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SCHOOL BASED CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN ABORIGINAL STUDIES

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In this paper I will draw attention to some basic considerations which my research* would suggest are needed in curriculum development in Aboriginal studies. The research is aimed at identifying basic research findings from which propositions can be formed and constructs for curriculum development formulated. This will enable practical classroom procedures and methods, as well as curricula, to be developed. There is no body of educational knowledge in Aboriginal studies particularly, or ethnic studies generally, which allows a theoretical framework for the curriculum developer to work from. The following considerations may be useful in this regard.

Firstly, what does one mean by curriculum, and why refer to curriculum development? Generally, curriculum researchers refer to the curriculum in a much broader way than has been the custom traditionally. (Musgrave, 1974; Hurst, 1974; Walton, 1971; Stenhouse, 1975). For the purpose of this research, the curriculum is considered as the experiences the child will meet with at school as the result of the planned efforts of the school to meet its aims and objectives. This is wider than the old concept of the curriculum which had to do with courses of study in the classroom and planned syllabuses. In the new sense of curriculum, all aspects of school life must be considered. Therefore, a particular model for curriculum development will be suggested, but more essentially what will be stressed is that a model for curriculum development be followed. Intuitive leaps in the dark have seemed to be the pattern, albeit well intentioned.

However, before any move should be made in planning a curriculum in Aboriginal studies, either specifically for Aborigines, or about Aborigines or for ethnic studies generally, the aims and objectives, the reasons why, should be clearly identified. The problem should be clear if intuitive leaps in the dark are not to

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continue. But here arises another problem. It is difficult to be clear and certain in an area which deals with attitudes and values (Eckermann, 1977) and which is, to say the least, controversial. Yet the problem does not go away by ignoring it.

The general ethos in Australia today is one of cultural pluralism (Bowen, M, 1977; Havighurst, 1974). This follows on periods which supported assimilationist then integrationist policies. The full impact of this concept has yet to hit schools and is only just reaching curriculum developers. However, Departments of Education are moving in this direction. (Power, 1976).

Aborigines are a minority ethnic group. There is ample research showing the educational problems they suffer (de Lacey, 1974; Schools Commission, 1975). The curriculum developer must clearly define the problem and rationally set about solving it. Here another question arises. Who is the curriculum developer? Traditionally it has been the centre, or a central, departmental body. Also, traditionally, content has been set, often in syllabus form. In the last five years particularly, there has been a massive move to decentralise curriculum responsibility from the centre to the periphery - to the schools. A new movement has taken place toward school based curriculum development (Carlin, Purchall and Robinson, 1976). The school and the teacher now find the responsibility for curriculum development in their hands given, usually, broad content-free guidelines from the centre. (N.S.W. Department of Education, 1977). What does this mean? Several things:

- .. the teacher must acquire new expertise;
- .. the teacher must take on an added responsibility;
- .. the teacher must accept a new role.

Naturally, the school will generally be the organising body rather than an individual teacher, but it is still teachers who will take the action. The first major point then, is that it is the school which is responsible, not only for carrying out, but inaugurating, new curricula.

Here, very real problems arise:

- .. Have the teachers the expertise?
- .. Have they the time?
- .. Have they the support systems available?

The general findings of my research show that they have received little, if any, training in curriculum development. State departments of education are asking a lot of teachers to take up this new responsibility of school based curriculum development (S.B.C.D.) on a broad scale, without providing support systems offering time allocation, technical support, specialist assistance and general support. Teachers certainly are in the right position to identify and diagnose the needs of the children and the community, but support is needed if failure is not to be built into the S.B.C.D.

However, in ethnic studies generally, and Aboriginal studies specifically, S.B.C.D. seems a necessary, indeed an essential catalyst for change. Ethnic groups have unique needs which are a function of their unique environments and social circumstances. It is folly to suggest a central curriculum can cater for these needs, especially when the problem is one of social origin. S.B.C.D. seems uniquely tailored for the school with an ethnic minority. The school can develop a curriculum specifically to cater for the unique needs of its community. The second point of the paper is that S.B.C.D. is a tool now available in Aboriginal studies.

This raises the next point. What are the needs of the community and how does the curriculum developer go about diagnosing them? It is here that curriculum research is needed and access to curriculum consultants is necessary. From a survey of programs in schools from around Australia, it is clear that although the effort, time and integrity of the curriculum developers is evident in the programs, often a rational curriculum plan is not in evidence. The aims and objectives are rarely clearly stated and evidence of a situation analysis is often lacking. This is not to say that no general aims are stated. Specific objectives are often vague, although they would seem implicit in most. Explicit, specific aims and objectives are often missing. This can lead to a freewheeling meandering process with no goal clarification and with inherent problems for assessment. It is a problem of where are we going and why?

A model for curriculum development is needed. The rational planning model (Walton and Welton, 1976) which suggests a procedure which begins with a situation analysis tapping the needs of all parties involved and then proceeds to the development of curriculum aims and objectives, is suggested as an appropriate general model. Content and process are considered after aims and objectives are clarified. An evaluation of the situation is done first. Only then are curriculum aims and objectives clarified. Content and

process are considered last. How often is it that content is developed and then aims and objectives are considered to fit the content, if indeed they are considered at all?

The third point, then, is to draw attention to the need for rational planning. Skilbeck's 'rational interactive' model of curriculum development would seem an appropriate starting model in Aboriginal or ethnic studies. (Skilbeck, 1976). It allows for shared decision making between school and community within broad policy directives and curriculum outlines, as well as resource provision. It suggests optimum co-operation between the centre and the periphery.

What of content and process? These two are of utmost importance but should follow in rational order. Generally, it appears that one of the problems facing schools with Aboriginal populations is one of negative attitudes between the ethnic groups. Central curriculum bodies (N.S.W Department of Education, 1976) are developing curricula in the social sciences aimed at reducing prejudice between ethnic groups. Research by Piper (1977) suggests that the community sees curriculum items dealing with inquiry and decision making skills, personal development and the skills of social interaction, as being important.

The fourth point of the paper is that curriculum developers give due consideration to this aspect. Piper's study suggests that wide support would be given to curricula developed in this area.

I have already mentioned the awakening concept of cultural pluralism in our community. (Jayasuriya, 1977). This offers an identity for the Aboriginal community and a new integrity in their cultural heritage. Essentially, it respects their culture, indeed all cultures. We are a pluralistic society (Bowen, J., 1977). Any program in Aboriginal studies which does not accept this as a basic premise is ignoring social reality.

The final point is that the concept of cultural pluralism plays an integral part in curriculum planning in Aboriginal studies.

In summary, the points that have been raised are suggested considerations for curriculum development in Aboriginal studies. They have been raised in the hope that they will give real assistance in curriculum development, not only theoretically, but from a practical point of view. The basic points for consideration are:

1. The school is the focus for curriculum development, most essentially in new areas such as Aboriginal studies.
2. S.B.C.D. is a tool allowing a school to tap the needs of its community and develop specific curricula to meet those needs.
3. A model for curriculum development is needed. The Rational Planning Model is suggested.
4. Emphasis on social interaction should be considered in the curriculum.
5. The concept of cultural pluralism should be considered in curriculum planning.

These are only initial suggestions which may assist curriculum planners develop curricula in Aboriginal studies to meet the needs of the communities they serve.

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