

# OUTCOMES-BASED EDUCATION:

## Will it benefit our children?

**YES . . .**

says *EMILIA POTENZA*, coordinator of the Benoni/Brakpan Teaching and Learning Unit of the Gauteng Department of Education. She is also the author of several groundbreaking new history books

Outcomes-based education (OBE) has a long and varied history in many parts of the industrialised world. Essentially, OBE tries to make schooling as relevant to real life as possible. It starts off with a simple question – what do people need to be productive, independent, constructive members of society? Sure, they need real knowledge (content) but they also need two other things – they need skills, and they need to explore and develop their own values and attitudes. Who can quarrel with this shift in emphasis in a world where the amount of information available to people doubles every 72 hours?

OBE also argues that we should focus less on what the teacher teaches and more on what the learner learns. In fact, some proponents of outcomes-based education say that the new role of the teacher is to be a facilitator. To my mind, reducing the teacher to a facilitator greatly oversimplifies the complex roles that most teachers play every day – sometimes facilitating, sometimes mediating, and sometimes doing a bit of good old teaching.

Whatever role the teacher may adopt, however, the central question about the learning process has shifted. The teacher should no longer ask, 'What have I taught?' but 'What has each one of my learners learnt?' Or, to put it another way, 'What learning outcomes can each learner demonstrate?'

The implications of asking what 'learning outcomes' learners can demonstrate are manifold. This approach requires teachers to be much more active in deciding what outcomes are most important for their learners to achieve.

Sixty-six outcomes have been stipulated by the National De-

partment of Education, but they are all very broad in their scope. For example, one of the outcomes for the Human and Social Sciences (one of the eight new learning areas that replace subjects in the old curriculum) is, 'Learners will demonstrate an ability to understand how South African society has changed and developed.'

Most of us would take a lifetime to achieve such an outcome fully. However, it is expected that learners will be provided with opportunities to take small steps towards achieving this outcome (and 65 others) throughout their whole school experience.

Studying history is a classic example of how OBE works. In the past, we learnt only a story: 'This is what happened in 1652 . . .' And, of course, we learnt it from a particular perspective (although no one ever told us that). Learning history has now changed in two ways. Firstly, it is integrated with other social sciences, such as geography and civics, highlighting the fact that different areas of inquiry are linked in the real

part of Education, but they are all very broad in their scope. For example, one of the outcomes for the Human and Social Sciences (one of the eight new learning areas that replace subjects in the old curriculum) is, 'Learners will demonstrate an ability to understand how South African society has changed and developed.'

Most of us would take a lifetime to achieve such an outcome fully. However, it is expected that learners will be provided with opportunities to take small steps towards achieving this outcome (and 65 others) throughout their whole school experience.

Studying history is a classic example of how OBE works. In the past, we learnt only a story: 'This is what happened in 1652 . . .' And, of course, we learnt it from a particular perspective (although no one ever told us that). Learning history has now changed in two ways. Firstly, it is integrated with other social sciences, such as geography and civics, highlighting the fact that different areas of inquiry are linked in the real



SAGEWOOD SCHOOL:  
A multiracial class of learners.



## NO ■ ■ ■

says **JONATHAN JANSEN**, dean of the Faculty of Education and director of the Centre for Education Research, Evaluation and Policy at the University of Durban Westville

I have spent a decade as a classroom teacher in South Africa. I have studied every major international curriculum reform this century. I have closely observed what goes on inside more than 1 000 classrooms in all nine provinces of South Africa. I have studied, first-hand, both classrooms and curriculum reform in Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe and the United States. I have assisted, at various points, in the development of education policies for the

broad democratic movement. And since 1991, I have trained hundreds of South African in-service teachers (urban and rural) in the fields of teaching, assessment and curriculum development. The knowledge and experience that I have accumulated lead me to the conclusion that outcomes-based education will be an unmitigated failure in South African classrooms.

