

TOWARDS CULTURE-SENSITIVE CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

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Ever since schooling was introduced to our islands, there has been a continuous flow of conflicting assumptions, values, beliefs and techniques concerning what is worth knowing and what education should be about. Today, perhaps the most important question with which Pacific Island educationists are grappling is how best to reflect their traditional education practices through the imposed structure of the school so that people are able to survive in a modern world and retain their cultural identities.

This issue is particularly significant for curriculum developers, who during the past two decades have been forced to the forefront of educational planning and evaluation. Their experiences have not been entirely without problems; in fact the history of curriculum development, especially since 1970, has been fraught with conflicts, most of which can be traced to different perceptions of what education is or ought to be. It has not been easy to free ourselves from the unconscious grip of our traditional notions of what is worth knowing on the one hand or from the ideas/values acquired as a result of modern (western styled) infiltrations, on the other.

Issues in Curriculum Development

Three kinds of issues commonly face curriculum developers in the region, related respectively to pupils, to teachers, and to the curriculum as a whole. Much remains to be understood about the ability and readiness of island children to learn different concepts and skills. Many curriculum developers, for example, have adopted a "spiral" model of curriculum development much influenced by the work of Bruner.

In social studies, this often leads to some consultants underestimating the ability of island children to understand different and complex kinds of social relationships to which they are socialised from a relatively early age. On the other hand, many children seem to have difficulty learning basic Maths and Science concepts and performing simple experiments. Finally, there is the issue of the relationship between student learning and the language of the curriculum and instruction. In my view, pupils' "inability" to learn concepts in their second or third language (English/French mainly) is often wrongly equated with general cognitive inadequacy.

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Issues related to teachers are often associated with their relative inability to actively participate in curriculum planning and implementation. The centralised quality of curriculum development in most island nations means that most teachers are at the periphery of curriculum decision making, despite official proclamations about the desirability of their inclusion. Where there have been attempts to involve teachers in curriculum materials design and evaluation, many have shown that they lack the necessary skills to carry out their tasks effectively. Furthermore, there have been few if any incentives for teachers to become more active participants in the curriculum development process. For example, many are expected to give up their "holidays" in order to attend curriculum workshops or prepare curriculum units. Financial assistance offered to teachers for this is minimal compared to the huge amounts of money spent on overseas consultants, many of whom depend on a few local teachers to do the job. In short, many practising teachers lack the necessary professional and material support to be actively and effectively involved in curriculum development.

Many curriculum planners themselves are unsure as to which strategies are more effective in inquiry-based learning, given the variety of cultural contexts in which they operate. Furthermore, a lot of the work so far tends to ignore research findings dealing with the development of attitudes and values. Affective objectives, for example, usually appear in the introductory pages of some subjects' curriculum specifications, yet the targeted learning experiences often reflect only cognitive skills and understandings. Thus, many curricula tend to be too deterministic, often over-emphasising the need for (Pacific) peoples to adapt to their physical and social environments rather

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than to deal with their role in changing these environments. Such an apparently functionalist view of curriculum and schooling has also been largely responsible for the reluctance of many curriculum writers to deal effectively with conflicts inherent in many Pacific societies undergoing change. Finally, there has been the additional problem of dealing with a barrage of new ideas and approaches, often championed by enthusiastic foreign consultants who visit from time to time, but whose contribution is essentially transient.

Towards a Culture-sensitive Model

Cultural analysis has been emphasised by Lawton, who sees it as a systematic process of examining a particular society in its social and historical context.¹ Such an analysis in full would involve an examination of a society's culture, language, technology, knowledge, beliefs and values, in order to make better judgements about what ought to be transmitted to the next generation - in other words, what is worthwhile to teach and learn.

Cultural analysis, in my view, is the missing link in curriculum development in the Pacific islands. We have been too hurried in our work because of the constraints and exigencies associated with outside funding and have not heeded the associated administrative setting of many curriculum projects. Too

many foreign consultants have been unfamiliar with or insensitive to our cultures, often (wrongly) assuming that the "locals" with whom they work will provide the necessary input and cultural analysis.

Some searching questions, therefore, should not be ignored in curriculum planning; what are the underlying values of this curriculum and do they agree with the prevailing values of the target society? What role does the language of the curriculum play in teaching and learning? What are the consequences, for example, of English or French predominating as the language of instruction (at least in theory) while the language of the home and of socialisation is different? Finally, what important knowledge, skills and values are to be exemplified or expressed in the new curriculum? Answers to these questions would assist curriculum developers in planning, giving them a better idea of how teachers and pupils might react to any new materials that are to be introduced.

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Research I conducted in Tonga in the 80s revealed some interesting aspects of that society which are useful to curriculum planners. Different "emphases" were identified, arising out of two basic assumptions made by the author, namely, that the kinds of things which preoccupy the thoughts of people in a given society affect what they consider worthwhile to teach/learn; and secondly that a people's language provides an important key to understanding their notions of education (worthwhile learning).

From an analysis of the Tongan language of education together with a study of Tongan teachers' perceptions of their role, several valued contexts of thinking or "emphases" were identified. These included emphases on several focal points of cultural interpretation: the supernatural, concrete situations; formal conformity; rank and authority; social relationships; kinship relationships; 'ofa' (compassion); and restraint behaviour. The term "emphasis" was chosen deliberately because the author did not wish to imply that all Tongans value all the following aspects; rather the contexts were seen to be important in motivating

and explaining behaviour.

Cultural analysis will help all of us involved in curriculum development. The major responsibility for cultural analysis rests with islanders themselves. Whether cultural understandings will be used to improve current situations will probably depend on the extent to which foreign advisers/ consultants/experts are willing to listen to island voices and silences. This is crucial because island countries will continue to depend on metropolitan countries for financial and other assistance in order to "develop" their education systems.

My vision for the future of education in general and curriculum development in particular is contained in a new orientation; one in which we are increasingly aware of those (educational) issues which are related

to our acceptance and/or adoption of relatively foreign educational models and their associated ideas, values and assumptions; ideas which we have had to translate into our own cultural contexts in order to make them meaningful and worthwhile. Cultural analysis will, in my view, encourage us to look towards our cultures as major sources of curriculum objectives, and view "culture" as a privilege rather than an excuse for inaction.

Note: The above is a shortened version of an article which appeared in *Directions* 24, Vol.13 No.1, September, 1991.

REFERENCE

1. Lawton, D. (1975). *Class, Culture and the Curriculum*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.