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12. THE INTRODUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

INTRODUCTION

A superficial reading of the relatively thin literature on technology education reveals that it is a new phenomenon in educational curricula worldwide. Although there is growing consensus on the nature of the learning area, there remains room for debate about many of the specific issues and even among experts there are often sharp differences about fundamental questions. The following often-cited typology gives a sense of the range of 'flavours' in which technology education programmes are available throughout the world:
  – a craft-oriented approach;
  – a production-oriented approach;
  – an applied science approach;
  – a high-tech approach;
  – a technological concepts approach;
  – a design approach;
  – a key competency approach;
  – a science, technology, society (STS) approach. (de Vries, 1994, pp. 153–154)
  The South African General Education and Training (GET) curriculum for learners from Grade 1 to 9 – in spite of drawing fairly extensively on the pioneering Design and Technology curriculum of the United Kingdom (England and Wales) and those of other Commonwealth countries such as Australia and New Zealand – would be difficult to categorise into any one of de Vries' categories. The intended curriculum may be that of the 'design approach', but the implemented one is probably more a 'craft-orientated' approach with aspects of the 'STS' approach grafted on. The reasons for this are complex and have as much to do with the history of South Africa's education policy formulation and implementation as with curriculum theory. It is perhaps worthwhile to spend some time reviewing the history of technology subjects in the SA curriculum in order to gain a deeper understanding of current policy and practices.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Prior to 1994, the year of the first democratic election in the country, education in South Africa was organised on racial lines with separate schools, universities, teacher colleges, and administration systems for each of the four main race groups as defined by the apartheid state, namely black, white, coloured, and Indian. To complicate matters further, there were four so-called 'independent homelands' within the borders of the country for four of the main black population groups, each having their own educational ministry and administration. Although the curricula in each of these systems were similar – and theoretically equal – the huge differential in state funding for the different systems made a mockery of the apartheid state's claim of 'separate

but equal' treatment for all races. The legacy of these discriminatory practices continues to plague South African education to the present.

Given the glaring disparities between schools for the different race groups, it was not surprising that it was an education issue (the compulsory use of the Afrikaans language in black schools) which sparked the famous 'Soweto Uprising' in June 1976 which signalled the beginning of the end of apartheid. One of the responses of the state was a comprehensive investigation into education by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). Its comprehensive findings, published as 'Provision of Education in the RSA' (HSRC, 1981), attempted to shift the focus in education policy-making from formal education based on the traditional 'academic' arts and sciences curriculum towards a more 'appropriate' skills-based vocational curriculum (Kraak, 2002). This applied particularly to the education of black South Africans, which the commission found to be particularly lacking in these respects. A recurrent criticism of black education was that it was too theoretical, that it lacked a practical dimension, and that it appeared to be largely irrelevant to the lives of young South Africans.

Throughout the 1980s, a period characterised by widespread unrest in black education, the vocationally-oriented ideas of the HSRC report began to take root in much of the official discourse of the time. The Education Renewal Strategy (ERS) of 1991, a product of the pre-democratic government, recommended the introduction of a number of new subjects into the general formative curriculum (South Africa. Department of National Education, 1991). Amongst these were three innovations to the South African curriculum: Economics, Technology and Arts Education, the rationale being that these three subjects would provide education relevant to the needs of learners and society as well as contributing to the person-power requirements of the country.

Although the ERS was in favour of giving a vocational slant to the curriculum, it was also aware of research pointing towards the dangers of vocationalising education too early in a learner's school career, and it was careful not to propose too clear a differentiation between academic and vocational pathways in the compulsory phases of education (i.e. Grades 1–9). However, in the proposed post-compulsory phase (Grades 10–12) it is clear that vocational education was to assume far greater significance. Although never implemented, some of these proposals by the apartheid government were to find strong echoes in the policies and legislation of the new democratic order.

When the African National Congress (ANC) swept to power in the first democratic elections in 1994, much was expected of the new government, particularly in the long neglected area of educational transformation. At the level of policy, Kraak (2002) identified the following three pillars underpinning the new dispensation:

– An integrated education and training system – the new government committed itself to eradicating the difference in status and privilege that a differentiated 'academic' vs. 'technical/ vocational' system promoted;

– a single qualifications structure – a new statutory body, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), was established in 1995 to co-ordinate and manage the new National Qualifications Framework (NQF); and

– a new curriculum framework.

The new curriculum, named Curriculum 2005 (C2005) for the year in which implementation was to be accomplished, is the first single curriculum for all South Africans. Education, for the first time in South Africa's history, was to be compulsory for all learners for nine years, the newly named General Education and Training Band (GET). Thereafter would follow three years of Further Education and Training (FET) that would provide for more differentiated general, vocational, and work-based education and training.