

INNOVATION AND CONSOLIDATION IN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND REFORM: THE CASE OF THE NEW SOCIAL STUDIES

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The New Social Studies movement of the 1960s and 1970s represents a significant era of curriculum development and reform in the United States, which had international implications. This article presents an Australian case study of the experiences of curriculum workers involved in the development of an elementary social studies curriculum in the 1980s and their responses to the New Social Studies movement. It addresses the question: How did curriculum workers in the 1980s respond to innovative curricular and pedagogical practices espoused by Hilda Taba and the New Social Studies, and what influences shaped their work? It draws on data gathered primarily through oral histories of curriculum workers and corroborated by analyses of documentary evidence (reports, syllabuses, and correspondence) archived by the state educational authority in Queensland, Australia.¹ Through their oral histories, curriculum workers provide reflective, evaluative, and contrasting “voices” on official state-level efforts, or what Ross aptly calls the “official state curriculum,” and their perceived impact upon the curricular and pedagogical practices of classroom teachers.²

Hilda Taba and the New Social Studies

The New Social Studies movement was an innovative curriculum response to political and educational imperatives in the United States precipitated by the Soviet launching of Sputnik in October 1957. During the life of the movement, more than fifty large-scale, discipline-based curriculum projects in the social sciences were supported by scholarly societies and congressional funding. They were undertaken almost exclusively by university professors and trialed in school districts throughout the United States.³

One of the more influential curriculum projects was undertaken by Hilda Taba at San Francisco State University (then, San Francisco State College, California).⁴ Taba and her project team worked collaboratively with elementary classroom teachers in Contra Costa County (near San

Francisco) for four years to develop a series of instructional guides that adopted innovative curricular and pedagogical practices designed to support the cognitive development of children.⁵ The innovative practices of the "spiral curriculum" (a theoretical approach in which concepts are introduced to children at increasing levels of sophistication and complexity) and "inductive thinking processes" (a cognitive approach to learning that employs a variety of precise questioning techniques) were fundamental to her approach. These practices had a much wider educational audience than Contra Costa County and informed much curriculum development work in social studies across the United States and elsewhere.

Inspired by Taba and her perspectives, curriculum workers in Queensland employed her innovative practices as the theoretical scaffolding for an Australianized-version of the New Social Studies first introduced into state elementary schools in 1971. The adoption of key social science concepts and their arrangement within a spiral curriculum called for a radical shift in the curricular and pedagogical practices employed by classroom teachers, who prior to this emphasized linear approaches to the sequencing of curriculum content, factual knowledge and basic skills, and expository and rote learning approaches.

Problems Encountered by Teachers with the New Social Studies

As with other innovative curriculum development and reform efforts, the curricular and pedagogical practices purported by Taba and embraced by curriculum workers in Queensland were greeted with contrasting reactions by teachers. Some teachers enthusiastically adopted the innovative practices whilst most floundered due to their reluctance to change, or to their lack of understandings and skills. Reports commissioned by the Queensland educational authority observe that major uncertainties and difficulties plagued the teaching of the New Social Studies in classrooms throughout the 1970s.

The most significant problems were reported by Smith and Funnell in an empirical study of planning and teaching practices adopted within schools and classrooms.⁷ They found that many teachers struggled with the complexities of the spiral curriculum and their newfound autonomy to select conceptually-based knowledge and learning experiences suggested, not prescribed, by the curriculum. Teachers struggled with whole-school planning with many continuing to plan and teach in isolation from their fellow teachers within schools. For instance, a concept such as "culture" which might draw on illustrative knowledge including "traditional Aboriginal lifestyles in Australia," "European discovery of Australia," and "European exploration" was often re-taught by teachers across different year levels. Teachers also struggled with the notions of "concept attainment" and "inductive learning strategies", and continued

to teach factually-based knowledge in their classrooms employing expository and rote learning approaches.

With the repeated identification of these curricular and pedagogical challenges with the New Social Studies throughout the 1970s, an assessment by the Queensland educational authority acknowledges that "there is cause for concern about current teaching practice, and that the fault lies not with the curriculum itself, but more probably with the support provided for teachers in its implementation."⁸ In responding to these concerns, a new era of centralized curriculum development took place in the 1980s with the intention of providing teachers with additional support and guidance with the implementation of the New Social Studies.

