Curriculum as a Political Phenomenon: Historical Reflections on Black South African Education

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Until recently, studies of the curriculum in South Africa have been subsumed under (and lost to) broader studies of educational history (Du Plessis, 1965; Behr & Macmillan, 1971; Molteno, 1984). Recent foci on the curriculum have been largely descriptive in nature (Macdonald & Penny, 1984; Buckland, 1982) or directed at strategies for curriculum change (Basson & Walker, 1984; Millar, 1984). There have been few, if any, systematic studies of curriculum history per se, particularly few pertaining to Black education in South Africa.

The purpose of this article is to trace the evolution of the curriculum designed for Black education in South Africa since the colonial penetration of the 1650s to the present time. Specifically, by conceptualizing *curriculum as a political phenomenon* I will demonstrate that curriculum change in schools for Black South Africans has been principally determined by events outside the schools, i.e., by changes in the sociopolitical context of South Africa. Simultaneously, I will argue that a significant degree of continuity (that is, relative stability over time in the ideological and material assumptions governing the school curriculum) characterizes the curriculum in Black schools. The phenomenon of curriculum continuity will be explained in reference to the institutionalization of ideological forms, educational inequality, and societal racism in apartheid South Africa. The social origins and salient characteristics of curriculum within broad periods of educational history in South Africa will be discussed and key implications of historical curriculum analysis for postapartheid educational reconstruction will be presented.

An Overview of Black Educational History in South Africa

Black educational history in South Africa can be described in terms of five major periods. Of course, education existed in South Africa long before the arrival of the Dutch colonists in 1652. *Traditional African education* was led by community elders through an oral tradition based on cultural transmission and was closely integrated with life experience. The first European settlers introduced an era of *slave education* based on simple Christian religious instruction. The early 1800s saw the era of *mission education* in which Christian missionary societies introduced a

European form of education to the schools. The 1920s have been described as the era of *Native education* and were characterized by the rapid structural deterioration of Black schools and the introduction of the first state-mandated segregated curricula (Dube, 1985). *Bantu education*, derived directly from the official policy of apartheid, was introduced in 1953. With its explicitly racist overtones, Bantu education continues in similar forms, albeit under different labels, to the present day.

Curriculum as a Political Phenomenon

The fundamental premise of this study is that curriculum knowledge cannot be neutral. As Schaull argues in his preface to Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, education either acts as an instrument to integrate students into the logic of the status quo or it serves as the means of enabling people to critically transform their world (p. 15). By describing curriculum as a product and expression of the political interests, values, and knowledge of the dominant social group (cp. Englund, 1986), powerful insights into both the contemporary curriculum dilemma (see Jansen, 1987) and the emerging problem of curriculum reconstruction can be gained. School knowledge as a political problem can be discussed along two dimensions: curriculum change and curriculum continuity.

The Problem of Curriculum Change

The interaction of multiple influences, both material (e.g., the transformation from an agricultural to an industrialized economy following the discovery of gold and diamonds) and ideological (e.g., the conflict of mission versus state schools, the Boer-Brit conflict, and the Black-White conflict), produced a power dynamic in South Africa which led to a particular distribution of resources and ideas. This dynamic, in turn, has shaped the curriculum for Black education in South Africa (see Babb–Bracey, 1984; Molteno, 1984; Dube, 1985).[1] The following ideal-typical categories are useful for delineating different curricular emphases in the history of Black South African education.

The Evangelical Curriculum. The first school for Blacks in South Africa was started for slaves. In 1658, the following entry was made in the diary of Jan van Riebeeck, leader of the first Dutch settler group:

> Began holding schools for the young slaves—to stimulate the slaves attention while at school and to induce them to learn the Christian prayer. (Du Plessis, 1965, p. 30)

The explicit purpose of schooling for Black Africans during this era was religious instruction. It was aimed toward confirmation (training in the religious rituals leading to full church membership) rather than secular education. Schooling for religious education was not uncommon in European countries at the time, and such an initiative on the part of the Dutch settlers was consistent with practices in other Dutch possessions overseas. As noted by Behr et al. (1971, p. 357): "all the schools of that

[1]These studies, while informative, cover broader educational policy and not curriculum policy specifically.

period were controlled by officers of the church and the curriculum was essentially religious."

