Towards Reconstructing a Curriculum for Secondary Schools[1]

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Abstract

Focusing on the understanding of 'currere' as the individual's own capacity to reconceptualise his or her own autobiography, this paper explores the interface between this notion of curriculum reconceptualistion and the principle processes of identity, culture and politics. It is argued that the implications of these interactions should provide the bases for a national core literature curriculum for secondary schools in South Africa.

1 Introduction

Among the many images that constitute the field of curriculum studies, Schubert (1986:33) identifies the present conception of curriculum as deriving from the term 'currere', as 'a course to be run'. Contrary to the notion of curriculum as logical and technical, the reconceptualists emphasize that a more relevant notion should provide possibilities for the individual 'to reconceptualize his or her own autobiography' (Schubert 1986:33). This reconception of curriculum is incorporated in both Pinar's (1975) and Grumet's (1981) autobiographical notion of 'currere'.

In his autobiographical approach, Grumet (1981:115) believes that it is only 'in the freshness and immediacy' of our narratives of lived experiences that curriculum can be reconceptualized. Pinar (1975:391) asserts that 'currere' is a process involving a powerful sense of becoming through excavating and bringing to light that which has been buried by many years of schooling and social conditioning. Curriculum is thus seen as a continuous process of construction and reconstruction—of an active reflection on one's own experiences in the service of self-realization. In the words of Sepamla's (1977) *At the Dawn of Another Day*, 'I shall learn myself anew'. By shifting the focus of attention away from the technical rationale towards dwelling on the nature of one's inner experience, the curriculum is thus seen as autobiographical—a knowledge-producing method of inquiry appropriate for the achievement of self-realization and identity. Serote's (1982)

> I silently waded back to you
> And amid the rubble I lay
> Simple and black

provides one literary example of reflection on one's circumstances and by implication, the experiential domain of curriculum reconceptualisation.

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Positioning 'currere' as a suitable notion in the curriculum field involves more than just a struggle around issues such as selecting objectives, content, structure, historical evolution, organisation and evaluation. It should rather concentrate on a series of sensitive issues that strike at the heart of identity, culture and political ideologies, aspirations of nationhood and the permutations of all these. This article is concerned with exploring the principal processes of identity, culture and politics and the implications of these processes for the reconstruction of a national core literature curriculum for secondary schools in South Africa.

2 Curriculum reconstruction: realities

Reconceptualist thinking is valuable and even necessary in the present situation where aims and priorities in curriculum reconstruction are unstable and shifting and educators themselves uncertain about how to proceed with curriculum reconstruction. It may make us more aware of the inadequacies of the technical approaches present in curriculum models of the past. Central to the reconceptualist thinking about curriculum reconstruction are two issues which position the framing axes of the curriculum debate in South Africa. These are the reality of the shifting political ideology on the national agenda and the challenge to construct a nationhood through an evolving South African literature. It is not an easy task to reconstruct the curriculum in the present social context of a society in transition from an authoritarian, racist system of governance towards an unknown democratic future. According to Jansen (1993:65),

> powerful struggles around curriculum visions will intensify as political authority shifts from the white patriarchy to a national democratic base.

Thus, it would be a serious error to regard the curriculum struggle as one concerning only issues such as selecting objectives and content. Curriculum negotiation must address broader educational and political issues. As such, it does not merely rely on political events. It concerns a space of political struggle and involves an intensely political process.

Questions related to specific cultural identities, the nature of a core national identity and the identification of similarities and differences should structure the way in which curriculum reconstruction questions are asked and answered (Muller 1993:39). The important issue for curriculum developers in South Africa is to concentrate on the specificities of the South African context and to incorporate these realities into the curriculum in a way that results in the reconstructing of a knowledge which will be able to lead us into the future. Ultimately, the biggest challenge is to construct a nation, a collective 'we' that transcends the disparate and fragmented local communities. Crucial to this project is that the previously suppressed knowledge and experiences of people who were 'silenced' should be made central to the knowledge which is to be taught, learnt and celebrated as part of the national culture. The complexity of these challenges is succinctly described by Mouffe (see Taylor 1993:5).

