

REFLECTIONS ON A CURRICULUM PRACTICE*

Nicol Faasen
Cape Education Department

1. Introduction

A number of issues have come to the fore in Bible studies in schools during the past decade. In short, it was felt that too much emphasis was put on Bible content and that the starting point should not be the Bible, but the pupils' actual experiences and real, pressing problems.

In Cape Education Department schools it was becoming clear that the syllabuses for Scripture were not meeting the needs of our young people.

This report briefly relates what has been happening in the Cape Education Department since these issues became so prevalent. Against this historical background I wish to reflect critically on what we are doing. This report is titled 'Reflections on a Curriculum Practice' as the author looks at practical events in his experience in schools - these reflections cannot be generalized automatically to all other situations.

2. Historical review

The historical overview follows the model which was used in the development of this curriculum, namely:

- Initiation and preparation, including research and situation analysis
- Design and testing
- Dissemination
- Implementation
- Evaluation and further development.

2.1 Initiation and preparation

2.1.1 Research

As pressure from various sides mounted towards the beginning of the 1980's to reconsider the present syllabus for Scripture, the Cape Education Department began to canvass teachers' thoughts on syllabus revision. This resulted in research during

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1985-6 by the Research Section of the Cape Education Department. Views of pupils, teachers, principals of schools and inspectors were obtained.

This research highlighted the plight in which Scripture was in our schools. Many pupils found it boring and too repetitive. Very often the same content was dealt with by churches during catechism. Lessons often were of a story-telling and moralising nature.

A Syllabus Committee was appointed by the Director of Education to design new syllabuses. This Committee consisted of education planners, teachers and other members of different Christian denominations.

2.1.3 Situation analysis

The Committee used the research findings as a basis for a situation analysis. This entailed looking at four main areas:

1. Children
2. Teachers
3. Biblical Studies as a discipline
4. The broad social and political contexts.

2.1.4 Design principles

At the first meeting of the Syllabus Committee on 31 July 1986, the chairperson, Mr J. Goss, said: 'We shall be following modern principles of curriculum development based on curriculum theory. This implies systematic thoroughness and investigation, with decisions being based on sound criteria and established aims. This may, at first sight, seem to be laborious, but the end-result will be a responsible, well-founded piece of work.'

One of the procedural principles guiding the Committee from the outset was that Bible Education teachers had to be maximally involved. At least 250 teachers took part in some way or other in this initial stage.

One of the members of the Syllabus Committee stated before the Committee started its work: 'Any work which we do now ... needs to be sensitive to the needs of other groups and other faiths who make up the population of South Africa.' Another teacher pointed out: '... South African society is not only multi-cultural but also multi-faith'.

Another aspect pointed out quite early by teachers was that they would welcome thorough teacher guides to accompany new syllabuses. This would promote a positive, confident attitude among teachers.

High school teachers indicated clearly that the new syllabuses needed to be reconceptualised, away from a sequential, chronological, systematic treatment of the subject, in the direction of a thematic approach containing topics of interest and of direct relevance to the lives of pupils. The lessons had to address the questions pupils were asking and issues they were facing in their daily living. The focus would be on

the pupil, the situation, and the Bible simultaneously, rather than almost exclusively on the contents of the Bible. One teacher wrote: 'It is so important for scripture lessons to "scratch where it itches".' Another teacher pointed out that 'The moral questions for which provision is made in the [old] Std 10 syllabus are now being asked as early as Std 7 (in some cases even Std 6)'. A teacher also remarked that the present syllabuses are '... not people-oriented enough'.

There was also a strong plea from various teachers for the inclusion of a module on the comparative study of religions. One study group asked for 'Comparative Religion, ... in order that our pupils might understand what their neighbours believe'. Another teacher said: 'Pupils are assailed by T.M. Many pop idols become Buddhists or Hindus and it is important to inspect the claims and appeal of such religions against the Person and Work of Jesus Christ.'

Some of the other influences on the syllabus Committee at this stage were:

- an introduction to East African curricula;
- material from the Scottish Central Committee on Religious Education;
- conferences, e.g. in 1980 at the University of the Witswatersrand on 'Religious Education in our changing society';
- and meetings of groups of teachers in the Western Cape at the initiative of Dr Jannie Malan of UWC.

