

Curriculum change and contextual realities in South African education: *cui bono?*

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All planned change efforts imply a commitment to a certain view of reality, and acceptance of certain modes of realizing ends. Those assumptions constitute the conscious or unconscious bases for selecting specific courses of action and thus precede all tactical decisions. To the extent that change agents cannot identify those basic assumptions and their implications, they cannot explore the full range of effective strategies for change. (Crowfoot and Chesler 1974)

The proliferation of white liberal curriculum initiatives in South Africa since the mid-1970s must be understood in the context of the Soweto-originating national student uprising in 1976. These initiatives range from comprehensive policy proposals (e.g. the Race Relations Education Commission of 1979)¹ to alternative schools (e.g. the recently aborted PACE college)², to innovative projects (e.g. the READ project (Butterfield 1984)). Two such curriculum change projects, both recently discussed in the *Journal of Curriculum Studies* (Millar 1984; MacDonald and Rogan 1985), merit particular attention both on their claims to be contextual approaches to curriculum change and their ideological assumptions in the context of black schooling. The main features of these projects, the Science Education Project (SEP) and the Fort Hare Project (FHP),³ are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of SEP and FHP on selected criteria

	Science Education Project (SEP)	Fort Hare Project (FHP)
General purpose	Improvement of science education through practical work in black high schools	Professional preparation of student teachers, with practical training in black high schools
Status (relative to the state)	Independent; funded by Anglo-American (mining company)	Semi-dependent; based at Fort Hare University, a segregated institution
Primary theoretical basis	Becby's (1966) model for developing countries	'Eclectic' model
Major focus of change	Teacher	Teacher
Project evaluation	Positive; based in part on assessment of practical work	Critical; 'failure' related to political, cultural and institutional contradictions

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The focus of this paper is the critical examination and evaluation of the change agent responses presented by these projects to the contextual realities of black schooling in South Africa. How did a particular response in planning and implementation (a) determine what counted as valid outcomes for these projects and (b) influence the interpretation of each project's results?

The Science Education Project (SEP)

SEP was conceived in 1975 and aimed at the improvement of science education in black classrooms by introducing practical work (laboratory exercises) into science classes (MacDonald 1981). To this end the involvement and training of teachers was treated as a priority for successful curriculum change. The project discloses many interesting facts on school conditions, classroom practices, and curricular control in black schools, and the salient observation is that 'although practical work is prescribed in the syllabus, in general the closest pupils got to experimental work was reading about it in textbooks' (MacDonald and Rogan 1985).

SEP explicitly declared itself to have a contextual orientation to curriculum change (MacDonald 1980), but at least five central comments can be made about the nature of this declared response to the realities of schooling.

1. The project explicitly claims to offer a 'technological perspective' on curriculum change and, given this emphasis, inevitably degenerated into a technicist approach to deeply rooted, context-related problems. The defined strategy for, and purpose of, curriculum change is consistent with this claim. Thus the state education department is treated simply as a 'barrier factor' to be circumvented by technical manoeuvres. The strategy for implementation draws on managerial techniques and focuses on organizational behaviours. Efficiency with regard to project implementation is the key word (see Jansen 1987 a: 48). This project fell into the ideological trap which has claimed so many well-intentioned programmes—attempting to provide technical solutions to socio-political problems.

2. A conspicuous feature of the project is its ~~one-sided treatment of the components affecting curriculum change~~. Viewed in terms of Schwab's (1978) 'commonplaces' in education (teacher, learner, curriculum and social milieu), ~~SEP concentrates almost exclusively on the teacher~~. Learners' experiences and demands are treated as problematical—presenting instructional dilemmas to the teacher (MacDonald and Rogan 1985). Even more disturbing (but consistent with the technicist orientation) is the ~~perception of the teacher as~~, *inter alia*, a '~~classroom manager~~' (MacDonald, Gilmour and Moodie 1985). Such an orientation excludes considerations of, for example, 'the primacy of student experience', or 'the teacher as transformative intellectual', or 'curricula as socially-organized knowledge'—approaches desperately required for meaningful curriculum change in South Africa (Giroux and McLaren 1986; Aronowitz and Giroux 1985; Young 1971).

3. The project was theoretically inappropriate. Since it drew on the dated model of Beeby (1966) and the technicist literature, a fundamental question is avoided: ~~What is the value of this innovation for the alleged beneficiaries of the project~~, that is students? ~~Is it to empower students~~ to engage critically in the reconstruction of their social and educational reality in the context of an apartheid-based South Africa, or is it solely to display, with self-satisfaction, a modest improvement in examination results (MacDonald and Rogan 1985)?