> How can the maximum of pluralism be defended—in order to respect the rights of the widest possible groups—without destroying the very framework of the political community as constituted by the institutions and practices that construe modern democracy and define our identity as citizens?

The challenge of dealing with and finding adequate solutions to the realities of the plural cultural society that we live in while simultaneously upholding the democratic rights of individuals and groups will remain a continuous process. According to Degenaar (1992:13) the notion of 'cultures' (in the plural) refers to the forms of life of particular communities and 'culture' (in the singular) to the spiritual development of humanity. Since literature participates in both, it forms an important space where the struggle for nationhood must be waged.

At present, we have just won the right to participate legitimately in the process of moving towards a South African nationhood. The process of becoming one 'people' has hardly begun. As yet, there is no public sense or consciousness about what it means to be a South African amid the contesting nationalist, federalist and unitary geopolitical and ideological models. Most probably, Sol Plaatje's (1978:174) desire provides one important avenue: '... to incorporate them with ourselves, so that together we form one great nation'.

However, the wish for a single nationhood should not exclude the cultural diversity of our society. Any attempt to reconstruct a curriculum must therefore also provide space for the expression of cultural diversity. Muller (1993:12f) believes that commonness can only be built on and out of differences. This commonness does not imply a mere condoning or tolerating of differences. It requires a learning about how to deal with them. Serote's (1972) appeal is most relevant in our present context:

> White people are white people,
> They are burning the world.
> Black people are black people,
> They are the fuel.
> White people are white people,
> They must learn to listen.
> Black people are black people,
> They must learn to talk.

In order to reconstruct a curriculum for secondary schools in South Africa, we should recognise that despite the English language which we share, we are not culturally identical to the British or Americans. Sydney Clouts (1966) states in this regard,

> I have not found myself on Europe's maps ...
> I must go back with my five simple slaves
> to soil still savage, in a sense still pure

Even though it is virtually impossible to identify and describe what one South Africanism should or could be, we have to begin to construct a vision of a new curriculum. As Ngara (1984:8) suggests, literature forms an important mechanism in the nation-building exercise:

> ... literature is a singularly effective tool of colonial domination. Equally, it can be used as a powerful weapon of liberation. By exploiting the aesthetic appeal of anti-colonialist and revolutionary literature, a society can inculcate in its young people a new set of social values through the educational system.

This type of qualitative change can only be effected if European ideas of transcendental rationality are replaced with common sense and space is provided for the construction of multiple identities and the proliferation of dispersed meanings in the national core curriculum. The great variety and diversity in our South African literature provide a most valuable source for this purpose. This variety encompasses not only the diversity of art forms of literature but also the diversity of cultural and political experiences.

3 Curriculum questions and the alternative literature curriculum

If the reconceptualist belief is that the curriculum should be constructed in terms of 'the freshness and immediacy' of our narratives of lived experiences, then it is also to be accepted that the curriculum must be reconceptualized as 'the collective story we tell our children about the past, our present and our future' (Grumet 1981:115). It is evident that this notion of curriculum requires that we ask a range of questions that go beyond a narrow and officially sanctioned conception of schooling. Following Beyer and Apple (1988:5) I provide an overview of a few of the areas and the related questions which should be addressed when we attempt to practise a reconstructed curriculum. In attempting to categorize curriculum issues in this way, I hope to create a context for thinking about some of the contextual and substantive concerns of the curriculum debate which could shape a new model for literature teaching for secondary schools.

* *historical*: which traditions in the field of curriculum development already exist?; how can these traditions assist us in answering current curriculum development questions?;
* *political*: who should control the selection and distribution of knowledge?;
* *ideological/epistemological*: what knowledge is of the greatest value?; why?;
* *pedagogical*: how is this knowledge to be taught?

