

From Policy to Practice: curriculum reform in South African education [1]

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ABSTRACT An important development in the post-apartheid South Africa was a departure from apartheid education through an outcomes-based curriculum reform. This resulted in several structural and policy tensions within the system. This paper highlights how these tensions have played themselves out and shows how government and stakeholders have addressed the challenges emanating from them. The paper argues that the tensions that dominated the post-apartheid curriculum reform have resulted in a significant paradigm shift focused on reclaiming knowledge and cognition in the classroom as expressed in the new revisionism in curriculum debate. From a policy point of view, it argues that the South African experience demonstrates how the pursuit of grand philosophies and ideals such as OBE and curriculum 2005 requires, at both macro and micro, systemic and institutional levels, generally and at the level of detail, a great deal of technical and political skills that cannot be achieved overnight. This calls for realism and pragmatism in school reform by focusing attention not only on what schools in society stand for but also on what they can realistically do and achieve, given their legacies and the particular circumstances in which they operate.

Introduction

Grand philosophies and high ideals are all very well. The devil of the detail requires great technical and political skills. (Professor Cliff Malcom, at the Conference of the Association for the Study of Evaluation in Education in Southern Africa, Port Elizabeth Technikon, 26–29 September 2000)

Since the establishment of the new political dispensation, the South African government has placed emphasis on the introduction of policies and mechanisms aimed at redressing the legacy of a racially and ethnically fragmented, dysfunctional and unequal education system inherited from apartheid. In this regard, South Africa has excelled in setting up a new governance system which encourages local and community participation in schools through school governing bodies (SGBs) comprising teachers, learners, parents and other relevant stakeholders, new norms and standards for school funding and professional development of educators, and a National Qualifications Framework which harmonises vertical and horizontal mobility of learners throughout the education system. Within the schooling system, the most significant of these developments was a radical departure from apartheid education through an outcomes-based curriculum reform, known as Curriculum 2005, a topic that constitutes the focus of this paper.

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As in many other developing countries, curriculum reform in South Africa has resulted in several structural and policy tensions within the system. These tensions include: the vision *vis-à-vis* the country's realities; symbolism *vis-à-vis* mass expectations; the curriculum framework *vis-à-vis* applicability, conditions of implementation and actual practice in schools; expected outcomes *vis-à-vis* the capacity of teachers to translate them into reality; and budget concerns *vis-à-vis* commitment to values such as equity, redress and massification, and so on. While highlighting how some of these tensions have played themselves out, the paper concentrates on how government and stakeholders have addressed the challenges posed by them.

The paper starts by tracing the last reform project undertaken by the apartheid state and it puts into historical perspective the debates on the post apartheid curriculum process. It does so by drawing on both the national and global South African curriculum initiatives. At the national level, the paper scrutinises the apartheid government's last curriculum reform efforts, the mass democratic movement's *National Education Policy Investigation* (NEPI) and subsequent policies of the African National Congress (ANC) led government. At the global level, the paper traces those particular dimensions of outcomes based education (OBE) that were borrowed, appropriated and integrated into the South African school curriculum package, also known as Curriculum 2005. Against this background, the paper reviews key moments in the curriculum reform process, namely: (i) the genesis of outcomes-based education in South Africa; (ii) the design and introduction of a new school curriculum based on an outcomes-based approach—Curriculum 2005; and (iii) the tensions generated in the process, leading to the national curriculum review process. It highlights key lessons emerging from the South African curriculum reform experience.

In contrast to all expectations that stakeholders, both from government and civil society, had on the new curriculum project, it soon became an object of much controversy and contestation and culminated in a crisis within the school system. While some critics linked the crisis to the international roots of OBE, the Curriculum Review Committee, which was appointed by Government to address the crisis, placed the blame on the design and the implementation strategy. The paper argues that this experience demonstrates how the pursuit of grand philosophies and ideals such as OBE and Curriculum 2005 in South Africa requires, at both macro and micro levels, systemic and institutional levels, generally and at the level of detail, a great deal of technical and political skills that cannot be achieved overnight. This calls for realism and pragmatism in school reform by focusing attention not only on what schools in society stand for but also on what they can realistically do and achieve, given their legacies and the particular circumstances in which they operate.

The Road to the New Curriculum Framework: key moments

Chetty (1992) indicates that a South African tradition of policy-making as a ritual of secrecy and authoritarianism developed under apartheid. The apartheid government's approach to the policy process was a top-down one drawing heavily on the work of 'scientific experts' (Duff, 1995). The state had monopoly over public policy issues and no room was left for stakeholder or civil society participation. However, the mid-1980s marked a turning point in this regard with two important developments. First, while the apartheid state continued to pursue its own internal reform process, it did so with the realisation that old and rigid apartheid policy formulae would no longer be effective. The challenge was to modernise apartheid educational policies to make them less problematic to the opponents. Second, for the democratic movement the demise of apartheid appeared inevitable. *Resistance* to apartheid was to be matched with a degree of *reconstructionism*, i.e. the necessity to think about

alternative policies, initiatives and practices for building a new South Africa under the new political dispensation. This process has been interpreted as a shift from 'critique to reconstruction' and in the policy arena, from 'politics to policy'.