This analysis led to a number of principles which was to guide the design and further development of the syllabuses.

Some of these principles were:

1. The syllabus had to be based on the Bible as inspired word of God.
2. The pupil had to be made thoroughly conversant with the contents of the Bible.
3. Bible Education had to be broadly Christian with no particular, exclusive dogma or teaching forming the basis.
4. The development of the child as a whole human being needed to be considered.
5. Pupils would have to take actively part in classes through discussion and other methods.
6. The rapidly changing nature of community life needed to be taken into account.
7. Pupils needed to understand the implications of biblical teaching for personal faith and for daily living.
8. Background knowledge of biblical times was important for an understanding of the Bible.
9. A comparative study of other syllabuses needed to be carried out and used.
10. The approach had to be both thematic and chronological.

2.2 Design and testing

2.2.1 Structural elements

At its third meeting in April 1987 the Syllabus Committee decided to use the following five elements as basic structural principles for all syllabuses:

1. Biblical content (stories, etc.)
2. Background to the Bible (geography, archaeology, etc.)
3. Skills of studying the Bible and of worship
4. Biblical teaching (dogma)
5. Ethics and life skills.

This approach meant that pupils would be enabled to assimilate and use knowledge (information), acquire skills, understand and practise concepts, and develop and enhance attitudes. The ideal would be to integrate these five elements in each lesson.

2.2.2 Phases

It was also decided to divide the whole curriculum into four phases, each with its own overarching theme, namely:

1. Sub A - Std 1: Christians' love community
2. Std 2 - Std 4: God's kingdom of grace and love
3. Std 5 - Std 7: God's covenant of grace and love
4. Std 8 - Std 10: Themes relating to pupils' lives

The first three phases were seen as mainly analytical: the broad content of the Bible would be covered during each phase. The theme for each phase would assist in understanding the Bible from that particular point of view.

The last phase would be a consolidation phase during which the knowledge, concepts, attitudes and skills acquired during the previous phases would all be integrated and employed by the pupils in investigating their lives and understanding it better in the light of the Bible. It was foreseen that about 16 themes would be designed for this phase as a whole and that schools would then choose three themes per year from this list.

2.2.3 Participation by teachers

The Syllabus Committee was in constant contact with teachers, especially through the seven CED teachers' centres in the Cape Province.

In September 1987 provisional syllabus documents were approved. The documents were still rudimentary and the Committee approached a number of individuals and schools and asked them to experiment with the syllabuses.

2.2.4 General approach

The general approach towards these teachers was to limit prescriptiveness and to encourage teachers to use their initiative and creativity. The project leaders believed that teachers were the persons best equipped to judge what content best suited their pupils in their various environments and development stages. A detailed description of content was to be done only after the teachers had been busy with the draft syllabuses for some time.

2.2.5 Differentiated development approaches

Two different approaches were used for the primary and for the secondary schools.

2.2.5.1 Primary Schools

A fairly detailed discussion document was drafted. This document contained background to the project, draft goals and content as well as questions for discussion. It was sent to study groups at teachers' centres and to other interested persons, and served as a basis for trying out the provisional goals and content in 14 schools.

This initial phase proved invaluable in developing teachers' expertise and knowledge. A group of teachers developed that could play an important role in the training of other teachers.

As there was no money for large-scale in-service training during implementation in all CED schools, a different approach had to be followed. This could best be termed a concentric approach. The initial 14 schools were each assigned seven schools to which to introduce the draft syllabuses during 1989 and to provide the necessary training and support. They could then develop teaching material together as a group.

This approach involved a further 105 schools in the Cape Province during 1989 and all primary schools during 1990.

In order to implement this approach, the teachers in the initial schools received training in the rationale and content of the draft syllabuses, as well as in the introduction of innovation and the interpersonal skills involved in this.

2.2.5.2 High Schools

36 High schools were invited to take part in the initial design phase. The purposes of this phase were:

1. To plan the modules they selected in more details
2. To teach the selected modules
3. To evaluate the modules after teaching them
4. To provide the Syllabus Committee with the detailed planning of the modules.

These teachers were often visited by the three subject advisers and members from curriculum service and meetings were arranged in order to share experiences, ideas and problems.