In terms of content, the gradual extension of education to settlers, slaves, and indigenous peoples in South Africa was not accompanied by a change from the regnant religious education paradigm. Reflecting on the South African curriculum of the 18th century, Pells (1938) makes the following observation:

> Until the English permanently occupied the Cape at the beginning of the 19th century, formal education was synonymous with instruction in the doctrines of the Dutch Reformed Church, in Bible History, psalms singing and reading and writing sufficient for Church membership. The only secular subject was a little simple arithmetic (pp. 20–21).

The Academic Curriculum. Three major events influenced the course of South African education from 1795 to 1834: (1) the British occupations in 1795 and 1806, (2) the brief rule of the Dutch Batavian Republic from 1802 to 1806, and (3) the proliferation of intense foreign missionary activities in the 1850s. While the British governors of the Cape and the missionary societies both continued and extended the evangelical curriculum, challenges to this tradition emerged in the form of a rudimentary liberal arts or academic curriculum. During the brief period of Batavian rule an attempt was made by certain colonial administrators to break with the Dutch–Calvinist fundamentalism which pervaded South Africa's schools. In 1791, two Dutch clergymen raised funds for their proposal to offer "elementary instruction in the three R's, French schools, where some history, geography, Italian book-keeping, and the French language were to be taught, and a Latin school for the training of candidates for overseas university entrance" (Wilson & Thompson, 1969). Janssens and De Mist, the governors of the Batavian Republic, extended these ideas, which were strongly influenced by the liberalization in Dutch society. The school ordinance issued in 1805 provided for teacher training and for the education of girls "all on a nonconfessional basis" (Wilson et al., 1969, p. 276).

This radical agenda encountered resistance from farming communities in the interior which were "isolated from the intellectual influences of the capital and held fast to the theology of a preliberal age" (Wilson et al., 1969). While such reform efforts did not radically influence the curriculum of the time, partly because they were interrupted by the British occupations, they did lay the foundation for alternative thinking about education in South Africa.

Educational historians have asserted that the European form of education was introduced to South Africa by missionaries, particularly those of the Glasgow Mission Society (GMS) (Horrell, 1964; Dube, 1985). Although the basic purpose of mission education was Christianization rather than secularization, this was not unilaterally the case. The Lovedale curriculum, for example, presents a case study in contradictions. Lovedale was a mission founded in Natal by the GMS in 1824; in 1841, it became a seminary for the education of Africans and the children of missionaries. The Lovedale curriculum had three overlapping emphases: evangelical (the training of evangelists), industrial (practical training), and academic (preparation for the School Higher and Matriculation exam-

inations, which qualified students for the final school-leaving certificate). However, by 1872, the academic curriculum at Lovedale had flourished to such an extent that its curriculum included history, natural philosophy, English literature, political economy, mathematics, botany, Greek, and Latin. Both a professional and an industrial class were created at Lovedale. Courses of higher level instruction were adapted to meet university entry requirements, thus opening the door for Africans to enter tertiary education (Burchell, 1976).

This development was not without its consequences. As White opposition to Black education intensified during the 1880s, the belabored colonial criticism of African education as being "too bookish and impractical" was heard increasingly throughout the land. Nonetheless, significant changes in the curriculum content of South African schools emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century. According to Pells (1938), "revolutionary changes in curriculum also occurred" during the period from 1870 to 1900. The "fourth 'R,'" religion, was delegated to just an hour of scripture instruction weekly, and "modern" subjects such as drawing, needlework, woodwork, and nature study were introduced and encouraged (p. 44).