Last Apartheid State Reform Efforts

Beginning in 1989, officials of the Department of National Education (DNE) sought to devise new curriculum policies. This culminated in the formulation of a *Curriculum Model for South Africa* (CUMSA) in 1991. Its latest version was issued in July 1994 by the Committee of Heads of Education. CUMSA arose out of the need to 'make education more relevant, rationalise the curriculum, eliminate unnecessary overlapping of subject content and redress other shortcomings' (Committee of Heads of Education Departments, 1992, p. 2). Participation in the drawing up of CUMSA involved a variety of committees. These committees were made up of representatives and experts from the education and vocational sectors of the wider community. The DNE drew upon research from the parastatal Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and Afrikaans educationists in developing the Curriculum Model for Education in South Africa (CUMSA), embracing the élitist and technocratic nature which underlined research in these circles (Orkin *et al.*, 1997).

A second policy initiative on the DNE's part was the Education Renewal Strategy (ERS). The ERS was meant to be a 'wide-ranging plan to renew and restructure the South African education system in order to improve existing deficiencies, make education more affordable and create education and training opportunities for an ever-growing population' (Department of National Education, 1992, p. 5). Officials from the different education establishments and first line managers in the racially segregated education departments drew up the ERS document. As such the concept was problematised in managerial terms without looking at the nature of the apartheid education system as a whole (De Clercq, 1997; Orkin *et al.*, 1997). Unlike CUMSA, the ERS initiative tried to involve a wider range of people including National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) participants. However, although open to public contributions, the ERS was largely developed within the education establishment (NEPI, 1993). Attempts to involve the wider community in the ERS were not successful; it only managed to involve the private sector and not the wider education sector, especially the progressive education sector (Orkin *et al.*, 1997).

Briefly, the last apartheid curriculum package can be linked to a range of concerns determined primarily by the need to modernise the apartheid education system in order to minimise local and international protest and contestation. At political and ideological levels, it placed the apartheid notion of 'culture' at the centre of curriculum choices for the main racial and ethnic groups—curriculum diversity. This was an attempt to bring in a more rational and less problematic justification to apartheid social and economic fragmentation. At the economic level, it envisioned addressing labour market concerns by strengthening the vocational component and making it more relevant to economic needs.

Initiatives from Below: the role of the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) and the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD)

The ERS faded into the background with the appearance of the twelve National Education Investigation Policy (NEPI) reports in 1992. In 1989, the liberation movement requested the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC)—a nominal alliance of progressive education and labour stakeholders—to develop an agenda and position papers on education. The result was NEPI, launched in December 1990. The central idea was to generate policy

options for a future education dispensation in South Africa. It evaluated the formal education policy documents of the major political players to compare their similarities and differences. Policies were analysed in terms of their values, objectives and conceptual coherence. NEPI was the first major attempt to offer a new conceptualisation of the education system in the early 1990s. Non-racism, non-sexism, democracy, equity and redress were central principles informing all work done in its framework (De Clercq, 1997, Greenstein, 1997; Orkin *et al.*, 1997; Jansen, 1999a). It must be noted, however, that, apart from broad suggestions about a co-ordinated system of education and training, the outcomes did not have any reference to outcomes based education in the deliberations made by NEPI (Jansen, 1999b, p. 5).

A heterogeneous range of people from civil society participated in NEPI, including educational researchers, policy analysts, students, teachers, community leaders and trade unionists. It also involved a wide range of intellectuals from the mass democratic movement drawn mainly from the liberal, English-speaking universities and from Education Policy Units (EPU) based within the universities and funded by the NECC.

Generally it could be argued that NEPI's work did not address policy implementation issues. It only dealt with what the politicians wanted: a framework for negotiations (De Clercq, 1997). In a more generous note, Greenstein (1995) and De Clercq (1997) argue that the problem with the NEPI reports is that they had an impoverished notion of policy implementation. NEPI proposals were premised on the assumption that smooth implementation would follow because of civil society consultation. They either ignored or did not understand the role of the social medium and resource problems on the ground. NEPI also operated with a narrow conception of capacity building policy for policy development. It assumed that by integrating individuals from the different constituencies in the research process, issues of stakeholder participation, representativity and consultation could be resolved, and their knowledge and curriculum concerns could be automatically accommodated. The notion of policy advocacy was underplayed. This could be interpreted as an expression of lack of policy experience on the part of the ANC's government-in-waiting as a liberation movement concerned with the creation of an ideal society with little or no practical government experience. This is what Schoole (2000) has referred to as 'lack of policy literacy', i.e. an understanding of the complexities entailed in the process of development, negotiation, adoption and implementation of policy in a particular context. In practice, this entails *inter alia* knowledge and experience of the area and issue being dealt with, capability to interrogate the situation, knowledge of government's vision and ideological position, conflict resolution, development of consensus, research experience, being able to draw lessons from the past and from the international experience and a high degree of intellectualism. There is no school where this literacy can be easily and quickly acquired. It requires a great deal of learning from experience or learning by doing.

Subsequent to NEPI, the ANC's Head of Education constituted an independent policy-research agency, the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD) in 1993. Drawing on some NEPI specialists, the CEPD developed the ANC's 'Policy Framework', and undertook the subsequent 'Implementation Plans for Education and Training' (IPET) project. The CEPD was conceived as a professionally autonomous institution, providing rigorous and well-researched policy support to the democratic movement in the education and training sector, particularly the ANC. IPET outlined what implementing the ANC's draft proposals would actually involve, especially in the context of the ANC's Reconstruction and Development Programme (De Clercq, 1997; Orkin *et al.*, 1997). The CEPD worked closely with NGOs, academics with leanings towards the left, labour (Congress of South African Trade Unions—COSATU) and mass-based movements. Although it adopted a

consultative approach, critics feel the process of consultation was limited only to 'workshops' and did not include grassroots level role players (De Clercq, 1997; Orkin *et al.*, 1997).