This procedure led to an involved and well-informed group of Bible Education teachers who will be able to play an important role in the in-service training phase which will eventually accompany formal implementation. This group will also be available for further curriculum development work.

During the next three years these 36 schools, plus 23 which joined during 1990, designed, developed and evaluated teaching material.

These evaluations were used from May 1990 to February 1991 by five groups of teachers and the subject advisers to design a new package of experimental teaching material for each module. This material was therefore based on teachers' practical experience.

All high schools became involved in the project at the beginning of 1991. They all received the experimental teaching material. The three subject advisers and one project member from Curriculum Service also presented 21 afternoon courses to 720 teachers to introduce the draft syllabuses. The subject advisers are at this stage visiting the schools to assist the teachers.

The teaching material was not approved officially by the department. For this reason the material was in no way prescriptive. The aim was to provide informal support to the teachers during this experimental period. Teachers were therefore encouraged to use it critically and with due allowance for their particular circumstances and needs. They were welcome to adapt it or to design their own material.

2.3 Dissemination and implementation

2.3.1 Fusion of phases

By 1989 it had become clear that the testing phase, the dissemination phase and the implementation phase were beginning to overlap. As schools were trying out and developing the draft syllabuses, syllabuses were being disseminated and schools were already also implementing them.

2.3.2 Present position

At this stage the draft primary school syllabuses have been used in all CED primary schools for at least two years. The high school draft syllabuses have been used in all schools for the past year. Next year will be a last trial year for the high schools and we plan to evaluate the draft syllabuses towards the end of next year.

Formal approval of the syllabuses should follow at the end of next year and formal implementation with in-service training during 1993.

A major task that still awaits the high schools is the compilation of a teachers' guide, which will be done next year. This will again be the task of a group of teachers and a subject adviser.

3. Methodology

The draft syllabuses demand that methodology will change drastically. The result is a didactic approach which stresses experiential modes of learning and carry-over activities into other facets of pupils' school and personal lives, to be reflected on in Bible Education classes.

4. Reactions to the draft syllabuses

Both the South African Teachers' Association and the Suid-Afrikaanse Onderwysersunie discussed motions on these draft syllabuses during their conferences in June 1991. The one passed by the SATA - largely a body for English-speaking teachers - thanked the Cape Education Department for the democratic way in which the syllabuses had been developed. The one passed by the SAOU - largely an Afrikaans body - slammed the department for including material introducing pupils to other religions and for including material on sexuality and 'race relations'.

This is a reflection of the emotions which can be stirred by a sensitive subject such as Bible Education and of the predicaments faced by a department of education in this respect.

On the whole, however, reactions from both teachers and pupils have been positive. These feelings have not yet been assessed in a systematic way. At this stage one can therefore offer only tentative impressions.

Teachers and pupils seem to be satisfied with the general principles of the syllabuses, mainly as this entails a more informal approach through which pupils can become more actively involved in classes. Teachers speak of a noticeable change of attitude towards the subject among pupils.

Teachers also find the teaching material most useful.

There has been criticism in some high schools of the covenant theme. One problem was that some teachers did not like stressing the concept of the fear of God which is stated in the draft syllabus as one of the key concepts in this theme.

Another problem was the possible political overtones of the theme. One teacher wrote: 'I appreciate that this word has a general significance. However, historically in South Africa it has a particular significance - to one section of the population ... this word may contribute more to division than to racial togetherness.'

A constant problem seems to be that of inadequately trained teachers, teachers with low motivation and religiously uncommitted teachers or teachers of different religious affiliations than Christian. One subject head wrote: 'More than ever this year, I am faced with the problem of teachers who have no qualification, no inclination, or

no ability to be religious for two 35-minute slots a week. To expect such teachers to be remotely sensitive to the subject, to have any "technical" knowledge of it, or to do anything other than harm to the pupils' conception of it, seems far-fetched.'

We trust that the provision of extensive teaching material has helped in this regard, but we have not yet evaluated this important aspect.

