

# Outcomes-Based Education: Why the Alarm Bells are Ringing, And how to Turn them Off

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## Review Article

*Changing Curriculum:*

*Studies on Outcomes-based Education in South Africa*

Edited by Jonathan Jansen and Pam Christie

Kenwyn: Juta & Co, Ltd, 1999, 292 pp.

ISBN: 0-7021-5063-0

*OBE: Outcomes-based Education, A Teacher's Manual*

By Helen van der Horst and Ria McDonald.

Pretoria: Kagiso Publishers, 1997, 254 pp.

ISBN: 0-7986-4892-9

## I

In this article I review two books that deal with the introduction of Outcomes-based Education in South Africa: *Changing curriculum: Studies on Outcomes-based Education in South Africa* by Jonathan Jansen, Pam Christie and others, and *OBE: Outcomes-Based Education, A Teacher's Manual* by Helen van der Horst and Ria McDonald.

The first book essentially is a diagnosis of what many educationists consider to have gone wrong in the process of designing and implementing OBE. The second book contains many of the solutions to the problems that have been diagnosed in the first book.

## II

The South African educational system is being overhauled from primary school level to tertiary level as part of the rejuvenation of post-apartheid institutions, and to bring the country in line with current trends in international education. The South African Government has set very rapid time frames for the transformation of education. Primary and secondary school learning programs must be transformed to Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) by 2005. Tertiary level undergraduate programs must be transformed by June 2001 in order to lead to recognised professional and academic qualifications.

But what is OBE? An idealised characterisation of it would read something like this: The aim with OBE is to effect a mind shift away from an authoritarian mode of teaching to a co-operative mode of learning. The new model makes the educator a facilitator, and the learner an active participant in an interactive learning partnership. In the old model it was expected of pupils to unquestioningly memorise curriculum content without necessarily understanding the significance or relevance of information to be mastered. The new mode requires of the educator to facilitate the development of both critical and practical skills in individual learners by engaging a spectrum of active learning processes that incorporate cognitive motor skills as part of context-specific learning tasks.

The mind shift is away from knowing facts to knowing how to do things with information—information that the learner knows to be significant and relevant. Most importantly, the mind shift incorporates the life skills of employing one's knowledge within a broader social context to the benefit of both oneself and others.

If OBE is implemented successfully, the three minimalist R's of traditional education (reading, writing, and arithmetic) will be replaced with the three comprehensive H's (head, heart and hand).

## III

In *Changing Curriculum: Studies on Outcomes-based Education in South Africa* co-editors Jonathan Jansen and Pam Christie, and fourteen other contributors address various areas of concern regarding the implementation of Outcomes-Based Education on primary and secondary school levels in South Africa. One contribution focuses on principled problems regarding the introduction of OBE in higher education. *Changing Curriculum* is intended as a critical, but constructive contribution to the public debate regarding the soundness of OBE, the desirability of introducing it in South Africa, and the timing of its introduction.

Every text carries an inferential sub-text. The sub-text of *Changing Curriculum* is that the alarm bells are ringing because of the complex nature of outcomes-based education, because of the lack of proper prior consultation with all

interested parties, because of the low skills base of South African educators, because OBE is considered to be introduced prematurely without proper planning, preparation of learning materials, and without the requisite retraining of educators.

*Changing Curriculum* is organised in five sections. *Section A* is entitled 'Introduction, Overview' and consists of chapter 1 in which Jonathan Jansen reviews the origins of OBE, summarises the debate to date and previews the rest of the chapters in the book.

*Section B* is entitled 'Meanings, Motivations, Methodologies' and consists of three chapters dealing with diverse aspects of OBE. In chapter 2 *Andre Kraak* (Human Sciences Research Council) begins by analysing the competing discourses within the Department of Education regarding the nature of OBE. He subsequently outlines the complex interrelationship between various organisational structures involved in OBE, gives the key characteristics of the regulatory framework, discusses the distinctive systemic lexicology (terminology) that has evolved around OBE, and outlines the critical features of OBE before offering a critique of Outcomes-Based-Education and Training. Towards the end of his contribution Kraak crucially highlights the cognitive imperatives of OBE:

Outcomes-based education and training ... is not merely about measuring discrete (visible) units of competence. It is about recognising the indivisible link between competence and the conceptual, problem-solving, interactive and context-bound abilities which underpin (but which are invisible in) the performance of 'competence' (p. 52).

