

IF I HAD MY WAY

The Race Studies Syllabus

by M. G. MARWICK

IT is imperative that every teacher should practise the first duty of the professional person, which is to make responsible decisions based on a full knowledge of facts. More than ever before, teaching calls for tolerance, courage and unrelenting hard work if regimentation is to be kept at bay and the wholesome force of perceptive human originality is to be fully mobilised.

If the teacher accepts the Race Studies Syllabus without discrimination, and if he fails to mould it in accordance with the basic Western axioms of fairness, tolerance and objectivity, he may obscure the cultural riches of a multi-racial society and narrow even further the already artificial world in which many South African whites live.

If, on the other hand, he uses the syllabus wisely to soothe divided minds he may set free much energy at present wasted in inter-group tensions. This power might well realise the cultural opportunities brought about by the juxtaposition of peoples of varied philosophies of life and ways of artistic expression.

One of the dangers of the syllabus is its emphasis on differences between South Africans. Another is the fact that, like History, this subject might lend itself to subtle abuse in the hands of certain types of teacher, quite irrespective of their political allegiance. Unless used with care the syllabus may narrow the vision of our children, incapacitating them for any future reconstruction other than that dictated by the mistakes and fears of the past.

The advantages of the syllabus are that it introduces into the schools material that is easily taught because it is interesting; and that it provides a means of engendering tolerance and appreciation of the achievements of peoples of cultures other than one's own. Furthermore, it is a subject with everyday applications, and can encourage, though not necessarily bring about, better

understanding and co-operation between South Africans of all races and religions in every situation in which their common destiny brings them together. It can, in short, clear the way for the full development of the richest of the resources of this bountiful land, its human beings.

On a practical level, how can the teacher meet the challenge of the Race Studies syllabus? He can introduce some changes of emphasis and, by using materials readily available to him, he can supplement those sections of it that are poorly developed, e.g. the one dealing with urban Africans. If the teacher feels that there is over-emphasis on group differences, he can tell his pupils more about the common origin of all human races, of the facts that they share a basic uniformity and that it has been estimated that such stable differences as exist between them are brought about by no more than from five to ten per cent of the genes, the other ninety to ninety-five per cent being the common heritage of all mankind. He can lead them to an appreciation of the value of variety and the benefit of pooling cultural resources. He can demonstrate that civilisation started at the crossroads of human migration and that it has always flowered where communication between different cultural groups has been easiest. And he can remind them of their responsibilities as the bearers of a world civilisation whose roots go back six thousands years and to which all the races of man have made notable contributions.

This task of independent evaluation and adjustment in the light of the basic tenets of Western democracy is one requiring ingenuity, courage and determination. Not only will the teacher have to supplement the existing Race Studies textbooks, but he will also have to be on the alert lest he should inadvertently become a party to the misuse of the syllabus in propagating a particular political doctrine. For instance, he will have to keep a watchful eye on any examinations that may be set in this subject, lest they show a tendency to call for answers that are 'right' according to the yardstick of some narrow parochialism but wrong according to the standards of civilised men the world over.

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