CEPD's work provided a basis for the formulation of the 1994 Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) Base Document and the 1994 ANC Policy for Education and Training (ironically known as 'The Yellow Document'). These documents emphasised values denied by the apartheid regime and embraced by the democratic movement, such as equality, increased participation and democracy, redress and equity. Unfortunately, they did not go beyond the visionary and symbolic expression of the ANC's commitment to equity, redress and redistributive ideals, as subsequent policy developments represent a shift from these initial policy frameworks. As De Clercq (1997) indicates, South Africa committed itself to education restructuring with most policy documents largely being symbolic, substantive and redistributive, addressing issues of access, redress and equity. In Christie's (1999) view, the tensions between the visionary and symbolic nature of these policies and the contextual constraints at the implementation level led to their demise. Their approach to issues of development and redress collided with the scarcity of resources and budget cuts. This is a fundamental contradiction experienced by many developing countries, where promises of free education for all or compulsory basic education are made under circumstances where these ideals cannot be minimally achieved [2]. Note also that participation and community involvement, which underpinned the post-apartheid discourse of educational policy-making in South Africa are not unproblematic concepts. In some instances, they are used by conservative civil society constituencies which would want to derail the process.

In summary, one could say that compared to other developing countries, particularly within the continent, South Africa started its democratic project with a considerable comparative advantage. First, the apartheid government had initiated reforms that, though falling short of addressing fundamental systemic issues, launched a process of self-introspection within the bureaucracy and an internal and external policy dialogue with profound learning implications at a national level. Second, unlike many African countries, South Africa had a strong civil society movement aligned to the liberation movement, which was able to combine contestation with the search for alternatives to the apartheid education policy, including curriculum issues. As Jansen (1999b) put it, 'competing social movements and political actors started fiercely to stake their curriculum positions in anticipation of what seemed inevitable, the emergence of South Africa's first democratic state' (p. 2). In the process, key principles and values for democratic policy process such as participation, consultation, redress, equity, representativity and accountability, were generated and internalised within the mass democratic movement. As such the ANC was given the opportunity to build on this enabling legacy to develop its national reconstruction framework. The question that arises is whether the old curriculum could be maintained or transformed to serve the new educational order.

Post-apartheid South Africa and Curriculum Reform

As indicated above, proposals for transformation of education and training in South Africa first emerged within the civil society activities that led to the 1994 elections. At the time there was immense debate within and between the ANC and COSATU as well as private sector groups and community groups. The White Paper on Education and Training (DOE, 1995) called for the transformation of the school curriculum and formation of democratic structures to develop this curriculum (DOE, 2000). Following on the White Paper on Education and Training, a number of discussion documents were developed by the National Department of Education. The most notable one that began to moot outcomes in education

emerged in 1996 (DOE, 1996). Also, 1996 saw the Department of Education issuing syllabi purged of the most gross and evident apartheid, racial and ethnic stereotypes. For Jansen what government did was a sort of 'cleansing' through cutting out offensive and outdated aspects of the apartheid curriculum regardless of their pedagogical soundness (Jansen, 1999a).

Genesis of Curriculum 2005 in South Africa

OBE can be described as a global educational curriculum reform phenomenon with adaptations and local responses in South Africa whose origins and evolution can be traced to competency based debates in Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, Canada and limited circles in the United States. It is part of a flow of ideas that through globalisation processes have gained echo in different contexts and express converging trends in educational systems throughout the world (e.g. the centralisation/decentralisation debates, the school effectiveness debates and recently the school improvement approaches). With few exceptions, OBE still remains an experiment at different levels of national policy. In Australia it has become part of a national mission with regional adaptations. In Canada it has been a provincial experiment that gained popularity in Ontario. In Scotland it has been restricted to vocational programmes within Glasgow. In the United States, it has been met with a great deal of hostility at state level but has some acceptance at district level. Although OBE has been referred to differently in these countries, it has common or similar practices (Young, 2000).

In South Africa, OBE was not an educational borrowing just handed down and accepted uncritically by South Africans. There are both local and global roots to OBE that had different impacts at different times. First, OBE can be traced within the labour movement that sought to overhaul the education system and incorporate an integrated approach to education and training. In a recently developed doctoral thesis, Spreen illustrates 'how activists outside the traditional education establishment (with strong international ties) were instrumental in establishing the new educational agenda in South Africa' (Spreen, 2001, p. 5).

More specifically, the genesis of OBE appears to be in the National Training Board (NTB) and the labour union, COSATU (Christie, 1994; Jansen, 1999a). The National Training Board and COSATU produced a policy document: National Training Strategy Initiative (NTSI), which laid the basis for a future national training strategy (Christie, 1994) incorporating curriculum and assessment (Jansen, 1999b). For the NTB, growth in South Africa required technology, and modern technologies required not only educated labour literate in mathematics and science but also with an attitudinal profile characterised by flexibility, versatility, problem solving abilities and ability to work in teams (Christie, 1994). However, the primary focus of this strategy was on labour and the training sector since these organisations were concerned with improving and accreditation of labour's skills in the workplace. As Spreen (2001) has correctly suggested:

The COSATU Education Desk began to strive for recognition from the education community for what workers knew and were able to do. In many ways, these early concerns are what brought about an interest in OBE. Increased recognition of the skills workers obtained on the job and in other settings outside of the formal education system would give them better credentials that would bring more pay and greater mobility. (p. 130)

Another issue was the separation of education and training issues, which had a negative impact on career paths of the workers; this was addressed through alignment, and integration of education and training. Within COSATU there were discussions on compe-

tency-based education (CBE) as the instrument to provide and accredit training in the labour sector. This, it was argued, would ensure grading and progression in labour ranks through demonstrable competencies (McGath, 1997; Jansen, 1999b). The proposals for an integrated approach to education and training struck a chord in the education field and soon competencies incorporated schools in their framework.