With the release of 2005 balloons, painted in the colours of the national flag, the Minister of Education launched Curriculum 2005 in Cape Town on April 24, last year. What Professor Bengu also unleashed was a national controversy around outcomes-based education, the educational approach underpinning this new curriculum.

The ministry argues that OBE will displace the current teaching style (which emphasises content), make explicit what learners should learn, direct assessment towards specified goals, and make schools and teachers more accountable. Few educators would disagree with such noble goals. But does OBE achieve what

## OUTCOMES-BASED EDUCATION

**YES . . .**

world. Secondly, the emphasis shifts to enabling learners to interact with different historical sources (which may contradict one another) to develop the skills to work out what probably happened in the past.

Gone are the days of chalk and talk. For many teachers, this will mean making a 180-degree shift, which may be daunting. But for most learners, the silent hell of sitting trapped in a classroom and being forced to listen to their teachers droning on endlessly will thankfully be over.

So where does Curriculum 2005 come into the picture? This is our home-grown brand of OBE. The name captures the idea that the new curriculum will be phased in at different levels from 1998 to 2005. It will be a radical break with the past. No teacher – not even those in the ex-model C and independent schools – can afford to sit back and say, ‘Well, what we’ve been doing all along is good enough.’

Jonathan Jansen warns that we face real dangers in implementing Curriculum 2005: there’s the complexity of the language of the new curriculum, the fact that many teachers are underskilled, the increased workload for teachers, and the potential lack of emphasis on content. And it is true that these dangers need to be addressed as a matter of urgency by curriculum planners and implementers.

What overshadows these concerns in my view, however, is the unprecedented extent to which teachers across the country are engaged in discussion and debate about the school curriculum. ‘What do you expect your learners to know and be able to do by the end of Grade 1? What do you mean by knowledge? And skills? And values and attitudes? How can I assess whether a learner has achieved a certain outcome or not? Is it educationally more effective for learners automatically to be promoted from one grade to the next?’ Deficiencies and all, the new curriculum is forcing all of us to wake up. It is also beginning to restore to teachers their roles as professionals and intellectuals in society.

The legacy of the old system is that we have a cadre of teachers accustomed to being given clear instructions about the right and wrong way to do things. For many teachers, it is a shock to discover that they will have a greater degree of choice about what happens in their classrooms. For instance, Grade 1 teachers will be able to choose what Learning Programme Organisers (a bit like the old themes) they will use to structure the courses they design for their learners. Suggestions have been put forward by the National Department, but teachers don’t have to stick to these as long as their learners achieve the required outcomes.

**The silent hell  
of having to  
listen to  
teachers  
droning on  
endlessly will  
be over**

**NO . . .**

it claims to deliver? How does OBE work in a resource-poor context? And what lessons can be learnt from the OBE experience in other countries? With such questions in mind, I would like to identify seven reasons why OBE will fail miserably in South Africa.

**1** The language associated with OBE is too complex. To make sense of the system, a teacher will have to come to terms with more than 75 new concepts. Teachers will be required to understand 66 specified outcomes, competencies, unit standards, learning programmes, range statements, assessment criteria, performance indicators, equivalence, rules of combination, articulation, bands, levels, phases, and their relationship to SAQA, the NQF, NSBs, SGBs and ETQAs. Furthermore, they will have to reconcile the 12 SAQA fields with the eight learning areas, the eight phases, and the fields of study . . .

**2** In departmental documents it is claimed that OBE will be the basis for raising the economic growth rate from three to six per cent, for making South Africa more competitive internationally, and reducing unemployment. There is not a single study that demonstrates any relationship between fiddling with the school curriculum and changing the economic realities of a given country.

**3** OBE is supposed to create learner-centred classrooms, substitute understanding for memory learning, and develop learners who critically apply and demonstrate what they have learnt in different contexts. But how will this be achieved by an underqualified teacher who lacks the resource materials required to teach 60 pupils who are crammed into a classroom that was designed for 25? How can this happen in those urban township schools in which more than 30 percent of learning time is lost to nonschool activities? And how can the system be put into practice without sustained training of teaching staff?