The Industrial Training Curriculum. George Grey was appointed governor of the Cape in 1854. Following the seven "Kaffir Wars" in which Africans fought fiercely against the White colonists, Grey defined the purpose of education for Blacks as social control through "peaceful subjugation." To this end he sought funding from the Imperial Government for the industrial and occupational training of Blacks (or Bantus, as Blacks commonly were called then). Similarly, in the interests of "the political security and social progress of the Colony," the two superintendent generals of education in the Cape, Dale and Muir, concentrated on the establishment of a curriculum aimed at providing Blacks with skills for manual labor (Behr et al., 1971, p. 379). Whether the goal was producing Black agricultural workers for the White settlers' farms or for the missions' own fields, curricular emphasis on industrial training for Blacks pervaded all four South African republics.

The rapid transformation of South Africa from a rural-agricultural to an urban-based, industrialized complex (primarily as a result of the discovery of gold and diamonds in the 1860s) was to have profound influence on curricular issues. As Welsh (1971) has asserted, during this period:

> [T]he general effect of industrialization was to place whites and nonwhites in a more acutely competitive situation, and education, depending on its *content* and the extent to which it was made available to the different groups, might promote or prevent this competition (emphasis added). (p. 222)

Afrikaners felt their status threatened on two fronts. On one hand they feared that they would be forced into subservience by the more sophisticated British settlers. Secondly, they feared that Blacks would compete with them for employment. Rapid industrialization accompanied by a devastating drought in the 1880s intensified the need among Afrikaners for an educational system that could afford them improved economic and political status over the Blacks. It is in this context that the new criticism against industrial education must be understood. As noted

in a report from the Lovedale mission school: "Formerly the Natives got too much school education, and were not taught to use their hands. Now, industrial education is in disfavor" (cited in Burchell, 1976, p. 70).

The Differentiated Curriculum. Increasingly racist tendencies, shaped in part by socioeconomic imperatives and fueled by Blacks' demands for a more academic education, were the principal factors influencing the curriculum debate in South Africa as the country entered the twentieth century. However, the call for a differentiated education and, by implication, curricula, predated the events of the first decade of the 1900s. In 1889, Superintendent General of Education Langham argued in the Cape Parliament for "a differentiated education thereby ensuring that the Whites maintained their supremacy, while the mass of Africans were confined to a humbler position" (Burchell, 1976, p. 70). Hence, the accusation expressed in the South African journal, *The Christian Express*, in 1906 was simply part of a continuing debate regarding the content of Black education:

> [T]he Native. . .is too enthusiastic about mere book learning. . .he has all along shown such a pronounced preference for the European curriculum. . .It has been rather hoped that the craze would die a natural death. But it will take long for education. . .entirely to eliminate from his character that conspicuous defect viz. his fondness for the royal road, in other words his idea that he is already fitted for various positions at present occupied by White men only. . .for any occupation involving manual labor he is at present strongly disinclined. (cited in Molteno, 1984)

The formation of the White-dominated Union of South Africa in 1910, whereby the four previously self-governing colonies became provinces, finally and effectively excluded Blacks from sociopolitical participation. As Tabata (1960) points out:

> Non-whites were thrown out of the body politic and a policy of social segregation was strictly adhered to. As part of this policy, a system of education known as Native Education was evolved for Africans. (p. 8)

Accordingly, and for the first time in South Africa's educational history, separate curricula were officially introduced for Blacks and Whites at the primary school level. Given the context previously outlined, Dube (1985) has maintained that the main purpose of Native education was "to handicap African children with the introduction of an inferior syllabus" (p. 8). This view is consonant with Tabata's (1960) observation that the syllabus for the lower standards of Black schools was "inferior" and conceived to ensure that the great majority of Blacks were "fitted only for menial jobs" (p. 9).

The differentiated curricula introduced in Black South African schools in 1922 had two essential features: (a) teaching of the *vernacular* was made compulsory in all primary classes and (b) practical skills were emphasized; hygiene, handwork, gardening, agriculture, housecraft, and needlework featured prominently in the syllabi. Greater curriculum uniformity existed at the high school level between Black and White schools (Horrell, 1963, p. 41); however, curriculum differentiation in favor of nonacademic training at Black high schools continued to generate controversy in the Black community. For example, a columnist writing in *The African Teacher* (March 1943) objected to the policy of the Orange Free State schools which insisted that courses such as agriculture be offered in its Black high schools rather than mathematics and Latin: "The

African is being converted into a good and useful kitchen and garden servant rather than a good and useful citizen of the country" (p. 2).

