

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES OF THE NEW CURRICULUM STATEMENT – A PROGRESS REPORT

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ABSTRACT

With the dawn of the new curriculum in this country, namely, Curriculum 2005 (C2005) in 1997, and the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) in 2002, which are the two major curriculum policy developments in South Africa (Ramsuran & Malcolm, 2006:515), it invited an assortment of reactions from the entire education fraternity. The most obvious and extensive critique of the curriculum was that of the Report of the Ministerial Review Committee, which was established to review it in 2000. The approach adopted in this study is to encompass both processes of initial introduction and the revision stages in its reference to the curriculum. This article however, reveals that despite these implementation challenges, the overwhelming majority (88%) of the teachers have not only begun to embrace it, but are also applying the OBE principles in their lessons.

Key words: C2005; National Curriculum Statement (NCS); Outcomes-Based Education (OBE); teachers, challenges; successes; implementation; training

1. INTRODUCTION

The first democratic elections for all South Africans, regardless of colour or creed, were held in 1994 and ended 40 years of entrenched racial discrimination, termed the policy of “apartheid”. The period since then has been the first time that South African educators could seriously begin to educate a new generation of post-apartheid teachers (Robinson 1999:191). Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the history and origin of the South African Education system not only defines but also lays the foundation for any constructive reengineering of the society. The background to this history is concisely presented by the former Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal (2002:15), when he argued that “the profile of our society still reflects gross inequalities in education attainment across racial lines. Many people have lost the opportunity of pursuing their education through formal schooling because of the education policies of the apartheid government, but especially 'bantu' education. The few who were fortunate to obtain the education they could, had to do so under extremely trying circumstances, characterised by low morale and a poor culture of teaching and learning. Major unrest and dilapidated school buildings were the norm”.

According to Chishol (2003:3), the Report of the Ministerial Review Committee established to review the curriculum in 2000 gave a wide-ranging critique of the curriculum. It argued that while there was overwhelming support for the principles of outcomes-based education and Curriculum 2005, which had generated a new focus on teaching and learning, implementation has been confounded by: (i) a skewed curriculum structure and design; (ii) lack of alignment between curriculum and assessment policy; (iii) inadequate orientation, training and development of teachers; (iv) learning support materials that are variable in quality, often unavailable and not sufficiently used in classroom; (v) policy overload and limited transfer of learning into classrooms; shortage of personnel and resources to implement and support C2005; (vi) inadequate recognition of curriculum as the core business of education departments.

2. AIM OF THE STUDY

A number of studies have been conducted to interrogate this new curriculum, approaching it from diverse angles, everything from critiquing its underlying principles to the expectations concerning its actual implementation in one field of study or another, whether it be Languages or Life Orientation, etc.

This study, however, intends to reflect on the progress made by teachers in terms of embracing and applying the principles of this new curriculum since its inception. The idea is not to try and trace the debates around this curriculum from its inception to where it is today. Rather, the two phases (C2005 – 1997 to RNCS - 2000) are viewed as an essential process towards achieving a working curriculum model. A model which is currently adopted and applied in South African schools. So, the focus is centered around the perception of teachers with regard to their implementation concerns and success stories of this curriculum since its inception.

3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The introduction of the new curriculum brought with it a mixed bag of reactions amongst particularly teachers in this country. As implementers of this curriculum, it is a given fact that they had to go through some moments of anxiety, fear, frustration, uncertainty, etc. However, at some point they have to feel a sense of accomplishment or triumph. Not enough research study if any has been conducted to essentially investigate the progress made by teachers with regard to their alleged pessimisms towards this new curriculum, but also their ability and willingness to implement it. So, this study, hopes to serve as the “report-card” on this issue.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research design and population and sampling

This research study is an exploratory and descriptive study. The study is mainly quantitative in nature, using survey, that is, a self-completion structured questionnaire. The methodology chosen is strongly informed by (i) observations, informal discussions, as well as extensive literature study conducted by the researcher. The data collected for this study originates from the sampling population consisting of a total number of seventy-two (n=72) African educators. Further classified in terms of the following pertinent variables namely; gender, age and work experience. This sample population is drawn from both primary (n=40) and secondary (n=32) schools, found in the urban areas of Bloemfontein, using a purposeful sampling method. The respondents' age range was between 27 to 45 years. Work experience ranged from 5 to 27 years. However, it is essential to note that, due to the limited scope of the study, assertions and inferences will serve only as indicators without laying claim to any generalisation of the findings.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Unpacking the “ncs” and its underlying philosophy

Knight (2005:21) indicates that the effects of the introduction of, and confusion around, C2005 are becoming apparent. Curriculum 2005 is a form of outcomes-based education (Chishol, 2003:3). Outcomes-based education has meant different things to different people in theory and in practice (Hargreaves & Moore, 2000; Harley, Barasa, Bertram, Mattson, Pillay, 2000). Furthermore, Chishol (2003) states that as the guiding philosophy of C2005 in 1997 was that it was for its initiators, the pedagogical route out of “apartheid” education. Furthermore, OBE and C2005 provided a broad framework for the development of an alternative to “apartheid” education that was open, non-prescriptive and reliant on teachers creating their own learning programmes and learning support materials (DoE, 1997a, b and n.d.)