**4** OBE focuses on instrumentalism – in other words, what a student can demonstrate given a particular set of outcomes – and therefore sidesteps the important issue of values in the curriculum. There is no commitment in OBE to combating racism and sexism in society, or to developing the Pan-African citizen, or to looking at the role of dissent in a democracy. An outcome like ‘appreciating the richness of national and cultural heritages’ could be based on content that glorifies a narrow Afrikaner nationalism or, in another context, a militant ethnic Africanism.

**5** This narrow, instrumentalist view of knowledge is inappropriate for classroom teaching. The development of technical writing skills or the mechanical repair of a bicycle tube lend themselves to specifying instrumental outcomes, but developing appreciation for a complex piece of English literature or poetry does not. And there is a fundamental contradiction in insisting that students use knowledge creatively only to inform them that the desired learning outcomes are already specified.

**6** The management of OBE will multiply the administrative burdens placed on teachers at the very time when schools are losing their best teachers through what is euphemistically called ‘right-sizing’. In other words, OBE is entering an environment in which conditions are exactly the opposite of those it requires to succeed. To implement OBE, teachers will be required to design innovative learning

## OUTCOMES-BASED EDUCATION

**YES . . .**

Similarly, instead of being forced to use one prescribed textbook, teachers are now being asked to select appropriate material from a wide range of approved books and kits. At last, teachers are being treated like adults who can make responsible choices about what would be in the best interest of their learners.

That's all very well, you may say, but what about teachers who don't want that responsibility, or who are not able to make effective choices on behalf of their learners?

To begin with, this view assumes that the previous system was so carefully regulated that it was teacherproof. That is clearly nonsense. No matter what system of education you opt for, you still rely on skilled teachers to create opportunities for meaningful learning to take place. Secondly, effective training and ongoing support for teachers have to be part of the new deal. Without these, it will be impossible to effect any kind of transformation of the curriculum – whether we adopt an outcomes-based model or any other.

*'You taught me the names of the  
cities in the world  
but I don't know how to survive the  
streets in my own city;  
You taught me the minerals that are  
in earth  
but I do not know what to do to pre-  
vent my world's destruction;  
You taught me all about reproduction  
in rats  
but I don't know how to prevent  
pregnancy;  
You taught me how to solve maths  
problems  
but I still can't solve my own  
problems . . .  
Why do I feel I have to leave school  
to learn about coping with life?'*  
Author unknown

**NO . . .**

programmes, reorganise classroom space, monitor individual student progress against established outcomes, change teaching strategies, and administer appropriate forms of assessment. Such changes represent a massive reorientation of schools, classrooms and teachers – a daunting task at the best of times, and an overwhelming one when there aren't adequate support services, when classes are too large, and teachers are not exceptionally well trained.

**7 OBE requires a radical revision of the**

**There is concern  
that OBE will breed  
cynicism among  
teachers – which is  
what our country  
can least afford**

system of assessment, but international experience with this style of education suggests that assessment changes only moderately with an outcomes-based programme. And as the matriculation examination shows, assessment has a powerful backwash effect on how teachers teach, what content is covered and how learners get to grips with the curriculum. OBE underestimates this problem.

The fact that the apartheid curriculum needs to change is indisputable – whether OBE will be able to transform the legacy of the old system is what is in question. There is real concern that introducing sophisticated curriculum changes into underprepared educational environments will breed policy cynicism among teachers . . . which is what our country can least afford. ♦

We'd love to hear what readers think about this complex subject. If you have a strong view to express, write to us (head your letter 'The OBE debate') at Box 1802, Cape Town 8000, fax (021) 406-2930, or e-mail [flmag@fairlady.com](mailto:flmag@fairlady.com)