What is evident is that much debate about competencies was largely conducted within the labour movement and business. As a result little or no integration with educational ideas in the competencies debates had taken place. The competency debate found resonance within the trade union movement in South Africa (COSATU), gained expression in the NTB proposals, dominated the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the new curriculum framework, Curriculum 2005. The difference is that the term 'competencies' was reframed to mean 'outcomes'. A note of caution is that these developments took place without realising the danger that education could be easily hijacked into training or skills development. In fact, (Christie, 1994) and McGath (1997) shrewdly point out that to the dismay of those who favoured integration, the post-1994 government continued apartheid anomalies of dividing education from training and placed them in separate ministries: education and labour. Thus even after the 1994 elections the ANC-led government was still consumed by the administrative and political legacy of apartheid, with much effort channelled towards reorganising educational governance, and remained indifferent to inequalities fostered by apartheid curriculum.

Towards a New Curriculum Framework: the context

The implementation of outcomes-based education took place within the Government of National Unity (GNU) and under state political and ideological circumstances different from those of the ANC pre-election ideals. This is explained by the negotiated nature of the political settlement and the moderate politics of compromises it imposed on the new Government. For example, initial policy initiatives were highly conditioned by the so-called 'Sunset Clause' and the politics of compromise under which the GNU was constituted. The GNU prevented the ruling party from introducing new policies without reaching consensus with other government partners (Interim Constitution, 1993). As Christie (1996) notes 'bureaucrats of the previous order who did not support change often had the power to block it' (p. 77). In fact the Interim Constitution as a constitution based on negotiation and compromise overturned some of the central principles in the ANC's Policy Framework for Education and Training.

According to the 'Sunset Clause', the newly established Department of Education (DOE) was obliged to accommodate the staff from the apartheid regime for a period of five years without any danger of retrenchments. Thus, when the policy activity moved from civil society into the new state, the DOE had to operate for at least five years with two layers of bureaucracy with conflicting interests and cultures and disparate levels of capacity: a politically motivated, visionary but inexperienced bureaucracy of the new regime that had to depend on a strong conservative and technicist bureaucracy from the old system (Christie, 1999; Jansen, 1999b; Cross & Nomdo, 2000). Tensions between these two competing paradigms resulted in some cases in passive resistance that slowed the pace of change.

On the other hand, the radical intellectual movement that had dedicated its energy to criticism of the apartheid state either could not redefine its agenda under the emerging democracy or, with few exceptions such as Jansen (1999a,b), engaged uncritically and blindly into the project of national reconstruction. Certainly, in such an environment mistakes can easily be made and when they are made they can hardly be corrected. As it will be shown,

this is demonstrated by the experience of curriculum reform in South Africa. In this sense, one could argue that some of the shortcomings of the post-apartheid policy process were to a certain extent facilitated by a lack of a 'critical mind' within Government and mainly within the South African intelligentsia. This could be explained by the following factors: (i) some of them joined the bureaucracy; (ii) some were constrained by the demands of consultative work; (iii) some felt bound by the silences imposed by commissioned consulting work and have fallen victims of 'policy commercialism' (Rensburg, 2000, p. 7) to undertake work driven by the market without a sound research basis or any deep debate on policy theory; (iv) and yet others tended to relegate state critique to the past, enthusiastically embracing all state activities.

In Rensburg's view (Rensburg, 2000), the consequence was that curriculum conversations tended to focus on curriculum implementation and not on the theoretical underpinnings of curriculum change. For him hard questions, such as the following, were neglected in the process: what is general education? What is the curriculum of the past? What is the curriculum of the future? How does learning take place? How do we organise knowledge to improve learning? How do we deliver knowledge? This vacuum seems to have narrowed since the release of the report of the Curriculum Review Committee (DOE, 2000). Further, civil society organisations that have been able to participate in the consultative process and were able to articulate their voices systematically, were not always concerned with the democratic project in the country. In some instances, not only did they object strongly to ideals of the new Government but also they turned the consultative process into a slow, cumbersome one, leading to near paralysis in some aspects.

Further, it is important to note that, while the newly established government had the advantage of inheriting an enabling policy environment for curriculum reform, one should not underestimate the challenge of overhauling a national curriculum for basic education. In this regard, Jansen (2000) has the following to say:

Most educationists, most of the time, of course, are involved in something much more urgent and practical, particularly where educational provision is manifestly inequitable and frequently inadequate. Their immediate concern is with school improvement. And the immediate problems in improving schooling are problems of means, not of ends... These are the preconditions of an equitable system of public education. But what else can all in a democracy readily agree on as constituting the improvement of schools and schooling? When we move beyond those basics and begin to consider not just the preconditions of an equitable education for all but it's content and processes, ready agreement is harder to obtain. For to make progress in any democratic negotiation of curriculum and pedagogy, even to draw up a blueprint, we need to ask what schools are for; to ascertain what democratic citizens, individually and collectively, expect their public education system to deliver. And this is where a surprising number of difficulties begin, for the answer to that depends upon who you are and where you stand—upon your current or aspirant position in the social structure and your relative empowerment in the economic structure. (p. 3)