In chapter 3 *Roger Deacon & Ben Parker* (University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg) focus on organisational and comparative aspects of OBE. They outline the complex interrelationship between the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and various Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). They characterise OBE as being instrumentalist rather than rationalist, before finally suggesting a pragmatic alternative.

In chapter 4 *Cliff Malcolm* (University of the Witwatersrand) discusses the different models of OBE found in countries like the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain as well as the motivations for developing each particular model. He compares one American framework, developed by Spady, with the Australian framework, characterising the American model as ultimately 'behaviourist' (p. 91) and the Australian model as 'much closer to a constructivist one' (p. 91). Malcolm subsequently characterises the Australian framework as having a dual nature because Australian writers 'constructed the outcomes frameworks in a way that would support constructivist, organic approaches in the classroom, but also allow behaviourist, teacher-centered approaches' (p. 98).

Due to the heavy demands that OBE will place on teachers, school managers and learners, Malcolm characterises OBE as a voyage that requires faith' (p. 110), a high risk choice

in a country where teachers have a low knowledge base (in relation to what is required), the tradition is bureaucratic and text centered, and the system is woefully under-resourced (p. 110).

*Section C* is entitled 'Concepts, Contexts, Criticisms'. It consists of six chapters (Chapters 5 to 10) dealing with various philosophical, ideological and practical problems relating to the introduction of OBE.

In chapter 5 Jane Skinner (University of Natal, Durban) focuses exclusively on the introduction of OBE in higher education from a socio-economic perspective. She points out that since the first Education Act in Britain in 1870, the introduction of subsequent educational systems have been promoted as being part of the process of democratic reform while they in fact have

always been designed to provide appropriate economic support, in the form of human capital, for the power structures of the day (p. 117).

She argues that progressive educationists have for decades rejected positivist and behaviourist approaches to knowledge, but that 'now these are introduced through the back door as "market imperatives"' (p. 121), unrecognised for what they are, and seen as pragmatism. According to Skinner the educational system is being influenced by 'market thinking' (p. 121) with the aim of delivering competent workers to the economy while at the same time there is 'an extreme unwillingness among economists to examine their own assumptions' (p. 122). Skinner characterises the new educational policy as 'the commodification of education' because society is prepared 'to rationalise education down to this simple deployment of isolated profit-maximising individuals divorced from any sense of community into whatever spaces "fate" (read "global capital") dictates' (p. 126).

In chapter 6 Jean Baxen & Crain Soudien (University of Cape Town) focus on the one-sided control in the management and implementation of OBE in the Western Cape, based on documentary analysis of the proposals, interviews with teachers and 'selected role players' (p.132). Members of eight Learning Area Committees (LACs) were nominated by various stakeholders, including the teacher organisations. The majority of the committees were however co-ordinated and chaired by officials from the Department of Education.

Representatives on these committees were confronted with the OBE

narrative and were not provided with an opportunity to examine its origins—politically or pedagogically (p.137),

and

when a subgroup of people from the LACs were mandated to advise on the development of the indicators, they found that the indicators had already been developed by a separate specialist group at national level (p. 138).

In chapter 7 Jonathan Jansen (University of Durban-Westville) lists and discusses 10 reasons why he thinks OBE will fail. The main reason is that the language associated with OBE is too complex, confusing and contradictory.

The OBE curriculum policy is lodged in problematic claims and assumptions about the relationship between curriculum and society.

OBE is based on flawed assumptions about what happens inside schools, how classrooms are organised and what kinds of teachers exist within the system. There are strong philosophical rationales for questioning the desirability of OBE in democratic school systems. There are important political and epistemological objections to OBE as curriculum policy. The focus on what a student can demonstrate, given a particular set of outcomes, side-steps the issue of values in the curriculum. The management of OBE will multiply the administrative burdens placed on teachers.

