelligent students may, and probably will, defeat its own purpose with a large proportion of the population in our elementary and secondary schools.

For this reason I would have you look with all sympathy you can on what may be called the social studies approach to the teaching of both national and international affairs. This approach is most widely used in the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia, where students in the senior high school grades study contemporary problems which lead back into history and cut across geographical boundaries. If one looks at the curriculum, there is an obvious loss of organized knowledge. But if one

looks to the effect on the thinking, attitudes, and interests of young people today there is a decided gain in functional value. Canadian education is such that we can move much further in the direction of the social studies approach, provided we do it intelligently, without any danger of disintegration.

Apart from the study of history, and some increasing emphasis on geography, Canadian schools give some regular attention to contemporary affairs by discussion of current events in the classroom, in auditorium periods, and in after-school clubs. One current-events magazine published in Canada for the use of school pupils has a circulation of sixteen thousand. Some of this attention to contemporary affairs is necessarily concerned with international relations.

To deal now with the subject in a broader way, I should like to enlarge somewhat on the work of the Canada-United States Committee on Education, which was mentioned briefly by Professor Wilson. This committee is one agency set up to foster and improve the teaching of international relations. Although its terms of reference embrace only relations between two great North American neighbours, the influence of the committee will extend much farther if, as is hoped, it becomes a model for the establishing of other similar committees between other pairs of countries.

Practically all of you will have read the committee's first publication, *Education for Mutual Understanding and Friendship between Canada and the United States*. I shall not therefore waste your time by giving an extended account of the committee's origin and purpose. Let me say rather that we are now trying to secure financial support for a number of studies of teaching materials and educational instruments in Canada and the United States which closely affect relations between the two countries—school text-books in history and geography, the content of courses in literature, music, and art, school broadcasting and educational films, the leisure reading of school pupils, and a dozen or more other items of various kinds. Members of the committee have been active in other ways—for example, in a conference held to encourage teachers and other students to take some part of their graduate courses in a university on the other side of the border, and also to encourage a freer use by universities of summer school teaching personnel from across the border.

In the teaching of international relations I would attach the highest importance to the attitude of the teachers themselves. For this reason one achievement of the Canada-United States Committee on Education seems to me to be of particular significance. At the suggestion of committee members, at least three universities this summer are conducting workshops for teachers in the field of Canada-United States relations. They are Harvard University, the University of British Columbia, and the University of Toronto.

The summer workshop at the Ontario College of Education, University of Toronto, has as its theme "Canada as a member of the British Commonwealth." It will be attended by thirty or forty teachers from both sides of the border. The teaching staff consists of two educators who will act as directors, one a Canadian and one from the United States, and lecturers drawn from three or four Ontario universities, including Queen's University. Teachers who attend the workshop will use a specially prepared collection of books, pamphlets, films, and other teaching materials; they

will take part in regular organized discussions; they will have plenty of opportunity to consult members of the teaching staff; they will visit centres of interest in Canadian life; and they will have other direct contacts with Canadian people and Canadian ways. Add to this planned programme the opportunities for teachers from two countries to get to know one another at meal-time and in residence life at the university. It is evident that these international workshops for teachers should help materially in making the classroom teaching of international relations sound, interesting, and convincing.

For one who would improve the teaching of any aspect of contemporary affairs, this is the most promising approach—reach the teacher first. The teacher who has sound knowledge and keen interest combined with an appreciation of the pupil's point of view and skill to arouse an abiding interest can achieve much. Without such a teacher any provision in the course of study is of little avail.

DISCUSSION*

Mr. McDermott opened the discussion by stressing the need of developing an international point of view through the teaching of history in particular, but through all teaching as well. He stated that a distinction should be kept between the subjects of history and current events. Teaching the latter does not necessarily mean the development of an international attitude of mind or understanding amongst students. They need historical background first. We must reach students who are not interested in the social sciences. We must make an international frame of mind seem practical to all students. Languages, for instance, of subjects other than history, can be a basically international subject for Canadians. It is important to reach students who do not go to university but who will be involved in Canadian international trade. International politics is a necessary subject of study for Canada's international safety. An international attitude is of importance to the proper development of the arts. Any lack in schools in the creating of an international attitude is not made up after graduation.

Mr. Skilling asked about the possibility of the development in Canadian universities of courses in the social sciences which would give an idea of international organization and relations. He suggested that the best approach to the study of international relations is to be found in the areal or regional approach. He cited the School of Slavonic Studies in London, and the war-time training of military governors in the United States as successful examples of this type of approach.

Professor Soward stated that there is not much direct teaching of international relations in Canadian universities but that this is carried on through other social sciences, especially history, economics, and geography. He cited his own experiment at the University of British Columbia in giving a course in the history of the twentieth century, in which he made use of newspapers as an instrument of teaching, as a successful way of developing an international attitude. He said that the establishment of the social studies programme in the schools of British Columbia has resulted in the development of a wider international outlook amongst students. We need to train

*This discussion also refers to the previous article on "The Teaching of International Relations in the United States" by Howard Wilson.

teachers in the use of the "problem method" which is particularly fitting for this field. The use of radio in the schools will be important in the future in this teaching. He instanced his own weekly commentaries on the news which have been used in the schools in British Columbia. He cited the demand of the Canadian Youth Commission for the introduction of more teaching of international relations in the schools as an indication of the attitude of young people. We should use voluntary organizations in the schools for arousing an interest in international relations.

Professor Sage also remarked upon the success of Professor Soward's course at the University of British Columbia.

Professor Lower considered that there was no need to worry about interest in international affairs in the universities and colleges. His students, he feels, are interested in the here and now perhaps to an alarming degree. This sort of thing can be overdone. There is a danger of losing the historical perspective. He protested against the divorce of political science from history which makes it simply a study of administrative problems.

Professor Fieldhouse asserted that the development of an international outlook is one of indirection rather than of direct teaching. He doubts if courses in international relations do much to develop an international attitude. That can be done better by a proper method of teaching history. He hopes that we will not have a system of clubs, organizations, etc., operating under directives.

Professor Burt indicated the possibility of an unofficial approach to the problem through teachers' organizations. He cited the success in this respect of the teachers' dining clubs in the cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

Dean Douglas noted that we should encourage teachers of all subjects to make their students aware of international indebtedness. This can be shown through the historical development of each subject, and through the discussion of international contributions in each field.

Mr. Gray said that he is not very worried about the international outlook of the children in the schools of Ontario. The teachers will reflect the teaching of history in the universities and that is in good hands. The foundation of an international attitude is mostly well-laid without the pupils realizing that it is being done. The success of the teacher depends entirely on the approach used.

Professor Trotter insisted that universities as well as schools should regard the creation of intelligent citizens as a proper objective of education. As it is we are inclined to forget the "citizen" part in favour of the "intelligence." Our students and we ourselves suffer intellectual emasculation through over-objectivity. We cannot stop with the inculcation of a critical sense no matter how important that may be. The intellectual has been too often the irresponsible observer. We can't afford to turn out such people. We should avoid stressing terror of war too greatly in our teaching of international relations as this leads straight to policies of appeasement. The whole picture of motives of action in historical development and international affairs should be given so as to avoid the producing of "bystanders."