Key Features of Curriculum 2005

On 24 March, 1997 the Minister of Education, S Bengu, announced in Parliament the launch of Curriculum 2005, which not only marked a dramatic departure from the apartheid curriculum but also represented a paradigm shift from content-based teaching and learning

to an outcomes based one. It also marks a departure from 'fundamental pedagogics' (a racially-based prescribed set of learning objectives) to progressive pedagogy and learner-centred teaching and learning strategies. As in many other examples of outcomes based curricula, the assumption was that outlines of content or traditional subjects are not an adequate basis for framing everything that the curriculum should teach. Underpinning Curriculum 2005 is also the integration of education and training. The sources of integration can be associated with the inadequacies of the separation between mental and manual work or academic and vocational education in the old curriculum, the notion of integrated studies that had become popular in some educational circles (private schools), the need for an integrated regulatory framework which gained form in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), and concerns with the job placement needs of learners in the context of globalisation. It can also be linked to the debates around the changing mode of knowledge production, which emphasises the shift from Mode I (disciplinary knowledge) to Mode II knowledge (applied, interdisciplinary knowledge).

Curriculum 2005 tried to do the following: (i) align school work with workplace, social and political goals; (ii) emphasise experiential and cooperative learning; (iii) pursue the value of diversity in the areas of race, gender and culture; (iii) develop citizens who are imaginative and critical problem-solvers. Curriculum 2005 identifies eight Learning areas. These are regarded as a way of breaking away from strict boundaries between traditional school subjects and to ensure integration within and across the different disciplines as well as developing and organising the core curriculum. The traditional subjects are accommodated within eight learning areas: Arts and Culture; Language, Literacy and Communication; Economic and Management Sciences; Human and Social Sciences; Life Orientation; Mathematical Literacy, Mathematics and Mathematical Sciences; Physical and Natural Sciences; and Technology

Another key feature of Curriculum 2005 is the *critical outcomes*. These are broad generic cross-curricular outcomes that have been developed to encourage further integration between the different learning areas and to give an integrated approach in all teaching and learning. In short, the critical outcomes are that learners should be able to do the following:

- Communicate effectively using visual, mathematical and/or language skills in the modes of oral and/or written presentation;
- Identify and solve problems using creative and critical thinking;
- Organise and manage themselves and their activities responsibly and effectively;
- Work effectively with others in a team, group, organisation and community;
- Collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information;
- Use science and technology effectively and critically, showing responsibility towards the environment and the health of others;
- Understand that the world is a set of related systems. This means that problem-solving contexts do not exist in isolation.

Together, the eight learning areas constitute sixty-six *specific outcomes*. These refer to the specific knowledge, attitudes and understanding which should be displayed in a particular context. *Assessment criteria* provide evidence that the learners have achieved the specific outcomes. In broad terms, the criteria indicate the observable processes and products of learning that indicate learners' achievement. *Range statements* indicate the 'scope, depth and level of complexity and parameters of the learners' achievement' (DOE, 1997, p. 16). Performance indicators give detailed information concerning the learning progress of each learner. And *learning programmes* are the sets of activities in which a learner is engaged in the achievement of specific outcomes (DOE, 1997, p. 11).

Outcomes-based Curriculum in South Africa: the critics and their critique

By critics here we refer not only to those who from outside Government and bureaucracy have implicitly or explicitly expressed their concerns about particular policies and dimensions of a policy but also to those within Government who have voiced their opinions on similar issues. The critique of the outcomes-based curriculum has been waged with reference to the following main dimensions: (i) its origins and conceptual basis; (ii) its policy nature; (iii) its knowledge and pedagogical features; (iv) process issues such as the management of its formulation, adoption and implementation; (v) design issues; and (vi) its position in the context of schooling.

It has been argued in this paper that debates within the labour movement led to the 'borrowing' of an outcomes based approach to curriculum as a solution to skills and job concerns among workers. In this sense, the emergence of outcomes-based education can be seen against the backdrop of globalisation and consequent converging tendencies within national education systems as educators increasingly learn from each other across borders (Steiner-Khamsi, 2000). In the minds of the main role players, though restricted to a small pool of countries in the Western world, OBE was regarded as 'the state-of-the art thinking on Western schooling' and 'the best of international experience' to address South African problems (Christie, 1999, p. 281). This view was met with criticism by those who see OBE as an imposition of the Western world or, in other words, another manifestation of cultural imperialism. This is present for example in Kallaway's words when he suggests that:

In South Africa educational politics has increasingly been reduced to a matter of policy implementation. In the name of change and redress, and because of the need for politicians to produce demonstrable innovations in a short space of time, a range of policies, often hastily borrowed from foreign contexts without adequate research into their success and effects, have been bundled together with insufficient consultation or research. (Kallaway *et al.*, 1997, p. 1)

The quotation refers to the borrowing of an outcomes based strategy without considering the contextual changes needed to make the strategy effective. Education systems are part and parcel of the fabric of the societies in which they operate. For one to understand them one must take into account their historical, political, social and cultural settings. This is not to deny that national education systems in different parts of the world are converging and that educators increasingly learn from each other across national boundaries (Steiner-Khamsi, 2000, p. 3), but to emphasise that effective educational borrowing requires solid understanding of how ideas, concepts and educational innovations are borrowed, adapted and implemented locally. Cultural imperatives are of paramount importance and the most important aspect to bear in mind when considering the possibilities of effective educational borrowing. It is the socio-cultural settings that keep policies in place and that provide resistance to the transfer of ideas from other countries and systems and that determine the preparedness of local contexts to accept or receive such ideas.

