

Professor stands by his OBE paper



Jonathan Jansen responds to reaction to his OBE paper

In March 1997, I published a paper setting out the reasons I thought Outcomes-based Education (OBE) would fail.

The main reasons were the hopelessly overstated claims of OBE, the inaccessibility of the policy because of its burdensome vocabulary, and the under-preparedness of the environment into which OBE would be introduced. "Why OBE Will Fail" has been debated widely in the last few months, drawing a range of reactions.

It seemed to resonate strongly with the concerns of teachers and teacher educators. Many said the paper captures the real challenges of the classroom.

But teacher responses are often fractured along racial lines. Few black teachers were against OBE, although they expressed reservations about their level of preparedness to implement this new policy. More training and time was needed, they said.

Among most white teachers I encountered there was general cynicism about OBE, largely because it was read as a strategy to undermine the privileges embedded in the status quo. OBE, among some white teach-

ers, meant automatic passes for black students; the collapse of multiple grades or standards into one classroom; the loss of status for English; and the dropping of standards.

My OBE paper has unfortunately often been misused by conservative commentators to veil an underlying racism and shield inherited privileges.

The paper continues to draw criticism from education authorities. In fact, criticism of OBE in general has been subjected to political baiting. A more public instance was that of Education Minister Sibusiso Bengu's dismissal of Stephen Mulholland (the *Sunday Times* columnist who criticised OBE) on the grounds that he was elitist and privileged.

The most disappointing treatment of the paper was by a senior official in the national Department of Education misquoting and misrepresenting the paper -- in my absence -- by saying on public platforms that the paper states that teachers are stupid and incompetent.

I have observed, though, that younger and more recently appointed officials are more accepting of criticism and prepared to engage with it substantively. But even among this group, the burden of their civil service compulsions -- implement faithfully because you are paid to do so -- undermines any possibility of accepting (at least in public) the substance of the

OBE criticism.

Almost every official I interviewed for the paper was privately critical of OBE. The same officials, though, would defend OBE in public as if it was the best discovery on the education landscape.

The worst response to the paper came from several senior officials of the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (Sadtu). These persons played out the roles, puzzlingly, not as leaders of the critical interrogation of state policy on behalf of teachers, but as brazen policy sycophants who could not

counter the substance of the criticism in the OBE paper beyond the simple: "We must implement OBE anyway

... apartheid was bad and teachers need something new."

At least one senior official referred to my paper as "propaganda". Such responses differed considerably from the ordinary Sadtu member for whom the OBE paper affirmed the anxieties teachers experience in their classrooms. Why the union has so uncritically pushed OBE suggests some level of political alliance with the state on curriculum policy that has little to do with the realities of the classroom and much more with the exigencies of

political interests.

From universities, the only criticism came from a few academics who were contracted to produce OBE materials on behalf of the state. Their position, perhaps predictably, was that my paper did not "give the state credit" for action taken against apartheid education.

Why did I write the OBE paper? I wrote this paper after a 1996 visit with a deputy director general in the national department and after addressing, with some colleagues, the national executive of Sadtu. On both occasions I stressed the importance of a national in-service training programme in 1997 to undergird the introduction of OBE in 1998.

I felt that I had to make more public the argument that, in order for OBE to succeed, policy implementation would require massive injections of training and resource support for teachers.

It is also my responsibility as an intellectual activist to draw attention to the limitations of OBE and the crisis of context that all policy changes must address if schools are to transform. If the paper results in greater attention to the policy implementation context and the movement of resources to support teachers, then it would have served its purpose.

What have I learned from the

reception of the OBE paper?

First, that there is little tolerance for criticism in officialdom.

Second, I learned that there remains a huge gulf separating policymakers and their planners on the one hand, and teachers and their classrooms on the other.

Third, I learned that many white teachers have not come to terms with our political transition; that their ideological inertia as professionals might, in the end, prove much more devastating to the implementation of OBE than the concerns of the under-qualified rural teachers whose enthusiasm for change somewhat offsets the challenge of learning new competencies.