5. A tentative evaluation of the project

5.1 Salient characteristics

- a. The project is based on classroom curriculum development.
- b. Basic preparatory and ground work is being done by a small group forming the project leadership.
- c. The project depends on teacher initiative to expand and adapt the syllabuses to local circumstances.
- d. Teachers play a major and decisive role in the design of the draft syllabuses, its development, dissemination and implementation.
- e. Teacher guides and teaching material play an important supporting role.
- f. Consideration of individual teacher concerns and personal support to sustain innovation play an important role.
- g. Clear curriculum principles informed and guided the project from the beginning.
- h. There has been a movement away from a confessional, moralising and evangelizing approach towards one that is less so, although it retains a confessional character.
- i. The draft syllabuses are as little prescriptive as possible.

5.2 Positive aspects

- a. Professional growth of teachers has been clearly visible. Many teachers felt involved in the process of syllabus development and felt that they had more control of the syllabus. (One teacher remarked: 'A teacher does not shoot down his own syllabus!')
- b. A non-threatening atmosphere and relationships have been established and nurtured from the beginning.
- c. The overall approach has been flexible.
- d. Continuous evaluation and adaptation has been applied.
- e. Curriculum theory has been successfully applied in practice.
- f. Valuable insight has been gained into aspects of a process of educational renewal, e.g. into teacher uncertainty and fears.

- g. A practical approach to teacher-based curriculum development was identified and tried out that can serve as a model for similar projects in the future.
- h. Many teachers say they experience personal religious renewal.
- i. Many teachers enjoy doing self-study and to broaden their own backgrounds.
- j. Some teachers believe these syllabuses provide a better opportunity of preserving Christian norms in a changing world.
- k. Many teachers feel that the Bible is becoming a living and practical reality in pupils' lives.

5.3 Problems experienced

- a. Many teachers were unfamiliar with curriculum, subject and theological terminology; they were therefore afraid to start teaching the new syllabuses and felt helpless in having to apply new methods.
- b. Teachers expressed the fear of failure and of having to admit failure.
- c. Some teachers expressed uncertainty as to how they should use the freedom implied by the syllabuses.
- d. It has been difficult keeping up with the administrative work - e.g. evaluating and making comments on all the teaching material designed by teachers.
- e. The time it takes teachers to become familiar with new processes and material was underestimated. There was too little time for teachers' own research and preparation required by the new approach.

5.4 Questions still unanswered

- a. Did we involve the wider community, e.g. parents, enough?
- b. Could university departments of Biblical and Religious Studies and schools of theology have played a larger role?
- c. What ideological or power agendas might underlie the way teachers and schools are selected to take part in such a project? Could these selection procedures actually invalidate the process and the product?
- d. A technically correct procedure of curriculum development has been followed. Does this guarantee success? Is the (unfinished) product which really a relevant one simply because followed 'sound curriculum practice' was followed?

Should one not consider whether curriculum development emanating from the education bureaucracy is so bound to the ideological context within which it operates, that it cannot but work within the paradigm of that context? Once the ideological paradigm changes, might the process of curriculum development, if it is run as a technicist process, continue as if nothing has changed? Have we not perhaps fallen into this trap?
- e. Was the formative evaluation thorough enough?

f. Should the approach not have been clearly non-confessional? On the other hand: would one have been able to design a more phenomenological syllabus immediately after the present official syllabus? Is such an approach the one that the community wants?

One should also remark here on the long time it takes to implement educational innovation in a meaningful way - the innovative East African syllabuses were published in 1974, the first moves towards syllabus renewal in the CED were made towards 1980, and today, eleven years later, we have not yet fully left the old way of thinking behind.

6. The future

There seems to be fairly widespread concern among teachers and others about the future of this subject. One can certainly understand such fears at a time of radical change such as we are living in.

When planning future curricula, I believe there are determining factors within the broad South African context that one will have to reckon with. I suggest the following examples of such possible future factors:

- a. The state will be non-discriminatory and democratic.
- b. The education system will not be based on favouritism or elitism of any kind. This means, for example, that no one religion will be favoured by law above the others.
- c. A policy of promoting mutual understanding and reconciliation will be followed by all official state institutions.
- d. The majority of the country's citizens profess to be Christian, yet society at large could be described as multi-faith. These facts will be taken cognizance of in all government institutions.
- e. The government will allow and support systems of private schools which will accommodate specific cultures for people who wish to have these and who are - if necessary willing to pay more for tuition than would be the case in public schools.