Related to the policy nature of the new curriculum is the primacy of politics in influencing educational policy after the fall of apartheid (Jansen, 1999b). Political imperatives are given primacy over policy imperatives. In this perspective, the curriculum initiative was not meant to be implemented. It was part of state policy symbolism and political expediency to give the impression that change was taking place and the expectations of the disadvantaged groups were being addressed. However, Christie cautions that it would be a mistake and simplistic to see global influences simply as impositions on local contexts, since this would overlook the *agency* of local actors as well as the different forms that adaptation

to local contexts brings. Thus although OBE reflects a pastiche of policy borrowing, in practice the issues are being woven into a texture of local concerns.

At the conceptual level, the charge is that the South African outcomes based curriculum reflects the limitations of its origins. Having been inspired by debates within the labour union, it certainly was generated in a context where skills and training concerns prevailed over educational concerns, and narrow measurable skills over thinking issues. The debates moved from a narrow conception of competences to a narrow conception of outcomes as expressed in Curriculum 2005. Most importantly, it was not clear what clusters of knowledge or content should be brought together to facilitate learning, in what sequence, and at what level of competence (Muller, 2000, p. 15). As such Curriculum 2005 remained heavy in integration but conceptually light. Further, it also pinpointed that the curriculum demarcation with the past was flawed because it was assumed that everything from the past (apartheid curriculum legacy) was politically and educationally bankrupt and as such unsuitable for the new context.

Also at the conceptual level, there was the question of integration. From the outset, it appeared that, while the socio-political purposes of integration were clear, its pedagogical purpose and consequent procedural consequences remained unclear. The uncertainty about the practicalities of integration at the curriculum level has led some educators to settle with a much more comfortable and modest notion of 'integrated approach' to education and training instead of integrated education and training. The most significant charge against the notion of integration is that it treats all forms of knowledge as if they have the same identity or structure; rather, it is argued, one should consider most clusters of knowledge with degrees of connectivity.

Further shortcomings are experienced at the process level. They concern the management of the curriculum process from its conceptualisation, formulation, adoption and implementation. The first charge here was the lack of alignment between curriculum development, teacher development, selection and supply of learning materials (Potenza & Monyokolo, 1999). Thus lack of co-ordination and interface of the three key components of curriculum led to poor implementation, with ad hoc workshops in place of teacher training, tied to a cascade training model compounded by lack of relevant OBE materials, and delays as well as non-delivery of such materials. As Christie (1999) clearly points out, the curriculum was poorly planned and hastily introduced in schools with teachers being insufficiently prepared, with inadequate resources. It is also argued that the curriculum process did not carefully consider resource constraints, nor the inadequate databases of, for instance, simple matters such as the number of schools or teachers in the country, and that it suffered from lack of or inadequate planning and co-ordination, coupled with poor strategic interventions in the introduction of OBE.

The second charge is about the political process that should have informed the curriculum development. After labour's active involvement in initial curriculum debates, it is alleged, the technocrats (experts), including foreign consultants, hijacked the process at the expense of the role of practitioners. The consequences were twofold. The role of the teachers in curriculum design became marginal and the curriculum was framed and mystified by impenetrable and obscure jargon. Curriculum 2005 has been criticised for using inaccessible language to teachers who are supposed to implement it, which makes it an élitist system with profound political implications for the Government's redress project (Christie, 1999; Jansen, 1999b). Also there is a proliferation of new terminology in the implementation of OBE. For instance, the procedures for developing a learning programme are deemed complex and hence the need for better prepared teachers, many of whom, especially in the previously disadvantaged groups, are inadequately prepared for basic teaching let alone comprehending the new curriculum.

The third charge is concerned with the degree of state interventionism in the curriculum process. For the critics, Curriculum 2005 represents an example of a bureaucratic-driven process of curriculum reform, which has resulted in the following deficiencies: (i) too much alignment to socio-economic concerns at the expense of knowledge and pedagogical concerns; (ii) highly regulated framework; (iii) over-specification of outcomes (7 critical outcomes and 66 specific outcomes) which de-skills teachers by leaving little space for their discretion and creativity; (iv) under-specification of content and knowledge basis, which diminishes its value as a framework and limits the pedagogical authority of the teacher; (v) limited teacher participation in the conceptualisation and design of the curriculum (as Rensburg, 2000, puts it, 'have we left our comrades behind?'); and (vi) less attention to pedagogical concerns.

At the design level, there seems to be consensus that Curriculum 2005 fell short of constituting an effective curriculum framework for teachers and learners. First, it focused too much on outcomes and neglected issues of content that were left to individual teachers to construct. However, given poor training of teachers and lack of resources, as well as the toll that apartheid had inflicted on the education system, the majority of teachers found it difficult to know what to teach and tended to act as mere technicians without the necessary conceptual and content tools.

Second, the shift from a narrow labour-inspired concept of competence to a narrow concept of outcome left the knowledge basis of the curriculum dependent on the possibilities of social constructivism in which cognitive dimensions of the learner tended to be neglected and the pedagogical possibilities of the teacher were overestimated. This could not offer an effective curriculum basis or pedagogy for disadvantaged teachers. In this regard, Young (2000, p. 11) calls for 'a reconstruction of the notion of social construction' to accommodate its fundamental cognitive dimensions. Knowledge in the classroom was reduced to the constructs that teachers and learners individually bring into the classrooms (personal knowledge embedded in personal experience) or just a product of classroom interaction through some form of progressive pedagogy (group work, integrated studies, etc). Explicit discipline knowledge was ignored. In MacDonald's words, schools had become about 'anything but knowledge' (MacDonald, 1998, quoted in Muller, 2000, p. 9). This could be described as the 'side effect of progressivism' in education, which by overemphasising learner-centredness, tends to neglect a critical pedagogical dimension. In this regard, Muller referring to Gee (1999) argues that for instruction to be effective the teacher must know more than the learner, must have adequate content knowledge, must know the conceptual destination of the learning, and therefore purposefully steer the learner towards a pre-set goal or outcome (Muller, 2000, p. 9).