4. From a *practical* standpoint, therefore, the intended change is short-sighted. Given the nature and scope of the educational dilemma which is fundamental to black education in South Africa, this project is, and was, at best ameliorative and, at worst, increased and increases the level of frustration among graduating students. There is a 4% pass rate among those who run the gauntlet of black schooling, only to find their way to meaningful economic (let alone political) participation systematically blocked by apartheid-directed structural arrangements. The ability to perform successfully a few 'practicals' hardly alleviates the oppressed condition.

5. The research is ~~ideologically problematic~~. Following the tactics of the apartheid regime, emphasis is placed on South Africa as an African developing country and the culture-problem argument is unashamedly used. The umbrella concept of South Africa as a developing country in Africa ignores the fact that in wealthy South Africa poverty, hunger, disease, unemployment—and educational equality—are *imposed* by constitution and practice, as opposed to many African countries where these conditions may have a structural basis, for example in agricultural and climatic factors.

Furthermore, this cultural argument ignores the historical and political context of its use. Prior to the 1960s the South African government used blatantly racist explanations to justify its policies. But as institutionalized racism receded in Western and European countries, and with the decolonization of the rest of Africa and the increasing international isolation of South Africa, there emerged a change in the rhetoric of justification for apartheid policies. Protection of 'cultural identity' and 'minority rights' become the new rationalization:

The field of culture is exploited by the regime as a means of fostering division and discrimination... Cultural variety amongst those who inhabit South Africa is falsely presented as involving the existence of groups with cultural traditions which are not only distinct but mutually incompatible. This is then used as part of the whole rationale for physical segregation and separate development. In turn the educational system and the control of cultural activity is used to promote further division. (Unesco 1983)

Given SEP's 'technicist-culturalist' response to contextual realities, it becomes clear why MacDonald and Rogan (1985) only go as far as recognizing and listing, in pedestrian fashion, all the glaring shortcomings in black schools: classrooms without ceilings; pupils sitting three or four in a desk designed for two; teaching aids conspicuous by their absence; no running water or electricity; schools lacking administrative facilities. The origins and purposes of these politically imposed inadequacies are ignored, and the place of education *vis-à-vis* the status quo is not addressed.

It was inevitable that SEP's treatment of the teacher as technocrat, or of ~~curricular innovation as a politically neutral process~~, would be challenged by the realities of the broader social context (Whittaker and Morphet 1986). Whether SEP will respond to this challenge remains to be seen. The project's insistence on its ideologically neutral position may, however, be the source of its ultimate downfall. A recent evaluation, for example, reported that 'SEP's acute consciousness of the dangers of moving its field of operations either towards the conservative or radical positions in the endeavour to maintain a central 'educational' definition of its work had extracted a price in the scale and impact of the innovation' (Morphet, Schaffer and Millar 1984).

The Fort Hare Project (FHP)

We see a distinct shift in approach and evaluation in FHP as a curriculum innovation in that it adopts a more critical views of change (see Table 1). But FHP is also more difficult to evaluate because of its ideological ambivalence; it (a) articulates a critical awareness of curricular contexts while (b) endorsing technicist-oriented projects such as SEP and (c) striving to locate 'successful' projects in an ideologically neutral position. This will become clear in the following discussion.

In a retrospective account, FHP is labelled 'a failure in innovation' (Millar 1984). A crucial finding was the fundamental mismatch between the theoretical preparation of student teachers and the contextual realities of the school environment: 'Our expectations had thrown into relief the nature and power of school and classroom ecology' (Millar 1984: 301). This, of course, was predictable, as Millar (1987) concedes: 'The Fort Hare Project' did not in any central way plan for the frames of the Ciskeian schools... The important thing was that the school reality was backgrounded.' Practical difficulties centred on higher-order thinking and questioning, pupil participation and involvement, pressure on pupils to conform to type, coverage of the syllabus, the language medium and lack of resources.

The contextual explanations of FHP's failure focus on institutional, cultural and political realities. In examining the nature of its response (or non-response) to context, the rhetoric of FHP sounds progressive. Two examples will suffice. First, Millar (1984) claims that curriculum analysis should not be limited to 'efficiency terms' (297) and should take cognizance of 'the institutional and social context' (298). Second, the limitations of university-based curriculum change are recognized; institutions such as the segregated University of Fort Hare serve 'as an instrument of political and cultural control in that it gives expression to an explicit ideology' (Millar 1984: 298).

However, on closer analysis, a number of specific criticisms can be levelled against this project, despite the fact that it takes a critical and, at least rhetorically, a 'holistic' approach to curriculum change.

1. The curriculum is treated as neutral. While extra-curricular, instructional and learning factors are seen as contributing to the failure of the innovation, the technical and 'modernizing' curriculum implied in FHP is uncritically accepted in form and content.