In responding to these questions in a synthesized way, I attempt to meet Pinar's definition of 'currere'—especially in so far as this approach will enable us to analyse educational experiences and to reconstruct the curriculum in terms of nearly universal autobiographical urge to retell episodes from past and present lived experience.

3.1 The historical question

Historically, past curriculum practices were presented in a top-down approach, were handled in a secretive manner and received in packaged form for implementation. Prior to February 1990, the curriculum was state-driven,

state-directed and issues such as history, religion, value systems, culture and gender roles were imposed on people irrespective of whether these were relevant to the teacher, the pupils or their lived experience.

Some of the historical issues present in literature which a new curriculum could address are themes related to racial injustice and the history of the development of Southern African literature. Themes related to racial injustice include the forms of worker solidarity, struggles for equal access to education and employment as well as the fight for a living wage. Since many of these issues have impacted on the lives of many white and black South African writers—either in the form of inspiration or disaster—their experiences can be studied. These concerns have become so pressing that anything largely cosmopolitan would be experienced as trivial and irrelevant.

South African literature has developed into an exciting and diverse literary complex. It has come a long way from the colonial writings overflowing with stereotypical portrayal of blacks. Even Afrikaans literature transcended the Calvinistic ethos and nationalism echoed in the 1876 poem by Hoogenhout (see Opperman 1964):

> 'n Ieder nasie het syn LAND:
> Ons woon op Afrikaanse strand;
> Vir ons is daar g'n beter grond;
> Trots is ons om die naam te dra
> van kinders van Suid-Afrika

Alongside this movement, and very often in conflict with it, a tradition of protest literature has developed. The works of Ingrid Jonker, Breyten Breytenbach and André Brink are examples. A vital part of Afrikaans literature was and is being produced by Afrikaans speakers who did not and do not belong to the establishment and who are not white. Black Afrikaans poetry gives excellent historical and current perspectives on the experiences of black people. If the reconstructed curriculum must 'tell our children about our past, our present and our future', then all the varieties of Southern African literature, also Afrikaans, must form part of the curriculum.

In the broader context of Southern African literature, a broad outline of a reconstructed curriculum may draw on some of the following historical and ideological categories.

* Precolonial times and recorded materials of the San and Khoi Khoi including pictographic script, rock paintings, the *izibongo* and the oral literature.

* Colonial South Africa: Thomas Pringle, Olive Schreiner, FC Slater, Roy Campbell, Sarah Gertrude Millin (the controversial *God's Stepchildren* - 1924).

* Afrikaner nationalism: DF Malherbe, Totius, Jan FE Celliers, GA Watermeyer.

* Apartheid and racism: Nadine Gordimer, Ruth Miller, Matshoba, André P. Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, Bloke Modisane, Ellen Kuzwayo.

* Black writings of the seventies addressing issues such as political despair and violence: Bessie Head, Modikwe Dikobe.

* Post Soweto 1976 and the beginning of the *interregnum* including themes of prison, exile, anti-apartheid and exploitation: Frank Anthony, Dennis Brutus, Elsa Joubert, Wally Serote, Sipho Sepamla.

* The 1980s and the intensification of political unrest: Miriam Tlali, Jeremy Cronin, John Miles.

* Late eighties and nineties: worker unrest and trade unions, gender and sexuality: Emma Mashinini.

* Post February 1990 writings and new writings: At van Wyk, Robert Hill, Sithembele Xhegwana, Kelwyn Sole, Heather Robertson, Tatamkulu Afrika.

* The archaeology of autobiographical works: the diaries and journals of the early colonists and trekkers to the protest works of Sol Plaatje at the turn of the century to the more recent *Coolie Doctor* of Goonam and Mark Mathibane's *Kaffir boy*.

