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CULTURE AND CURRICULUM

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It has become fashionable in educational circles to pay homage to what is described as 'cultural activities' in schools, particularly those schools in which the clientele is drawn from a culturally different community. Such an addition to the curriculum content of schools is a response to the concern that schools are somehow irrelevant to the needs of the client group. While the latter point may indeed be true, this paper argues that curriculum decisions in the area of 'culture' are deceptively simple.

One way in which teachers have introduced cultural activities into schools is by including in the curriculum 'traditional' singing, dancing, painting and carving. In this way the school is thought to be making use of the children's culture.* In some cases programs have been well developed and articulated with the community outside the school. But a closer inspection of such activities suggests that activities are not the central issues if the inclusion of local culture is a serious aim of the school. The suggested dilemma arises from what is perceived as being 'culture' in relation to a particular group of children and from the way in which curriculum decisions are made on the basis of that knowledge. I discuss each of these areas in what follows.

Ward Goodenough, a cultural anthropologist, distinguishes between two kinds of culture (Goodenough, 1961; 1963). On the one hand culture refers to the recurring patterns of behaviour which characterize a community as a homeostatic system, and on the other, people's standards for perceiving, judging and acting (Goodenough, 1961 : 522). The import of this position is that it isolates patterns of and patterns for behaviour. Furthermore, individuals can only be said to possess the second kind of culture whereas the first kind is a property of a social system.

* This phenomenon is not restricted to schools for Aboriginal children, but is world-wide.

Goodenough goes on to propose that people possess a repertoire of cultures from which they select for a given situation and according to the identifications that they make. The repertoire of generalized cultures is developed as a person organizes in a cognitive map the conceptions he has of the concepts, beliefs, values and operating principles of others (Goodenough, 1961 : 522-533). Thus a person can bring to bear knowledge by which to interpret and generate behaviour in contexts as diverse as the rugby club or a church service.

In addition, people who interact frequently modify their own conceptions of the cultures they attribute to others so as to increase the predictive value of their operating culture. As individuals mutually try to predict the cultures they attribute to others in regular interaction, a degree of consensus can develop. In this sense, a social group may be said to have a public culture which its members share, consisting of,

"...perceptual and conceptual features embedded in the meanings of the vocabulary of its language and other public symbols, a public body of knowledge and beliefs, .. a set of public value systems implicit in the rules of procedure (as in the distribution of rights, privileges and duties in the group)..." (Goodenough, 1961 : 524)

Cultural activities when considered against this background pose some difficult problems of judgement for teachers. The relationship between standards for behaviour and actual behaviour is not necessarily one-to-one.* Geertz (1957) for example, when analyzing ritual and social change in a Javanese setting, concludes that,

"...cultural structure and social structure are not mere reflexes of one another but independent, yet interdependent, variables ... that man's need to live in a world to which he can attribute some significance, whose essential import he feels he can grasp, often diverges from his concurrent need to maintain a functioning social organism..." (Geertz, 1957 : 53).

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* That is, if one knows the values and beliefs of a community's public culture one cannot always predict behaviour from a knowledge of them. Similarly, it is unwise to impute values and beliefs from a knowledge of observed behaviour.

This raises the question about changes in behaviour which occur at the levels of both the private and public culture.* The possibilities are firstly, that the behaviour may change in response to a changed environment without any serious changes in the standards for behaviour; secondly, behaviour may change in response to changed circumstances together with a reorganization of cultural standards; thirdly, behaviour may change and be accompanied by an entirely new organization of experience. The first is analogous to playing soccer in a way appropriate to rugby; the second is analogous to an alteration in the rules for playing soccer; and the third is analogous to "a decision by the several football teams in the same league to play rugby instead". (Goodenough, 1961 : 526)

An important question to ask of attempts to introduce 'culture' into the curriculum of a school is that of what purpose is to be served? The preservationist ethic which seeks to preserve the end-product (dancing, art-forms, etc) when the beliefs and values (standards) which give meaning to the activity no longer exist, or have been radically modified, may hinder the development of a reorganization of culture in school children. Further, attempts to include 'culture' in the school, which are teacher reactions to their changed circumstances arising from policy and pedagogical doctrine (Keddie, 1971) changes, are unlikely to grasp the independent/interdependent relationship noted by Geertz, perhaps because of the pressures to 'do' some 'culture' in schools.