Curriculum Revisions in the New Social Studies in the 1980s

The revision of the New Social Studies by curriculum workers in Queensland began in March 1981 and took eight years. Their work embarked upon "changing certain aspects of the curriculum without changing the fundamental conception of it or its organization."⁹ As Maureen Lyons, a curriculum worker, succinctly observes,

We had a fairly clear notion that there was definitely not to be a new curriculum. There was no brief for a new one. We were not to write a new curriculum and the fundamentals of the earlier Taba-based curriculum were to stay.

The reality was quite different. Curriculum workers deliberately exercised considerable latitude with the intended design brief for the curriculum revision and re-worked some of the more significant theoretical underpinnings and assumptions of Taba and the New Social Studies. For as Karen Thompson, a curriculum worker openly acknowledges:

The two eras of curriculum development are similar in that they were based on Taba's philosophy but you would never know it. We ended up with an almost new curriculum. As we felt constrained with the revision, we kept moving the boundaries just a little at a time. We probably moved beyond the original intention and ended up with something that I believe became a very good curriculum.

Alan Hyne, a curriculum worker, concurs:

It was to be revised, but I feel it went beyond that. There was substantial restructuring and it became very much a new curriculum. There was a change in the conceptual framework, the organization of content, and the major themes. I think it should be seen as a fairly major change. It was new.

The revised curriculum emphasized two key curricular and pedagogical practices that are discussed below.

First, curriculum workers reinforced and simplified the curricular practice of the spiral curriculum and its pedagogical implications with the adoption of a "scope and sequence content matrix." The matrix was informed by the notion of "expanding environments" advocated by Paul

R. Hanna in the United States during the 1960s and provided an overview of conceptually-based knowledge (expressed as “concepts” and “main ideas”) to be developed across the seven years of elementary schooling. It provides a “neat”, “logical” sequence of content that begins with the experiences of the child in a local geographic setting and proceeds in subsequent years through a series of gradually expanding, yet interdependent, communities ranging from the family to the global community.¹⁰

Curriculum workers believed that its adoption would alleviate problems associated with the spiral curriculum where content was being repeated by teachers across year levels.¹¹ Each year of schooling focused upon a theme within the matrix including from years 1 to 7: Living in Families, Living in Neighborhoods, Living in Australia, The Local Area, The Past in Australia, Other Societies, and Australia Today. All of the concepts and main ideas from the preceding curriculum were either discarded or reworked to achieve consistency and a logical progression of conceptually-based knowledge within and across the year themes. Over time, curriculum workers attached considerable importance to the year themes and used them pragmatically to justify the selection and organization of knowledge and content within the revised curriculum. This was not without its difficulties for, as Lyons again observes:

The scope and sequence chart actually drove the curriculum and I was never in favor of it. I don't think it fits the notion of a spiral curriculum. It was very difficult actually pigeon-holing main ideas to fit within year levels and relate them to key concepts. It was a very difficult exercise. Some main ideas were created, and they were main ideas that probably should never have been created, to fill one of those spaces in the matrix. It was artificial. It was a framework that wasn't appropriate.

More significantly, Hyne points to the adoption of the matrix as moving the curricular and pedagogical practices of the revised curriculum further away from those adopted in the New Social Studies introduced in the 1970s by stating:

We explored the notion of developing the spiral on a geographical progression and organized content in a series of expanding environments. It was supposed to be a Taba curriculum but we started to feel uncomfortable about how the spiral curriculum approach was being represented.

Second, curriculum workers developed teaching activities and resource lists to expand upon the concepts and main ideas outlined in the scope and sequence content matrix, and, in turn, “support the philosophy and rationale of the 1971 curriculum.”¹² It was believed that the sourcebook-materials would alleviate problems experienced by teachers by making the curricular and pedagogical practices of the New Social Studies “appropriate” and “usable.” As Martyn Mackie, a curriculum worker, comments:

Teachers couldn't see the progression required moving from basic factual

knowledge, through using skills, to developing understandings, higher-level thinking and concept development. They couldn't fit the whole thing into a pattern. This is why we became certain that we had to produce sourcebooks with appropriate activities. If teachers followed those activities through, they would automatically be doing the things they were supposed to do.