There are many more examples of authors who could be studied in each category. It is important to state that there is no reason whatsoever that the reconstructed curriculum should not place the Southern African literature in all its diversity and particularity at the centre of secondary school literature study. We may agree with Malan (1984:13) that South African literature has acquired its own identity and is no longer a kind of appendage of other literatures.

3.2 The political question

In asking who controls the selection and distribution of knowledge, there is a need to recognise that the curriculum process is by its very nature a political process. Heaney (1987:97) sees alternative literature as a form of 'alternate government, or a government in exile'.

Spivak (1987:113) posits the theory of the centralized versus the marginalised literatures—a recurrent feature of the fate of South African literature and authors prior to 1990. This compartmentalising has led to a pattern where literature which provides a voice for the experiences of the majority of South Africans has been estranged from them by political repression. Curricula connected too closely to the diverse sociopolitical realities of Southern Africa might be seen as resegregation. The diverse

experiences of exploitation, subjugation, oppression and poverty under the hegemony of the apartheid state, though, will counter this argument. These curricula will prevent us from ending up with a distorted and stunted model which does not include literature in all its diversity from the earliest times. Moreover, since a large portion of South African writers have been and are inspired by themes related to the reaction to the dynamics of colonialism, apartheid and discriminatory exclusions in various forms, the study of literature is fundamentally a political act. These themes no longer point to political defiance, but are part of our very existence. It is aptly stated in the *Draft Policy Document on Education and Training in South Africa* (1994:7), which claims that '... now the legacy of the struggle is the common legacy of all South Africans'.

3.3 The ideological question

In arguing for a reconstructed curriculum in literature, the development of a specifically South African aesthetic is just as important as locating South African literature at the centre of the curriculum. This aesthetic may be read off 'landscapes, physical, psychological and social' (Chapman 1985:149). This approach will develop and enlarge the configuration of literary forms and forces specific to the Southern African context. It will provide a redefinition of socioliterary maps from our own perspectives.

Ideologically, the reconstructed curriculum in literature aims to create a common 'we' or collective identity on the basis of common experiences of oppression, exclusion, subordination, colonialism and apartheid nationalism. This 'we' will understand itself in a different relation to dominant groups. This may be formed along the lines of Degenaar's (1992:11) plea,

> ... a pluralistic rather than a reductionist approach, disclosure rather than enclosure, many stories rather than one story about life and history, tolerance rather than authoritarianism, and for a choice against imperialism in whatever form.

In answering ideological questions about the curriculum, I am not suggesting that an extreme reaction to social injustice be the basis for a national literature curriculum for secondary schools. Such an approach would be sterile and would not make positive contributions to life experiences and identity formation in a democratic society. On the other hand, as long as the realities and results of the situation of oppression are with us, the acknowledgement of the experiences of the imposition of hegemonic ideology will remain the primary space of departure for the reconstructed curriculum. James Matthews (1972) represents this in *Cry Rage*.

> It is said
> that poets write of beauty
> of form, of flowers and of love
> but the words I write
> are of pain and rage.

From the varieties and diversity of anger and despair we may move to a new

identity: a Southern African consciousness. Hence, the pluralistic approach ensures that different ideologies are embraced within a single curriculum model.

3.4 The pedagogical question

The pedagogical question addresses the issue of how pupils would interact with the new curriculum and how it would be taught to them. In the mainstream schools, literature syllabi and teaching practices are blissfully unaware of current issues and levels of contestation in curriculum development. The whole process can be described as flat, compartmentalized, extremely transactional, lacking in depth and resonance. Pupils learning in accordance with these curricula have gleaned huge fragments of 'the great tradition' and together with it an extremely deprived, incoherent and uninformed worldview. One of the major drawbacks of the present curricula is that secondary school pupils assume that literature comes only in three forms: poetry, fiction and drama. We have come to view these three forms as the only channels through which truly high art can flow (Malan 1984:21). There is a challenge to open up to the new categories: diaries, letters, commonplace collections, notebooks, biographies, autobiographies, as well as other media forms such as radio, television and film.