The curriculum aims to develop the full potential of each learner as a citizen of a democratic South Africa (RSA, 2002:1). The Outcomes-based education forms the foundation of the curriculum. It strives to enable all learners to achieve to their maximum ability. This is done by setting the outcomes to be achieved at the end of the process. The outcomes encourage a learner-centred and activity-based approach to education. This learner-centred learning entails a shift from the traditional teacher-centred approach to an approach in which the emphasis is on the learners and what they learn (Spencer & Jordan, 1999:1280).

Barr & Tagg (1995:23) state that the traditional 'Instructional Paradigm' which consists of formal lectures is increasingly recognised as ineffective. In addition, an outcomes-based education and training system starts with intended outputs (outcomes) as opposed to the inputs of traditional curriculum-driven education and training (Spady 1994:68).

An outcome is defined as “a culminating demonstration of the entire range of learning experiences and capabilities that underlie it, and it occurs in a performance context that directly influences what it is and how it is carried out” (Cronje, Du Toit, & Motlatla, 2000:466). An outcome is not simply the description of the learning material, a concept, competence, grade or score, but a result in a real situation. The basic approach is that if learning is based on outcomes the starting point is with the intended outcome – the end result.

Once this is established the curriculum processes (learning programmes) such as design, instructional planning, teaching, assessing and the development of learning to reach the outcome can commence. Outcomes-based education is a results-driven approach, and grounded on the following bases (Van der Horst & McDonald 1997:6):

(i) it takes the learner's needs into consideration; (ii) it acknowledges human diversity by taking learners' differences into account; (iii) it is democratic and participative in nature in that parents and learners have a say in education; (iv) it focuses on responsibility; and (v) it allows learners to achieve their full potential. The greatest challenge that still faces teacher training institutions is to adapt their training strategies and programmes not only to familiarise their students with the challenges facing them but also appropriately equipping them with the necessary tools to confront these new pedagogic demands and challenges. The National Curriculum Statement builds its learning outcomes for all grades on the critical and developmental outcomes. Most importantly, the curriculum seeks to create a lifelong learner who is confident and independent, literate, numerate, multi-skilled, compassionate, with a respect for the environment and the ability to participate in society as a critical and active citizen.

5.2 Perspectives on curriculum implementation

Prior to reflecting on what table 1 elucidates, it is essential to pay attention to the remark made by one of the local newspapers with the headline “What 'outcome' should we expect?” Daily Sun (2004:27). The first sentence read 'the new outcome-based education (OBE) system is extremely confusing.

When the new system was introduced, I thought we were shifting from old-fashioned practices and welcomed it... as the system requires guardians or parents to help pupils, I believe they should have considered the fact that parents also have limited exposure to a specific working environment, ... the education authorities should look into the matter and reform the syllabus”.

Knight (2005:19) reports that in the ten years since the coming of democracy there have been profound changes in all public institutions in South Africa – often for the better, but also often accompanied by negative consequences.

She went on to argue that in education, many of the most controversial changes have centered around the introduction of outcomes-based education (OBE). A new OBE curriculum entitled Curriculum 2000 (C2000), was introduced in 1997 and later amended and adapted to become Curriculum 2005 (2005) when it became clear that C2000 could not be implemented by 2000. Not much long-term scenario planning seems to have gone into the possible effects of, firstly C2000 and then later C2005. The system also appears to have been mostly imposed from the top down, that is, it was devised by experts appointed by the Education Department rather than arising from the experience of educators on the ground. Indeed, it was presented to ordinary educators as a *fait accompli* rather than being developed and implemented in partnership with them.

When outcomes-based education (OBE) was introduced in this country, it required teachers to follow some new approaches to planning, teaching and assessment (Vandeyar & Killen, 2003:119). This was stressful for many teachers who felt that they were ill-prepared for this so-called paradigm shift, and who found it difficult to navigate through the maze of new jargon that accompanied OBE and Curriculum 2005 (Jansen, 1999; Department of Education, 2000:2). Consequently, approximately 200 000 of the learners writing the Grade 10 examination in 2003 failed (Naude and Rademeyer, 2003).

