

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE TEACHING OF SOCIAL STUDIES
IN PRIMARY 'T' SCHOOLS IN THE TERRITORY OF
PAPUA AND NEW GUINEA

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Summary

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Social Studies Syllabuses in Papua and New Guinea have been organised around particular topics from which the teacher must choose the most relevant for his class. This is difficult enough where patterns of living are held commonly; but where, as in Papua and New Guinea, social diversity is so wide and varied the problem is highly magnified. This project was designed to examine the feasibility of using the 'concept approach' in teaching the subject.

Two units of curriculum were tried with two classes in different schools, viz, the family with Standard III, and government with Standard V, the teachers having been provided with detailed lesson guides for teaching.

The report describes the procedure, and the response of both pupils and teachers, and draws the conclusion that the 'concept approach' is a possible alternative to the existing curriculum, and preferable to an 'information oriented' syllabus.

Report

A research grant from the Department of Education in T.P.N.G. enabled myself and Mr. G. Johnston to visit Port Moresby, Lae, Kundiawa, and Wewak in 1967-8, to investigate some of the problems in the teaching of social studies in Primary 'T' schools which catered mostly for the Territory's indigeneous children who were learning English as a second language.¹ A result of the visit was an experimental project which ran for six weeks involving six classes at North Goroka and at Barunik Port Moresby, in July-August 1968.

Granted the important place of social studies at the very minimal level of knowledge and skills, it is in this subject nevertheless that the

¹ Primary T schools can be contrasted with schools where the instruction assumed an extensive prior knowledge of English, and where the children were of English speaking descent.

teacher faces most acutely the problems of obsolescence and change, for he must select which facts from the multitudinous variety indicated by his syllabus are of most relevance in his teaching. The task is difficult enough in a country where many patterns of living are held commonly, but in a country with the social diversity of the Territory the problem is magnified proportionately.

Social studies syllabuses in the past have usually been organized around the particular rather than the general, which has meant that learning in the subject has been of very limited application. Yet if a syllabus could be devised which made use of social science concepts the way would open for making an analysis beyond the specific situation. To elaborate, the syllabus planner for Standard III might wish to introduce a unit on family living but he is well aware that the Territory's children come from many types of family groups, with differences based on the habits of different tribes, on whether the family is indigenous or of European origin, and on alternative behaviours within the tribes. To narrate even a sample of the differences and similarities between the Territory's communities would require an array of resources and the description of an overwhelming number of facts, yet the results would still only be valid in the particular situations described. However, it is conceivable that this multitude of specifics could be handled more meaningfully by some classification which could well be applied to a universe of families.

The first project introduced to the Standard III classes at North Goroka and Buruni was based on learning situations designed to reveal underlying structures of the family. Aspects selected for study were: the family as a group; relationships between families; family activities involving roles, work, and entertainment; and an examination of a selection of these in the lives of a past generation. Local material was used to provide the basic understandings, and the outcomes were contrasted with family life in other regions including Australia. An integral part of the project were three semi-programmed booklets: Family; Activities; and Work. These were essentially linear in organization making use of open-ended responses and incorporating student opinion frames. Charts, work-sheets, coloured and black and white slides with tape-recorded commentaries, and a strip-film on roles were also used in certain lessons.

Unit I introduced the idea of the family as a group and that families have different members and are of different sizes; then immediate family relationships were discussed and extended to include past generations; finally, some implications of different family sizes were related.

Unit II discussed relationships between families within the tribes, and across tribal areas.

Unit III dealt with family activities including roles, and covered personal and family activities, and family members' responsibilities; it also demonstrated that sex, age, and family relationship help determine what work each member undertakes. Concepts learnt to this point were put into the Australian social context for purposes of comparison.

Unit IV looked at family activities, and family at work which was categorized into wages and general jobs; factors determining job selection and wages were discussed; and work in T.P.N.G. was contrasted with work in Australia.

Unit V on entertainment followed in which the activities of family members were listed having regard to individual activities, those undertaken with the family, and with the community as a whole.

Unit VI, a time sequence unit, aimed to give children some understanding of the past related to previous ideas of family composition, father's role, and entertainment.

Unit VII, the concluding unit, was one of revision and evaluation.

The project introduced to Standard V's at Baruni and North Goroka concerned the functions of government. Primarily it examined local government in T.P.N.G. through the perspective of a social science analysis of the functions of government which could be identified in various societies at different times. The functions selected for class treatment were: decision making; decision application; decision adjudication; and the role of support in the maintenance of government systems. These concepts were organized in six teaching units: the development of a model story; local government decision-making; putting decisions into practice; the settlement of disputes; support for government; and a recapitulation section. The programme's objectives were to make the children aware that some form of government is necessary for all forms of social living, to develop an understanding of the functions that governments can be expected to perform, to identify these functions when they occur, and to suggest when these functions should be performed for the maintenance of society.