Lyons strongly concurs:

I think that the New Social Studies that was released in 1971 completely bamboozled a good percentage of teachers and really alienated them from teaching social studies. That was very unfortunate as some teachers were not teaching social studies at all. It was just too different, too far ahead of its time. I am convinced that the revised syllabus has achieved something that the New Social Studies didn't achieve. The sourcebooks were something that teachers found usable. They were never meant to be prescribed documents. There was nothing in those sourcebooks that was compulsory as teachers didn't have to use them. But in having them, at least there may be more teaching of social studies. Now, whether we want to make some comment on the standard of teaching social studies in the schools is another thing altogether. But, the reality is that there was more social studies teaching taking place. That is the reality.

Curriculum workers viewed the sourcebook-materials as "baseline documents" rather than as exemplary materials to illustrate key curricular and pedagogical practices of the New Social Studies. For as Lyons remarks:

The sourcebooks were always written as baseline documents. We were quite open and above-board about that. They were baseline documents - that if you did nothing else, using the sourcebooks would be okay.

Like their counterparts at San Francisco State University a decade or so earlier, the curriculum workers extensively trialed the sourcebook materials (instructional guides) in schools. In all, 49 curriculum units were sent to 100 Queensland schools from 1983 to 1985 with invitations to provide evaluative comments on the curricular and pedagogical practices being proposed. The curriculum workers did not work closely with the schools and the trial suffered as a consequence. Some schools observed regrettably that major discrepancies and apparent inconsistencies existed between the contents of the trial sourcebook-materials and the current curriculum, and that this occurred "despite the claim that the curriculum has not changed."¹³ It meant, as Principal White points out, that "The content is so far removed from the present curriculum (in fact an almost complete reversal) that teachers considered it impossible to trial at this stage." "We contend," continues White, "that resources and activities should be developed to supplement and expand our present curriculum and not to completely re-organize it."¹⁴ Other respondents feared that teachers would just work systematically through the sourcebook-materials thereby stifling intellectual enquiry and the research capabilities of students, which, as Tony Cousins (writing on behalf of a network group of teacher-librarians) contends, was "the most uplifting feature of the

New Social Studies of 1971 and its appreciation of the fact that in educating children for life they must have the ability to research."¹⁵

A number of curriculum workers were also highly critical of the sourcebook-materials, believing that they failed to reinforce the curricular and pedagogical practices and the broader conceptual framework espoused by Taba and the New Social Studies. For as Gordon Wright, a curriculum worker, points out:

I was very concerned that the revised syllabus in many respects did a very bad injustice to the 1971 curriculum. I don't think it really improved it a great deal apart from the fact that for some teachers, who knew the curriculum framework quite well, could then have some extra resources to work with. But they would have been a very small percentage of teachers. Many others would have simply used the resources holus-bolus. We tried to translate the Taba model into supporting curriculum materials in the form of sourcebooks. But I don't think that we did it all that successfully. It actually led to a lot of unthinking teaching because teachers were not made aware of the theoretical framework informing the activities. I was very concerned about this. There was no attempt to really develop a curriculum. It was more like, "Let's just simply make a few cosmetic changes here, straighten up the frameworks, and provide this resource material, and somehow articulate those frameworks into the supporting curriculum materials." And it was done quite unsuccessfully in many instances. Teachers used those materials, which were unsuccessful translations of frameworks, without even thinking about what lay behind them in terms of the Taba curriculum. It was basically cosmetic.

This perspective is shared by Hyne, who remarks:

The adoption of the sourcebooks was a retrograde step in that they were probably seen by some as very much "a support" and there was definitely a return to a prescribed text.

By 1987, the revision of the New Social Studies by curriculum workers in Queensland was nearing completion and the revised curriculum began to be implemented progressively in elementary schools from 1987 to 1989. The findings of an empirical study exploring the implementation of the revised social studies curriculum across fourteen Queensland schools in the late 1980s confirmed the fears of some curriculum workers.¹⁶ The study found conclusively that teachers employed the sourcebooks as the major input to their teaching of social studies. They did not refer to any significant extent to the official state curriculum document and rarely used resource lists that had been compiled to accompany the sourcebooks. The revised curriculum (sourcebooks) in social studies was still being used by teachers more than a decade later.