The implications of this might be the following. I am merely offering suggestions and am not stating departmental policy:

- a. Public schools might offer subjects such as Religious Studies and Ethics instead of Bible Education. Communities might then decide on the content of a specified percentage of the total content of the syllabus to reflect their particular cultures. e.g. 25% to be spent on 'general religious education' and 75% to be spent on the preferred specific religion, e.g. 'Bible Education'. This percentage might also not be the same for every school year, e.g. 100% to be spent on the community's preferred religion during the early, more formative, school years, succeeded by an increasing percentage spent on general religious content during the senior school years. This approach need certainly not be seen as syncretism, or a 'mixing' of religion as is so often asserted.

b. Subjects such as these might include studies of religion as a universal phenomenon in human society which plays a most important role, for example, in the individuals' creation of meaning in life. At the same time they might acknowledge the strong emotional and motivating effects of religion in people's lives. Schools might assist pupils in understanding their own experiences of religion and spirituality through interaction with other people in classrooms and outside of school. Such a curriculum should assist pupils in achieving a more meaningful experience of their own lives and spirituality, as well as a deeper understanding of the convictions of others.

c. Such subjects might be taught according to the general nature and task of schools, namely that of providing universal education aimed at equal opportunities for all children to develop their abilities. This view precludes state schools from educating children in particularistic areas, like that of personal faith commitment, which is the task of parents and churches.

d. In view of the growing importance of clarity about values, such subjects should preferably be a part of the formal compulsory curriculum of all pupils up to an advanced level. This means, among other things, that it will be a subject counting towards pupils' promotion credits. Hereafter it might become an elective subject.

e. This also means that only properly qualified teachers will teach these important subjects.

f. In non-state schools the present subject, Bible Education, might be continued if parents desire that.

7. Conclusion

Should we not now be looking at these issues from a curriculum development point of view in order to stop speculating and to start finding out what works in practice? Should we not be investigating these possibilities experimentally like we did with the development of the draft syllabuses described in this report?

Such a development programme might look at the following possibilities:

* A programme of a confessional nature for Bible Education in Christian communities and schools. Such syllabuses can be developed from the draft syllabuses described above.

* A programme of a non-confessional nature for Religious Studies/Ethics in public schools. A programme such as this will have to be researched, designed, tried out, evaluated and developed right from the beginning. One can hardly think of a more exciting and relevant curriculum undertaking for a new South Africa than such a one which will enable people from different religious background to

- deepen their own religious understanding
- share their common values and
- grow in understanding of and respect for their differences.

September 1991.

Footnote

So many changes have occurred since September 1991 that some perspectives need to be revised or reformulated.

One of the significant changes has been the apparent wider acceptance of the concept of community-based, state-supported schools.

At present a debate is raging about the place of Bible Education in schools. This debate often seems to miss the important point.

The author's personal viewpoint is that the question is not whether Bible Education should be included in the curriculum or not. Certainly communities should be allowed to educate their children in and about the religious values of that community. This is guaranteed as a right in the constitutions of many countries. The questions which should rather be debated concern the nature of the religion based subject offered in open state schools.

The central issue to be debated seems to be whether the programme should be

- * confessional and evangelizing
- * or clinically scientific
- * or experiential.

Bible Education, for example, could be offered according to any one of these three approaches. According to the author's views, open state schools in a democratic, multi-faith society should offer programmes of the third kind.

A secondary issue is whether religious observances should be practised in state schools and whether they should form a part of the religion education programme. The author views this as a very sensitive issue which should best be left to the individual community and school to decide. An experiential religion education programme can hardly be offered without some religious observances, but this obviously can cause problems in multi-faith communities. In such instances, clear agreements will have to be reached among parents and, possibly, church representatives.

The suggestion arising from the above report remains, as it was in September 1991: state schools should be able to offer a religion education programme which enriches pupils' religious backgrounds by contributing experiences to their lives which are in the nature of schools to contribute and which parents and churches can hardly contribute: that of reflecting on religious experiences. This should enrich pupils' spirituality and add to what they experience at home and in church and society, and not detract from it.

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