A number of issues come to mind that impacts negatively on the implementation of the new curriculum. Issues such as poor training of educators; classroom overcrowding; and poor support. Similarly, Adhikari (1993:29) and Motseke (2005:114) identified inadequate funding; overcrowding; inferior education system; poor teacher training and a lack of material and facilities characterised education for blacks over the years. Motseke (2005:116) further reports that his findings indicate that, the majority of the respondents mentioned that their professional training did not prepare them for OBE, ... because the department of education's workshops were (i) too short (a few hours or days, at most, one week); (ii) too theoretical (only lecturing in one big venue, no demonstrations); and (iii) too late (in some instances, up to 3 months after the introduction/implementation).

He went on to argue that, it should be considered that many black township school educators received their professional training during the “Apartheid” era. Their training, therefore, focused on drill-work, memorization and “chalk-and-talk” (Mulholland, 2001:1; The Star, 1996:6).

Similarly, Jacobs & Chalufu (2000:106) highlight some of these underlying and critical concerns for its successful implementation: Firstly, language mismatching - it has been suggested that the majority of teachers cannot speak, read and write English well enough to put OBE into practice (Vinjevold, 1999). Since OBE requires that both teachers and learners should be able to read extensively in English, certain language specialists maintain that OBE cannot be implemented successfully (Brown 1998; Vinjevold 1999; and others). Secondly, conditions at schools - during its inception it was stated that in approximately 60 per cent of schools the conditions were so critical that no improvement of learner achievements will be possible until massive reconstruction is done to upgrade the facilities, the management, the teachers and the culture of learning.

A complex system such as OBE will disrupt these schools more, causing learner achievement to sink even lower (Beinstein 1996; Dallas 1999; Taylor 1999). Thirdly, teacher preparedness - there was a widespread feeling that teachers had not been properly prepared for OBE. It would appear that the knowledge base, concept understanding and general capacity of many teachers were below par before the introduction of OBE.

Despite this situation, the new system has been imposed on them without well-constructed in-service teacher training programmes to support the new initiative. Fourthly, non-delivery of OBE resources - while teachers may be willing to implement OBE, there was doubt as to whether they will regularly receive the necessary documents, books and other resources to put the system into practice. Finally, an idealistic system - among the most important critics of OBE were educationists who disagree with the theory in principle (Huebner 1993; Darling-Hammond 1997; McKernan 1999; Vinjevold 1999; and others). In the words of Taylor:

Curriculum 2005 seems designed to promote superficiality at the expense of systematic development... the scheme for applying the curriculum in the classroom is quite bewildering in its complexity. It would seem likely that only the most dedicated, knowledgeable and skilled teachers are likely to achieve SAQA's learning goals using this curriculum (Taylor 1999:128).

5.3 Empirical evidence on the current *status quo*

It is essential to reflect on what teachers said then, singling out Knight's (2005:27) findings as an example, and what they are saying about their progress now, in as far as their implementation of this curriculum is concerned. Knight (2005) reports that many participants expressed dissatisfaction, in their qualitative comments, with the way C2005 and then NCS was being implemented. Firstly, some respondents feel frustrated and attribute this feeling to their alleged haphazard way in which the curriculum is being implemented. One educator remarked that "*NCS was implemented too quickly, that 'learners are treated like guinea pigs' and that 'it was too quick a change'*". Another critique was that of *lack of consultation*. Notwithstanding these and many other findings related to this subject, table 1 paints another picture, which indicates some of the current developing trends among teachers in this country, despite the challenges and obstacles they are confronted with.

Table 1. Questionnaire responses

No.	Items	Yes		No		Uncertain	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
1.	I know what NCS is about	72	100	-	-	-	-
2.	I am still frustrated with the new curriculum.	34	47	20	28	18	25
3.	I know the difference between OBE and the traditional way of teaching.	64	89	2	3	6	8
4.	I implement OBE principles in my subjects.	72	100	-	-	-	-
5.	I implement OBE principles correctly	26	36	15	21	31	43
6.	I still need more training on NCS/OBE	59	82	4	6	9	12
7.	For more comments, please use the space below. <p style="text-align: center;">THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR TIME AND INPUTS!!!</p>						

Table 1, clearly indicates that all the educators know (100%) and understand what New Curriculum Statement is about. They also claim to be complying with the requirements of this new curriculum in terms of implementation (100%) in the respective subjects. However, a sizeable number is non-committal in terms of their true feeling regarding its impact on their general approach to teaching approaches and morale among other things. An overwhelming majority (88%) of respondents single-out “a lot of paperwork” in their criticism of the new curriculum. However, the most notable difference is the willingness to change and embrace the imperatives of the new curriculum.

More than 60% claim not only to know its underlying philosophies, but also have begun to apply and implement the outcomes-based education (no.5), albeit uncertainty about the correct use of this principle (no.6). Undoubtedly, training is still required (82%), most importantly, this time not only to impart new knowledge, but also to reinforce confidence and validate progress made by teachers so far. Also, this approach will go a long in allaying the fears and doubts of some of the “Thomases” consumed by self-doubt, in as far as their creative prowess is concerned.