Concluding Comments

The innovative curricular and pedagogical practices of Hilda Taba and the New Social Studies dominated curriculum development and reform efforts in Australia throughout the 1970s and 1980s. This article

has presented a case study of the experiences of curriculum workers involved in the development of an elementary social studies curriculum in the 1980s and their responses to the innovative curricular and pedagogical practices espoused by Hilda Taba and the New Social Studies. It presents and accounts for differing manifestations and interpretations of the New Social Studies across two generations of curriculum development and reform efforts, and contributes to what Goodson calls "the unique evolution of school subjects."¹⁷

Some curriculum workers believe that the revised curriculum of the 1980s improved the implementation of the New Social Studies as innovative curricular and pedagogical practices were simplified, more effectively structured, and better-resourced. They point to the scope and sequence content matrix and sourcebook-materials as examples whereby the complexities of the spiral curriculum and challenging pedagogical practices are made "usable" for teachers. In contrast, other curriculum workers contend that their work was flawed as it responded to the perceived pragmatic concerns of teachers and provided a system-wide attempt to "teacher-proof" the curricular and pedagogical practices of the New Social Studies. They believe that the "approved" teaching activities over-simplified and devalued the innovative curricular and pedagogical practices of Taba by isolating them from their theoretical underpinnings, thereby challenging the autonomy and professionalism of teachers.

The curriculum development and reform efforts reported here ultimately proved to be detrimental to the implementation of the New Social Studies, as Taba's innovative curricular and pedagogical practices were never implemented, as intended, in Queensland schools throughout the 1970s and 1980s. As the 1980s drew to a close, the post-Sputnik curriculum development and reform movement was becoming increasingly irrelevant, and Taba's ideals and the New Social Studies were never to be picked up again formally by curriculum workers in Australia.

NOTES

1. The oral histories drawn upon in this article form part of a broader collection of taped interviews with social studies curriculum workers in Queensland, Australia, which were recorded by the author in the mid-1990s. They are held as the "Social Studies Oral History Collection" at Griffith University and were re-analyzed for this article in June-July, 2005. Pseudonyms have been adopted throughout the article to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of all interviewed curriculum workers.

2. E. Wayne Ross, "The Struggle for the Social Studies Curriculum," in E. Wayne Ross, ed., *The Social Studies Curriculum: Purposes, Problems, and Possibilities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

3. For a more complete review of the New Social Studies movement, readers are directed to Edward Fenton, "Reflections on the New Social Studies," *The Social Studies* 82, no.3 (1991): 84-90; Peter B. Dow, "Past as Prologue: The

Legacy of Sputnik," *The Social Studies* 83, no.4 (1992): 164-71; Byron Massialas, "The New Social Studies-Retrospect and Prospect," *The Social Studies* 83, no.3 (1992): 120-24; and John A. Rossi, "Uniformity, Diversity and the New Social Studies," *The Social Studies* 83, no.1 (1992): 41-45.

4. J. Fraenkel, "Hilda Taba's Contribution to Social Studies Education," *Social Education* 56, no.3 (1992): 172-78; and Jack Fraenkel, "The Evolution of the Taba Curriculum Development Project," *The Social Studies* 85, no.4 (1994): 149-59.

5. H. Taba, *Teachers' Handbook for Elementary Social Studies* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Addison-Wesley, 1967); and Hilda Taba et al., *Teachers' Handbook for Elementary Social Studies* (Menlo Park, Calif.: Addison-Wesley, 1967).

6. R. Smith and R. Funnell, *Primary Social Studies: A Sensitizing Study* (Brisbane: University of Queensland, 1981).

7. Department of Education, Queensland, Report: *A Proposal for Revision of Primary Social Studies Syllabus*, 1981, 2-3.

8. Department of Education, Queensland, Report: *Approval for Revision of Primary Social Studies Syllabus*, 1981, 2.

9. P. R. Hanna, "Revising the Social Studies: What Is Needed," *Social Education* 27, no.4 (April 1963): 190-206.

10. R. Smith and R. Funnell, *Primary Social Studies: A Sensitizing Study*.

11. Department of Education, Queensland, Report: *Approval for Revision of Primary Social Studies Syllabus*, 1981, 3.

12. R. Townsend to K. Thompson, August 18, 1983, Department of Education, Brisbane.

13. E. White to K. Thompson, July 10, 1984, Department of Education, Brisbane.

14. Tony Cousins to Karen Thompson, February 11, 1985, Department of Education, Brisbane.

15. Department of Education, Queensland, *A n Overview of the P-10 Curriculum Development Program*, (1989).

16. I. Goodson, "Subjects for Study: Towards a Social History of Curriculum" in *Defining the Curriculum: Histories and Ethnographies* (London: Falmer Press) 25-44.