It is important to note that the move toward a racially differentiated curricula was accompanied by massive structural neglect and deterioration of Black schools. Dilapidated buildings, lack of basic facilities and equipment, and a growing majority of unqualified teachers were the norm in these schools.

The Apartheid Curriculum. The growing racism in the country was formalized and systemized in 1948 with the introduction of a government policy called apartheid or "separateness." It was the apartheid platform which first brought the still-ruling Nationalist Party to power. For many years White politicians and educationists in South Africa have recognized the vital connection between curriculum content and the ideological and material interests of a racially stratified political economy. In characteristic fashion, the custodians of apartheid have phrased their objections to equal educational opportunity in rhetorical form and with carefully chosen verbiage that appeals to the compelling and "self-evident" logic of racism. Consider the comments of Natal administrator C. T. Loram in 1927:

> Which is really more important in the African villages today—practical hygiene or ability to read? Elementary agriculture or geography? Wise recreation or arithmetic? (cited in Davies, 1985)

or those of the educationist Pells in 1938:

> What boots it to teach a man to read if he can never get hold of a book? Why teach him the use of table-cloths and cutlery, if he cannot afford to buy them? Why teach him agriculture when all the arable land is already occupied? (p. 141)

or of H. F. Verwoerd, the "architect" of apartheid, in 1954:

> What is the use of teaching a Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice? . . . That is absurd. (cited in Harrison, 1981)

The fundamental assumptions implicit in such formulations were that the position of Blacks in the social, economic, and political life in South Africa was both *fixed* and *natural*; thus, education and, in particular, the curriculum, for Blacks had to be directed toward serving those predetermined ends. Guided by a philosophy called "Christian National Education," apartheid politicians and their educational cohorts called for a revision of the curriculum for Blacks to achieve both greater economic relevance and increased racial distinctions. Consequently, the Eiselen Commission on Native Education (1949–1951) was mandated to determine the extent to which modification could be made to "the content and form of the syllabuses in order to conform to . . . proposed principles and aims and to prepare Natives more effectively for their future operations" (Horrell, 1964, p. 4).

It is important to understand that the curriculum of apartheid education was the Nationalist party's response to what it perceived as the "inappropriate" liberal arts curriculum orientation of the mission schools, which were the main providers of schooling for Blacks until the 1950s. Apartheid education was based on a curriculum that extolled ethnic pride and racial identity, promoted the ideology of "separateness," and located the educational experience of Blacks in the rural setting of an emerging

Bantustan policy (Nkomo, 1984, pp. 92–93; Lelyveld, 1982). As Kuper (1965) explains:

> Where the missionaries showed concern for the cultivation of the individual and his religious growth, there is now conversion to the tribal identity. Where the mission high schools assembled African students of varied tribal background, extending perspectives and loyalties beyond the traditional societies, the Bantu Education Schools seek their return to the tribal milieu. Where the missions cultivated English as the medium of education . . . Bantu Education cultivates tribal sentiment through tribal vernaculars. (p. 169)

The Problem of Curriculum Continuity

Nonetheless, a significant degree of continuity exists between apartheid curriculum and its antecedents. In studying the history of the curriculum in South Africa, two related paradoxes appear. First, while significant curricular changes have occurred in South African education since colonial penetration, such reforms have been accompanied by a large degree of ideological continuity. Secondly, despite the political prominence of apartheid ideologues and policymakers in calling for a revisionist curriculum for Blacks, a greater degree of curriculum uniformity between Black and White schools has emerged since the 1950s. For reasons related to the structural and societal context of the curriculum, the use of curriculum as a political tool has been less critical to sustaining White supremacy in South Africans since the 1950s.