According to Vaughan (1982:43) we need to move away from metropolitan and elitist literary models, privileged genres, and colonial texts by male British authors. The important question in the reconstructed curriculum is to ask how literature at secondary schools can contribute to a better understanding of our past, present and future situation. It must be able to clarify our past, situate us in the midst of the complexities of our present situation of transformation and give us a vision of the future. If I believe in democracy, if I want to analyse the social injustices of the past, if I want to understand the historical conditions of the social, economic and educational structures which are still in place in society, what is the significance of the experiences of male British colonists and upper class literary ideologies? This question has been and still is asked amid growing resentment of colonial or Western literature, its values and ideologies. It does not have any pedagogical value in the South African context—i.e. apart from analysing it critically as examples of the hegemony of colonialism and apartheid.

Works which are closer to the pupil's socio-political world and experiences should be prescribed. Even though this is the desired route to follow, we must also acknowledge that the mere substitution of colonial works with works closer to the pupils' socio-political world can only be fractionally helpful at a content level. If a text is taught by a teacher who merely uses it as a hermeneutic tool, a mode of abstracting, investigating and sharing a complex cultural phenomenon, the learning experience will remain foreign to the pupil's lived experience. Any reconstructed model must be rooted in teaching practices that use these texts with informed radical critique and creativity. This is also voiced in the recent *White Paper on Education and Training* (1994:7) which supports the idea that the

> curriculum should encourage independent and critical thought, the capacity to question, enquire and reason, to weigh evidence and form judgements, to achieve understanding ....

4 Towards a national model for literature

The idea of a national literature has developed around a family of sociopolitical struggles—struggles that have been and need to be waged on a number of fronts, even the literary front (Cronin 1990:181).

No fewer than nine young literatures are developing simultaneously. Apart from the well established Afrikaans and English literatures, there are those produced in the black languages: Zulu, Xhosa, North Sotho, South Sotho, Venda, Tswana and Tsonga. These co-exist within the same socio-political framework and are being encouraged to develop. There is a need to incorporate the geographical experience into literature as a whole, notwithstanding the linguistic differences which may exist (Willemse 1990:184), in order to avoid the real danger of linguistic and cultural isolation. In developing a national model for South African secondary schools, there is a need to celebrate the diversity through a versatile and adventurous approach. We should call for variety within a curriculum that reflects a binding common society.

The modern democracy that defines us as true South Africans 'does not mean tolerating or condoning different beliefs, values and attributes, but learning to deal with them' (Muller 1993:12). In curricular terms, a recognition of common content in the curricula would represent the demand for the recognition of particularity, distinctiveness and difference. Any attempt at redefining curricula in terms of a common corpus of assumptions and practices must provide space for the expression of cultural diversity.

5 Conclusion

Stenhouse (1975:45) defines the curriculum as 'the means by which the experience of attempting to put an educational proposal into practice is made widely available'. In comparison with past practices which marginalized much of the local South African literature, Stenhouse sees curriculum change as a proposal to be presented in accessible form for public scrutiny and debate. Seeing it in this way, a curriculum will always remain provisional, constantly under revision and informed by a consensus that our sense of the past is almost as incomplete as our sense of the future. However, to assert centrality in the reconstructed curriculum is to emphasize that each country, each literature, each text provides the experiential core in terms of which it is to be understood. Each pupil is entitled to study literature with which he or she can identify experientially in the service of self-realization.

Although much of what is said about a reconstructed curriculum in the present situation of transformation is still backward looking, still attempting to reappropriate lost literatures and silenced experiences, one of the main issues which has to be addressed now is the construction of the literature curriculum for the future. There is a need to grapple with the issue of

producing a literature curriculum for a more appropriate future. And in the end, we would have 'run a course'. In the words of Mandlenkosi's *Final Clenching*:

> we began anew
> the ultimate embracing of Africa
> in the clasp that death
> in its hoary ugliness
> has no power to separate.

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