There is therefore a need to reclaim the pedagogical and cognitive aspects of schooling that have been lost through too much emphasis on outcomes, to bring back to the fore the role of the teacher, devalued in progressivism, not just in shaping the flux of experience gained through 'immersion' but by providing the 'baggage', the facts, the raw material to be shaped and ordered, i.e. the subject matter or content knowledge (Muller, 2000, p. 12). With no content stipulations, the content and coverage are tacitly assumed to be in place. The consequence, as Muller puts it, is:

A success can be made of such an under-stipulated curriculum, but only if the teacher has a well-articulated mental script of what should be covered, and if the pupils come from homes where they have been well prepared to respond to such putative freedom, in other words, only in schools by and for the middle class. (Muller 2000, p. 14)

In some cases there has been a lack of *political will* and *vision* evidenced by postponement of the implementation of OBE in all levels except grade 1 and 2 over the past two years. Clearly, as Jansen (1999a) competently illustrates, the implementation of OBE favours well-resourced schools with well-qualified teachers.

Briefly, the reviews of the first five years of curriculum reform in South Africa have been dominated by two kinds of pessimism: (i) a strong pessimism which reduces the period to a phase of policies and frameworks. In Jansen's words, the 'period of policy positioning', not meant to be implemented, and as such of unnecessary symbolic transition (Jansen, 1999b); and (ii) a weak pessimism which, though accepting the policy symbolism of the period, tries to justify it with reference to the question of priorities (Chisholm & Fuller, 1997). For the former, the new leadership through symbolic positions only revealed the position of the state in solving contestation in the political domain. For the latter, the new leadership was constrained by the difficulties of moving from 'an anti-state stance to building an identity and a new state that represented the interests of the majority' (Rensburg, 2000). While some of these criticisms were articulated with a degree of pessimism from either viewpoint, they were not indeed a simple expression of pessimism. There seems to be general consensus that, regardless of who or how they were articulated, they were symptomatic of the profound problems facing curriculum reform in South Africa. This claim was validated by the decision of the Department of Education to appoint a Policy Review Committee to evaluate key dimensions of the process.

The Review Committee on Curriculum 2005: review of 'what' and 'for what'?

Policy reviews have become common practice in many developing countries. Their functions vary from country to country and are determined generally by contextual issues concerning reform strategies and programmes. Generally policy reviews can serve the following functions: (i) to provide accountability mechanisms for governments and/or donor agencies with vested interests in a particular policy initiative or programme; (ii) to enhance existing policy; and (iii) to establish a new policy. In South Africa the Curriculum Review Committee was required to investigate:

- Steps to be taken in respect of the implementation of the new curriculum in Grades 4 and 8 in 2001;
- Key success factors and strategies for strengthened implementation of the new curriculum;
- The structure of the new curriculum;
- The levels of understanding of outcomes-based education by stakeholders.

From its brief, the Review Committee was not expected to do away with Curriculum 2005 or to question its approach (OBE) and basic assumptions, though these have been an object of contestation. It was primarily concerned with addressing what has been perceived as an implementation crisis and proposing measures to deal with it. Upholding social justice, equity and development constituted the point of departure of the Committee. Its task involved interrogating how the issues on the national agenda matched with global issues such as growth and competitiveness for the 21st century. At a more practical level, the Committee had to investigate how enabling Curriculum 2005 was for achieving these goals, how implementable it was, or whether it provided a good basis for achieving its stated critical outcomes. This meant weighing the operational realities against its strategic intent.

Several shortcomings were identified within the curriculum itself and within the system. These include:

- (i) varying levels of understanding of Curriculum 2005;
- (ii) a skewed curriculum structure and design (e.g. complex and cumbersome language and terminology, overcrowding of learning areas, over design in outcomes but under specification in content);
- (iii) integration, a leading design feature (seen as placing emphasis on progression and not on conceptual mastery);
- (iv) policy overload and limited transfer of learning into classrooms;
- (v) lack of alignment between curriculum and assessment policy (too much assessment—oral, written, individual, group, etc.—ad hoc and fragmented—each of the 66 specific outcomes has three to four assessment criteria);
- (vi) inadequate orientation, training and development of teachers and follow-up support unavailable;
- (vii) too much emphasis on the outcomes without stating what should go into the system (inputs) for the outcomes to be achieved;
- (viii) learning support materials that are variable in quality, often unavailable and not sufficiently used in classrooms;
- (ix) shortages of personnel and resources to implement and support Curriculum 2005; and
- (x) inadequate recognition of curriculum as the core business of education departments.

Against this background and to strengthen the process of implementation, the Committee proposed:

- A revised and streamlined outcomes-based curriculum framework that promotes integration and conceptual coherence within a human rights approach, which pays special attention to anti-discriminatory, anti-racist, anti-sexist and special needs issues
- A national teacher education strategy which locates teacher preparation and development for the new curriculum in higher education and identifies, selects and trains a special cadre of regional and district curriculum trainers working with NGOs and higher education for short-term orientation
- The production of learner support materials—especially textbooks—which should become the responsibility of publishers and dedicated units or institutes as proposed in the White Paper on Education and Training (DOE, 1995)
- Ring-fenced budgeting for the curriculum
- Reorganisation and reinforcement of curriculum functions both in the DOE and in the provinces
- Relaxation of the pace of implementation
- A managed process of phasing out the current Curriculum 2005 and phasing in Curriculum 21
- The establishment of a task team to manage the phase out and phase in process.