Government-sponsored interventions in Black education illustrate the shifting official emphasis on and White interest in the curriculum. In 1935 and 1936, the Interdepartmental Committee on Native Education (the Welsh Committee) found the salient problems of Black education in South Africa to include mass absenteeism, overcrowded schools, poor ventilation, lack of facilities, and understaffing. What is significant about the Welsh Committee's report is that it did not explicitly address specific curricular concerns. Rather, the report was a comment on the state of Black education relative to financing, administration, facilities, and attendance.

Despite the curriculum mandate of the Eiselen Commission, the legislation issued as a result of its report, the Bantu Education Act of 1953, was concerned essentially with the issues of control and segregation. Indeed, the new syllabi introduced in 1956 were hailed, with minor reservations, by liberal critics as "educationally sound and an improvement on the previous syllabuses" (Horrell, 1964, p. 52), and a comprehensive analysis of the revised Bantu Education curriculum noted that it retained "its basically Western character" (Murphy, 1973, p. 237).

The next major legislation regarding Bantu Education, the Education and Training Act of 1979, was largely a response to the Soweto student uprisings in 1976. The only curricular issue addressed by this legislation was that of the level of languages offered in the curriculum. The Act allowed for greater flexibility in the choice of instructional language, it lowered the grade in which teaching in one of the official languages (English or Afrikaans) would begin, and it also stipulated that mother-tongue instruction would be required only up to standard two (grade four). A range of noncurricular issues were addressed by this act includ-

ing changes in nomenclature, waiver of tuition fees, new requirements for registration, and empowerment of the Minister of Education to build and maintain schools. Curriculum content, however, remained unchallenged. Apparently as a gesture of reform, the Minister of Bantu Education declared late in 1976 that his department "had not only adopted the same curricula and syllabuses as were used by Whites, but Black and White students were now writing the same senior certificated and matriculation examinations" (Marcum, 1982, p. 21).

A fundamental question then remains: Given the changing sociopolitical context in South Africa since the 1920s, the hysterical call of apartheid rhetoricians for revisionist curricula in the 1940s, and the reformism surrounding Black education in the 1980s, why the stability and consistency in the form and content of the curriculum in Black South African schools? I propose the following explanations:

The institutionalization of ideological forms. Gradually, through the legitimation and reproduction of apartheid's cultural and ideological forms, the notions of White supremacy, the justification of racial separation, and the advancement of the White minority's "right-to-rule" ethic have been institutionalized in the South African curriculum. This is no longer done in explicitly racist terms as it was in the 1940s; instead, it is done through alternative curricular rationales (the replacement of racial identity arguments with cultural ones), emphases (the glorification of White nationalism), exclusion (notably, the absence of Black nationalist history or mention of the ANC), and distortion (the falsification of South African history to favor Whites and discredit Blacks). Recent content analyses of textbooks and syllabi used in South African schools have illuminated the subtle but pervasive institutionalization of apartheid ideological forms in Black education over three decades (Cornevin, 1980; Dean et al., 1983).

The institutionalization of educational inequality. Almost two decades after the differentiated, practical skills-oriented curriculum was developed for Black primary schools in South Africa, it has had little impact on classroom practice. According to Pells (1938): "Much of the curriculum cannot be taught for lack of equipment. . . . Ambitious and comprehensive though the syllabus is, in practice, native education is still largely at the elementary stage" (p. 133). Little has changed over the years. It has become clear that providing similar curricula for Black and White schools in South Africa does not change or challenge the broader social and political White power structure of apartheid society. The political neutralization of the curriculum can be directly attributed to the institutionalized inequality built into Black schools as a result of racially discriminatory funding, overcrowded classrooms, dilapidated buildings, inadequate facilities, and unqualified teachers. Segregated schooling with desegregated curricula provide neither challenge nor contradiction to apartheid ideology.