The question of purpose must also be considered in the context of the ideology of schooling. Bennett (1971) notes that formal Western schools are very much the same in structure everywhere, and that their purposes are tied to 'development'. Lewis (1954) suggests that -

"...general education in the elementary schools is perhaps the best instrument for breaking the fetters of the traditional way of thinking ... The elementary school is the place where one could succeed in destroying superstitions where one could stimulate ordered thinking and where one could impart knowledge of a *new and better* life..."

* Aboriginal communities have, of course, been subjected to a host of change factors such as settlement living, exposure to economic activities, and the consumption of alcohol. The problem facing teachers in the context of this paper is to what extent individual and public cultures have changed in response to these changed environmental factors.

Young (1971), discussing curricula and knowledge, proposes that academic curricula are premised on universal organizing principles which result in school curricula being abstract, highly literate, individualistic and unrelated to non-school knowledge. If formal schooling is 'development' orientated and if Young's analysis is correct, then serious questions need to be asked about the purpose in formal schools of 'cultural activities' which may well be oral, group presented, concrete and related to non-school knowledge, and at least in one sense, unrelated to 'development'.*

In an attempt to bring together the discussion, a short example is in order. Consider the World Health Organization's definition of health, which says that health is,

"a complete state of physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." (cited in Riggall and Bladwell, 1970)

This means that health education is concerned with thinking and feeling, the mental and emotional part of life, as well as with bodily strength and fitness and the way people behave towards each other (Riggall and Bladwell, 1970). Drawing on the previous discussion, the definition of 'health education' already encompasses behaviour and the standards which make up both private and public cultures of parents, children, teachers and 'the school'. If the culture of the community (for example an Aboriginal settlement) is to be included in the curriculum of the school, the question of purpose as it relates to the school and a health curriculum is a complex one. For instance, the assumptions behind the criteria for inclusion and exclusion in the curriculum of knowledge components becomes a crucial issue. Whose standards of thinking and feeling, mental and emotional life, or ways people behave towards each other ought to form the basis for judgement? It is probably true that because of dilemmas such as these, the present level of 'cultural activities' in schools remains that of singing, dancing, carving etc., that is, at the level of observable behaviour.**

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* Unrelated to development as defined by a particular perspective, that is, that of the educational establishment. Formal schooling may, however, have nothing to do with development, as Nyerere (1968) and von Sturmer (1971) quite rightly point out.

** What I am suggesting is that the cultural standards of the client community may well be unpalatable for teachers in a school or the school system administrators.

This paper should not be construed as an attack on the principle of including local cultural content in the curricula of schools catering for culturally different children. On the contrary, the available evidence suggests that schools everywhere have created problems by not so doing. (Baratz and Baratz, 1960; Bennett, 1970, 1971; Bloom, 1972; Chatterton, 1968; Cohen, 1969; Hansen, 1966; Lang, 1969; Larrick, 1965; Murray, 1929/1967; Nyerere, 1968; von Sturmer, 1971; Wax and Wax, 1968; Wolcott, 1974; et al). But the process of developing such curricula ought properly to be a professional task of the highest order. To make use of 'the culture' of the community in school, involves curriculum development aimed at more than behaviour. For a teacher who is not a member of that community, the raw data for curriculum decisions becomes problematic, and the danger of ethnocentrism is real. Where the data is available, its use may well contravene educational doctrine which sets limits to what may be called valid knowledge in a school, whether that school is situated in an urban area or Arnhem Land.*

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* In my view it is difficult to sustain a position which is on the one hand sympathetic to 'culture' programs in school and on the other denies the conceptual underpinnings of behaviour espoused by a client group.

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