A brief assessment of the problems identified by the Review Committee and its respective recommendations confirms the validity of most of the criticisms outlined above. In this sense, it appears that the main thrust of the review lies mainly in widening debates on curriculum reform by providing legitimacy and authority to constructive criticisms as a healthy instrument for successful policy development and implementation. In this regard, it also appears that, arising out of Curriculum 2005, there is a remarkable trend towards a paradigm shift in the ways we think about curriculum change and issues. The main feature of this trend lies in the increasing concern with re-thinking the role of schooling in society, the concern with the

'basics' in curriculum organisation and delivery, the importance of cognitive knowledge, and pedagogical issues in curriculum in their relationship to social justice and equity issues.

The Post-Curriculum Review Dilemmas

The South African experience provides both conceptual and policy lessons to be learned in the complex task of transforming educational curriculum. The Policy Review experience reveals three important aspects of the policy process: (i) commitment to making policies clear and simple; (ii) commitment to mobilising available resources to policy goals; (iii) commitment to intervening in areas of inefficiencies and crisis; (iv) commitment to crafting strategies and not just symbols; and (v) commitment to speaking of policy as what happens and not just text. A dilemma faced by the Department of Education is how to accommodate all stakeholders while simplifying the process of curriculum reform. Teachers need to be part of the process of knowledge construction to be able to deliver in teaching and learning.

The justification for the introduction of OBE in South Africa is noteworthy. Its value remains unquestionable. What requires problematisation is the range of expectations around an outcomes-based curriculum in South Africa, which is related to the wider question of what to expect from schools or schooling today. As Jonathan (2000) put it:

This raises the old vexed question of the extent of education's power to act as the primary engine of social change rather than simply as one of the key levers of change at the disposal of politicians, policy-makers and public when they seek radical social transformation. (p. 1)

While the focus of this paper is not on educational borrowing or transfer, we would like however to highlight a dimension of borrowing in Curriculum 2005 which has been the object of much debate in South Africa. Both Kallaway *et al.*, (1997) and Jonathan (2000) stress the value of looking 'at what has been tried elsewhere, provided (as seldom happens) that full attention is paid to context—to the differing purposes, resources and values of differing conditions' (Kallaway *et al.*, 1997, p. 1). There is however another sense in which the South African experience can be read. This is perhaps related to what its mode of educational borrowing certainly did not do: *learn from mistakes and failures*. This idea is well explored by Jonathan (2000):

The most frequently exploited of these [advantages] is to look at what has been tried in one place and to think out what relevance it might or might not have elsewhere. But there is another type of opportunity, which regrettably, is less often taken. *That is to share our understanding from one society to another, not so much of what seems to work, given adequately favourable conditions, but of what has not worked anywhere, whatever the policies implemented to bring it about.* [...] That cautionary tale might be of assistance in rethinking what schools are for, and in examining the role and limits of schooling reform in social change [our emphasis]. (p. 3)

As it is well known, although education cannot transform the world, the world cannot transform without education. However, what has not been questioned is whether education reforms and, in particular, school reforms in the present world fail and are failing, not because they are trying the right thing the wrong way, but because they are doing the wrong thing altogether (Jonathan, 2000). Failure is explained as a problem of means, not of ends. Perhaps we are asking or expecting too much from education. Certainly in the developing world and within the African continent in particular, unlimited and somewhat unrealistic agendas have been set for schooling.

Just as in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, the following competing agendas have been proposed for basic education: 'education for cultural diversity', 'education for national unity', 'education for liberation', 'peoples' education for peoples' power', 'education with production', etc. Each of these has its knowledge claims and curriculum programme, driven by a particular set of expectations. Of course the point is not that education does not or should not be about these important goals. Without denying that basic education can perform some of these roles, we would like to urge for a more careful consideration of what schools should stand for, can do and achieve more effectively, and on this basis reflect on a suitable curriculum. Another dimension on educational borrowing concerns the context from which to borrow. From the DOE, Lehoko (2000), having compared New Zealand to Soweto, raises concern about the dangers of 'borrowing from a small system to apply to a large and complex system' such as South Africa. For us the main problem in this regard is certainly the silence about experiences from other developing countries in the continent and elsewhere, even if it is to highlight what not to do.

Finally, the experience of the Review Committee highlights another important dimension of South African curriculum reform. After the release of its Report, the government endorsed most of its recommendations with the exception of the implicit suggestion about changing the name from Curriculum 2005 to Curriculum 21. Given the nature of the recommendations, this was not just a matter of semantics. It indeed reflected a major surgery on the existing curriculum approach and content. The question that this raises is how Government can address major policy shifts without giving the impression that it is for another major policy departure, which could certainly become more disruptive than the existing curriculum. This highlights the fact that very often in educational reforms political concerns are made to prevail over educational and pedagogical concerns in order to mediate conflicting interests in the political domain.

NOTES

- [1] This paper was first presented at the 14th Conference of Commonwealth Ministers of Education, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, 26–29 November, 2000.
- [2] To be fair, there was a perception in South Africa that as the apartheid state was wasteful, funds were available that could be redirected to address issues of equity and redress. The reality was that Government was already overspending in education.

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