The institutionalization of societal racism. Since the 1920s, the nullifying effect of the institutionalized curriculum has been accompanied by the invocation of legislation (such as the Apprenticeship Act of 1922) that has effectively excluded qualified Blacks from meaningful economic participation. This process of institutionalizing racist practices through official legislation has been intensified since 1948, the year in which the

apartheid-driven Nationalist Party came to power. Labor legislation such as the Physical Planning Act of 1967 and the Colored Labor Preference Policy of 1966 placed ceilings on the employment opportunities of Black workers.

The limited access Black students have to schools and the high rates of attrition and failure have further excluded the majority of Blacks from successful completion of schooling. Gish's (1987) observations of an earlier period in South African history are equally relevant in contemporary times: "Few Blacks had the opportunity to receive a secondary education in the 1940s, differentiated syllabus or not" (p. 6). Nkomo (1984) has noted earlier studies which indicate "a high recognition among African school pupils of the effects of the job reservation legislation and practices, formal and informal, on their ability to secure decent jobs for which they are educationally qualified to perform" (p. 110). The social and political consolidation of apartheid since the 1940s, therefore, has effectively reduced both the state's and the general White population's focus on the curriculum as a significant political problem.

In their now-classic study on curriculum change and stability, McKinney and Westbury (1975) assert that the curriculum can be seen as "an idea that becomes a thing, an entity that has institutional and technical form." While the curricula of Black and White schools in South Africa are technically similar, the particular institutionalized context of Black schooling neutralizes the curriculum in terms of its potential for empowerment, both educational and economic. Thus, the fundamental political explanation for the overall stability of the curriculum in Black South African schools is that the call for differentiated or "relevant" curricula subsided once Whites realized that extracurricular forces could be marshalled effectively to inhibit Blacks' educational achievement potential and output.

Conclusion

Several lessons for curriculum reconstruction in postapartheid South Africa can be derived from this historical study. The first is that of the power of curriculum as a political phenomenon in which a dominant group regards the curriculum as embodying the values and interests that sustain and reproduce its hegemonic control. This control has not gone unchallenged in South Africa. In recent years, control over curricular decisions regarding Black South African schools has shifted significantly, though not completely, from the state to the Black community. Accommodated within themes such as "alternative education" and "people's education," the Black struggle for political freedom has made curriculum change a central focus (Molobi, 1986; Nyaka, 1986; Samuel, 1986; NECC, 1987).

The second and perhaps most significant lesson of this analysis concerns the limits of curriculum reconstruction. A curriculum is only as good as its context. The limiting extracurricular factors that determine the meaning and potential of the curriculum must, therefore, be confronted simultaneously with curriculum revision. All of these factors—institutional norms, the adequacy of school facilities, the relationship between

social opportunities and curriculum objectives, relevant teacher education, and student aspirations—determine curriculum effectiveness and must be considered in terms of their particular impacts on the curriculum.

Finally, attention must be paid to the "commonsense meanings" of apartheid ideology that have been distributed throughout the South African curriculum in less explicit, subtle forms. Curriculum revision must achieve more than the mere exchange of White heroes for Black heroes in the nation's history textbooks; a careful determination of indirect as well as explicit racism must be made. Moreover, equal consideration must be given to the "hidden" curriculum—the unofficial school knowledge, values, and norms transmitted outside of the formal curriculum that also act as powerful determinants of state ideology (Christie, 1986).

In the design of a postapartheid curriculum, close attention must be given to the classroom, institutional, and societal contexts of the South African curriculum. A postapartheid curriculum will have to be informed by both the political purposes of the historical apartheid state and by the political aspirations guiding the contemporary "people's education" movement. That is, educational planners in a postapartheid South Africa will have to avoid treating curriculum as purely an educational phenomenon because, in so doing, powerful understandings of the sociopolitical purposes and potential of the curriculum are lost. Finally, the current political climate in South Africa has brought to the foreground the need for social reconstruction. Curriculum historians would do well to rehistoricize the genesis and evolution of the school curriculum in South Africa, analyze closely its purposes and assumptions, and identify the strands of continuity which continue to characterize its form and content. In so doing, a coherent and concrete basis for radical curriculum reconstruction will be laid.

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