Fourth, I learned that for all its political courageousness on salaries, Sadtu has yet to understand the imperative to engage the state critically on the curriculum front. It is sad that the possibilities for a critical pedagogy have been muted in the hands of our most progressive teacher union, leaving the curriculum landscape open to fertilisation by more conservative teacher bodies.

Finally, I learned that where curriculum policy is driven primarily by the self-preservation instincts of the state, we should not be surprised when it does, in fact, fail.

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Sadtu answers criticism

THE South African Democratic Teachers' Union would like to congratulate Professor Jonathan Jansen for his two thought-provoking papers on outcomes-based education. In both papers he discusses some of the problems he feels have been ignored by education authorities regarding the philosophical underpinnings, design and implementation of OBE.

While the union would like to align itself with some of the concerns he has raised, we differ with him on certain points. Areas in which we agree with him are:

- the need for training and retraining of teachers;
- provision of basic resources, the reorganisation of classrooms and school timetables, reduction of class sizes and reconsideration of current trends in the rationalisation of educators; and
- the need for fiscal intervention by the state to address the apartheid educational backlogs.

However, the union is con-

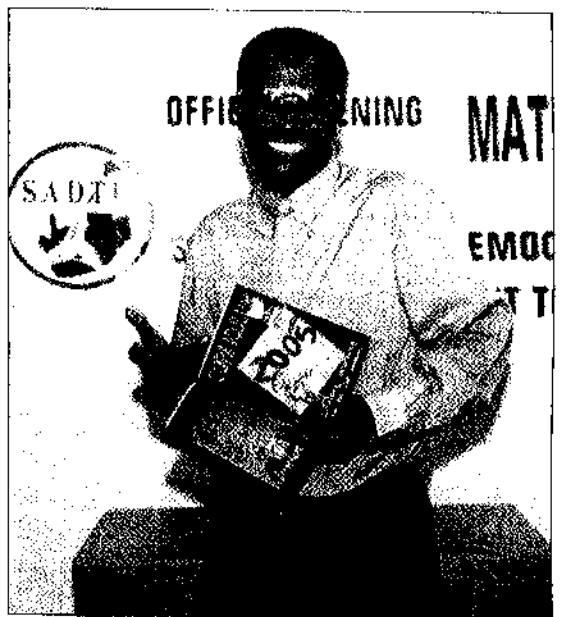
cerned about the extent to which the argument has gone. We are also upset about Prof Jansen's public attack on us about our position on OBE. We want to place on record that Sadtu has been an active participant in the design of the OBE since its inception. We have not been a passive and uncritical recipient.

One of the major problems we have with Prof Jansen is that his papers do not provide any alternatives. On the usage of complex and inaccessible terminology, he makes reference to some of the OBE concepts such as unit standards, learning outcomes, articulation, and their relationship to the South African Qualification Authority, the National Qualifications Framework and the National Standards Board. He states that these concepts are inaccessible to ordinary teachers. But he does not point out that great efforts have been made by the department of education to explain these concepts in clear and accessible documents.

Apart from these documents, Sadtu members and other teachers have taken part in national conferences to develop common understanding around curriculum issues. Many of these conferences and seminars take place in the different provinces -- as a Sadtu initiative and a commitment to service its members. Professor Jansen should attend some of these teacher development forums.

Jansen's papers also depict gloomy picture of the calibre of teachers expected to manage the demands of OBE. Sadtu challenges this perception of teachers. Jansen has overstated the lack of theoretical understanding and demonstrable capacity among teachers. Many good teachers have been teaching teachers how to think. They have been teaching demonstrable skills. We need to encourage these teachers and use them as role models.

Further, it is surprising to hear that OBE is basically anti-democratic in nature. The



Active participant: Sadtu members like Paseka Njobe of the union's education committee have been involved with OBE

design of the OBE curriculum has been participatory, involving all stakeholders. One of the key principles of OBE is its learner-centredness. Teachers

can no longer dominate the classroom; they are now facilitators. This should have a significant impact on democratising classroom practice.