2. Theoretically and ideologically FHP sought a politically neutral position in the change process. Millar (1984) vacillates between 'a conservative position committed to a system of maintenance [and] a radical position committed to system integration' and sketches the exposure of externally implemented projects to 'sanction as subversive from conservative positions within the state system and to opposition as crisis control or system maintenance from radical community groups'. This conveniently ambiguous position is, however, given clarity by the endorsement of SEP as a project which 'successfully negotiated' innovation. Taken seriously, this places Millar's perspective (at least by implication) within the parameters of a technicist orientation to curricular change. Furthermore, to point out that there are two opposing positions ('conservative' and 'radical') on change, does not automatically validate a third (or 'neutral') position as acceptable.

3. The project overstates the location and origin of change as a key factor in the legitimation of FHP as an innovation. The content and purpose of change however,

are more important than agency *per se*. The constant return to school after the sustained periods of protest of the past decade suggests a commitment by South African black youth to relevant and equal education from existing educational authorities.

4. Either as a limitation of the case study or as an interpretation bias of the research, students are depicted as concerned only with techniques of learning which circumvent 'risk, exposure of weakness and constant opportunities for failure'. Numerous other studies reveal a much deeper quest in the nature and character of student demands for learning.⁴ This, of course, is not to deny that reductionist learning strategies exist; my point is simply that Millar's description is simplistic and too negative, and needs to be linked to a deeper contextual analysis, for example reductionism as a form of resistance.

5. Finally, critical attention must be given to the 'higher-order thinking and questioning' tasks required of, but rejected by, students. It is not sufficient to ascribe students' rejection of such tasks to such considerations as restricted time, established practice and narrow examination requirements. The relevance of cognitive skills must also be examined. In the stiflingly oppressive black classrooms of South Africa, and the institutional and societal context of black schooling, critical (as distinct from higher-order) thinking is a more pressing need.

To summarize, it can be concluded that the response of SEP and FHP to contextual realities (a) is mediated by theoretical claims (explicit) and ideological assumptions (implicit), and these have an essential compatibility, which (b) defines the nature of the change strategy adopted and the perception and definition of 'successful' outcomes. These innovations clearly represent variations within the equilibrium paradigm (Paulston 1976) of educational change, and as such do not represent any significant challenge to, or movement away from, apartheid education. Given a contextual analysis it is legitimate, therefore, to raise the fundamental question, *cui bono?* That is, in whose interests is the intended curriculum change?

Conclusion

'There is no such thing as a neutral educational process', writes Richard Shaull in the foreword to Freire's (1973) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Referring to the 'neutrality illusion' in the evaluation of change, Tangerud and Wallin (1986) observe that 'School improvements rarely clarify the value-base of the intended change or the values held by those involved. . . . Still others suppress and conceal their value base in order that the school improvement project may be accepted.' SEP and FHP seem to work under the illusion of value-free science and ideological neutrality. But even if researchers in South Africa attempt to walk the tightrope of ideological neutrality, it becomes clear that to claim neutrality is to sanction the socio-political status quo as it affects education.

The underlying message of these South African projects is that, despite what might be claimed, *meaningful* change cannot be achieved by working within the confines of the state school system. The rigid control of schools by the state, the pervasiveness of supremacist ideology in curricula, and the institutionalization of inequality in schools, bring an inescapable reality and a formidable challenge to black educators, parents and students in South Africa. A critical moment in black

schooling has arrived when an alternative educational system becomes both morally imperative and politically inevitable. Millar (1984) makes the pertinent assertion that:

If the goal of an educational innovation in black education includes transformed commitments among teachers and pupils expressed in a changed pedagogy, then there is a strong case for the innovation to locate itself, and to be seen to locate itself outside of the formal system.

Given the nature of the apartheid system, the extent of its oppression, and its historical longevity, the quest for transformed commitments has to be seen in such educational and curricular alternatives as those proposed by the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC). This is not to say that liberal initiatives are completely irrelevant in South Africa, or that technical considerations are not important in curriculum change. Critical analysis, however, serves to expose *limitations* and, more importantly, derive *lessons* on which to base alternative, black-led, ideologically conscious, contextually responsive, holistic curriculum change.

Notes

1. For a summary of this report, see 'Report of the Education Commission of the South African Institute of Race Relations' in Marcum (1979).
2. PACE was a private, commercial fee-paying high school in Soweto funded by the American Chamber of Commerce. The school recently closed, not because its programmes were not innovative but because of its contradictory location and political irrelevance in the Soweto context.
3. This was not the formal name of the project. I have labelled it in this way partly for convenience and because the project was launched from Fort Hare University.
4. See, for example, Flederman (1980) and Jansen (1987 b).

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