In Unit I the children considered a group stranded on an island, and discussed ways in which disagreements between the members could be resolved. Alternative ways were listed, and the advantages of the majority decision method debated.

Unit II looked more closely at how agreements are reached, and decision-making was related to Local Councils and the sorts of decisions they take. Here problems from case studies were discussed, and the classes were actively involved in mock debates, visits, etc. Contemporary Local Council decision-making processes were then contrasted with practices from pre-European society.

The Unit III dealt with putting decisions into practice, it examined the task of Council employees, and led on to the advantages of specialization. It was emphasised that the term government implies arrangements for getting things done, for seeing that decisions are put into practice, and that this holds true equally for the government in T.P.N.G., for Australia, and for any other social unit.

Unit IV set up several situations in which disputes must be settled, and involved such problems as how to decide when a man had broken the law, and, if it was determined that he had disobeyed the majority decision, whether punishment should be incurred. These situations were related to the introduction of Unit I, and to circumstances of Territory life to-day. The unit concluded with an explanation of ways in which disputes were settled in the past. The notion of support or agreement to accept decisions arrived at by the rules was introduced in Unit V, where support through elections and tax payments provided the basis for most lessons. The final unit emphasised that government was concerned with making decisions, with putting them into practice, and judging when they must be obeyed. In both projects it was thought advisable to leave the adaptation of specialist vocabulary to the

teachers as much as possible, for some terminology would be clearly beyond the capacity of many primary children.

One advantage of a social studies syllabus based on a concept-centred or analytical approach is the extent to which the teacher can exploit his environment in showing the similarity between introduced ideas and those understandings which are already familiar to the child. Thus the notoriously elusive Western ideas of time and distance may well 'hook on' to the rudimentary comprehensions already in existence. However imprecise a notion of time is, when reckoned by pig-feasts or by moon phases, or one of distance counted by nights spent away from the home, these experiences do contain the element under discussion. Similarly, local myths and legends make use of material which involves the listener in a world of time, distances, sizes, and complex relationships. The analytical approach could also prove an important aid in helping to explain why behaviours in indigenous Territory communities differ, and in the building up of sets of values. Supportive community behaviour to children and old people in the Territory is only one feature of a way of life from which Western societies can learn. The approach is also well adapted to fostering an awareness of the social implications of introduced ideas as against their uncritical acceptance just because they have European approval or have been European inspired.

Reshaping social studies along the lines suggested would bring it closer in spirit to such other important parts of the existing curriculum as Natural Science and Mathematics. Some of the expressed 'mental attitudes' in Natural Science with their emphasis upon curiosity, openmindedness, and 'a determination to find out why things happen' are obviously in sympathy with the aims of an analytic curriculum. Similarly in Mathematics, the stress put upon concept development and the use of structural material is indicative of how social studies can be made more effective. Recent advances in the teaching of English in the Territory also point to the worthwhileness of graded material intelligently applied. This material is particularly valuable when textbooks are often inappropriate, and much teacher training has been short term. Two points emerge from this interrelatedness which are especially important. Prior learning in English and Mathematics must be taken into account when the Social Studies syllabus is being planned; too often syllabuses are developed in isolation. And the use of structural material should not make the lesson a joyless occasion by reducing the natural spontaneity of the young child, and through limiting his opportunity to make non-typical responses.

The teaching materials and methods used are described in some detail in a 'Report on an Investigation into the Teaching of Social Studies in Primary 'T' Schools in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea, 1967-68' printed for the Department of Education, T.P.N.G., 1968. Samples of the booklets, class activity materials, work sheets etc. are held by the Educational Materials Centre, Department of Education, University of T.P.N.G. The report also contains findings from the objective-type test material, the results of pupil and teacher evaluation questionnaires, and comments on more general features of the evaluation. The report concludes with remarks on implementation procedures and the relationship of social studies teaching with other areas of the curriculum.

As this was the first acquaintance of the T.P.N.G. teachers and pupils with this sort of approach the response of both was most encouraging. It was found that pupils managed multiple-choice questions with competence though many found difficulty with the more open-ended questions which

required causal explanation or justification of choice. All teachers reported heightened pupil interest - I hope not entirely attributable to the 'Hawthorne effect' - and of the six teachers involved, when asked on a questionnaire whether they would like to see 'all', 'part', or 'none' of the syllabus organised on social science concept lines, three opted for all of the syllabus on these lines, three for part of the syllabus, and none suggested that the approach was unsuitable.

The evaluation of the Baruni and North Goroka projects suggests that a concept approach to the teaching of social studies in the Territory is a feasible alternative to the existing curriculum. Such an approach could provide the basis for the development of an understanding of society more generally applicable than that acquired through a more information oriented syllabus.

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