General findings from the open-ended questions

Amongst the many concerns teachers have regarding the implementation of the new curriculum, “*lots of paper work*” ranks high on the list. One teacher said, *we spent more time giving learners work to do which lead to non-stop marking, checking and updating portfolios, and less time on actual “effective teaching”*. Other concerns raised include; *the need for training coupled with mentoring; overcrowded classes; inflexible time-table; infrastructure not yet conducive for OBE approach*; etc. Interestingly, some of these concerns are consistent with the findings of Knight (2005), where she reports that most educators expect a lower standard of education; find planning, preparation and assessment more work; lack of proper consultation and training, emphasis on group work, and classes being too large.

What needs to be noted also is the sense of appreciation from most teachers that more work has been transferred to the learner, and they are encouraged to take ownership of their education. One teacher remarked that “this curriculum provides no room for excuses for both learners and parents not to engage in education. So, when their children fail at the end blame cannot be put on the shoulders of the teacher or school alone, learners know this principle that they need to do more on their own, ours is to give guidance and support”. However, one startling revelation is that the (perceived) absence of discipline (perceived as a consequence of the abolishment of corporal punishment) disempowered them in their pursuit of in ensuring that learners do indeed do what their work as expected and on time.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

It stands to reason that the success of the implementation of the NCS depends entirely on an unconditional buy-in of teachers, together with the support they perceive to be getting, both in terms of material, mentoring, discipline problems, etc. The focus and emphasis have to revolve around the following pertinent issues that are central to the ability and willingness of teachers to embrace this new curriculum statement:

Firstly, autonomy in teaching and learning - the New Curriculum Statement affords teachers an invaluable opportunity to not only demonstrate their teaching/facilitating abilities, but also to ensure that these teaching skills stimulate learners to volitionally engage themselves meaningfully and take ownership of their learning. Secondly, enabling environment for creativity and innovation in teaching - it cannot be emphasised enough that one of the cornerstones of this new curriculum, is to ensure that teachers themselves are able to tap not only into their creative flair, but also encourage and stimulate their learners to recognise their creative abilities and exploit them to the maximum. Thirdly, overhaul the implementation plan/process - the first step to success is acknowledgement by everybody concerned, particularly the DoE and higher education institutions, the intervention measures employed have not yielded the desired results. For instance, the (alleged) ill-equipped DoE training officials dispatched to schools to facilitate the process of implementation through workshops, etc. and the perceived failure of HEs to develop or revamp their existing teacher training programmes for purposes of catering for the demands of the new curriculum.

Due to the intense need to address and undo the injustices of the apartheid education and confront the contemporary demands of the society, the South African government has devised numerous strategies to address these imperatives.

Some of them are social, economic and technological. For instance, statement such as “business leaders blame education” Sowetan (2004:12) are indications of the shortfalls and weaknesses of this country's education system. However, through teacher training institutions' programmes and approaches in addressing the general pedagogic, political and economic imperatives, these challenges can easily be dealt with.

7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Notwithstanding the critique and challenges brought by this new curriculum, this study revealed a positive mind shift by some if not most educators towards embracing and applying/implementing the principles and philosophies advocated by this new curriculum.

This developments comes at the back of the report of Vandeyar & Killen (2003:119) that, there were many calls for the changes to be postponed until teachers had received adequate training and until schools had been provided with the required resources for this new way of teaching (Potenza & Monyokolo, 1999). It stands to reason that this refreshing and thought-provoking approach called NCS, affords teachers opportunities not only to better express themselves in what they know best, which is facilitating learning, but also empower their learners to achieve to their maximum ability. What is also gratifying is the fact that majority of teachers are beginning to embrace this curriculum, the pessimism, subtle resistance and sense of confusion, seem to gradually fade away, notwithstanding the fact that most of these teachers 'come out of a fundamentally disempowering school system' (Robinson 1999:201) themselves.

It needs to be emphasized that the higher education institutions have the ability to do more in addressing and assisting the education authorities in terms of successful implementation of the new curriculum, and must, to some degree, account for their type of product (namely student teachers, entering the labour market) entering the labour market. It is a given fact that educators will want to look up to their training institutions as a frame of reference, not only for answers but also validation of their pedagogic approaches and new initiatives in their classroom encounters and challenges. Van Niekerk & Killen (2000:99) mention that when educators write student learning outcomes, they are attempting to convey to learners, and other educators, the intended results of some period of instruction. Additionally, Robinson (1999) suggests that these institutions might be doing their students (teachers), and education system, a great service by developing their potential to engage as learners in an ongoing and confident way. In a transformational OBE system, long-term results are claimed to be the most significant, whether teachers are well equipped to master and effectively engage themselves with this curriculum in the manner consistent with its principles, that is a judgement which can only be delivered with the passage of time.

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