### **OBE Trivialises Curriculum Content**

For OBE to succeed even moderately requires a number of simultaneous innovations in the education system, e.g. trained and retrained teachers, radically new forms of assessment, classroom organisation that facilitates monitoring and assessment, additional time for monitoring the complex process, opportunities for teacher dialogue exchange.

### **Radical revision of the system of assessment in the face of powerful interests insisting on retaining the assessment *status quo***

Jansen characterises the introduction OBE as 'an act of political symbolism in which the primary preoccupation of the state is with its own legitimacy' (p.154), and refers to research that shows

the national revision process (1995) was driven almost exclusively by official attempts to demonstrate to constituencies that at least some action was forthcoming from the Ministry of Education in the period immediately following the elections (p. 154).

In chapter 8 Haroon Mahomed (Gauteng Institute for Curriculum Development) focuses on reasons why Outcomes-based Education and Training (OBET) could succeed in South Africa and why it has to succeed, rather than why it will fail. Mohamed motivates the introduction of OBE: the need to break with apartheid education, the fact that the main goals and aims of the current system of education are in any case not being achieved, the need of a curriculum better aligned to the world of work, and the need to move education beyond the straight-jacketing, rigid authoritarian experiences of the past. In the last section of his contribution Mohamed responds to the criticisms made by Jansen in the previous chapter.

In chapter 9 Mahomed Rasool (Reservoir Hills Secondary School, Durban) formulates eloquent and credible responses to criticisms of OBE, while at the same time acknowledging Jansen's contribution to the curriculum debate. He cites 'the realities of constant change, globalisation, transformed workplaces, new competitive pressures and world-class performance standards' as reasons why South Africa needs OBE 'as it enters the global arena of the twenty-first century' (p. 174). Rasool stresses the importance in OBE of developing cognitive skills such as 'the ability to classify, infer, suggest, analyse and form testable hypotheses rather than concentrating on mastering content' (p.178), which he mislabels as 'life skills'. He concludes:

In the final analysis, the question is not whether OBE should be implemented, but rather whether sufficient support and encouragement is being given to teachers by all interested groups in education (p. 179).

In chapter 10 Ken Harley & Ben Parker (University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg) focus on the socio-economic aspects of OBE. They identify 'the emergence of global markets, mass consumerism, electronic technology and communications, and shifts in international power relations' as factors that have contributed to the fact that South Africa 'while under austere financial constraints—must negotiate a radical transformation of the state schooling system' (p. 183). They characterise the envisaged change as a shift from the mechanical solidarity that predominated the old South Africa to 'a new legal-organisational basis reflecting organic solidarity' which emphasises

human rights and a strong civil society ... the interdependence between people ... based on contractual relations with an emphasis on the rights and duties of individual citizens and their contractual relation with the state (p. 189).

Harley & Parker consider teacher identity to be one of the major problems with introducing Curriculum 2005, as it is an

attempt to graft a legalistic social framework and curriculum of organic solidarity onto a corps of teachers whose identities and roles were forged in the apartheid mills of mechanical solidarity (p. 193).

*Section D* is entitled *Inside Classrooms*. It consists of four chapters (chapters 11 to 14) dealing with various aspects of the implementation of OBE. In chapter 11 Jonathan Jansen reports on problems experienced in the introduction of OBE on grade one level in 1998. His research showed that grade 1 teachers held vastly different understandings of OBE, that they displayed considerable uncertainty about whether their practices in fact constitute OBE, that they uniformly felt that their preparation for OBE implementation was inadequate, that although most classrooms had basic curriculum 2005 documentation, many grade 1 teachers expressed the view that OBE was not implementable in the early part of the school year, that many teachers who claimed to be implementing OBE were in fact teaching in the same way as before, and that teachers understand and implement OBE in very different ways. Jansen comes to the pessimistic conclusion that 'C2005 and outcomes-based education will gradually fade into policy insignificance' (p. 216).

In chapter 12 Ian Bellis (Independent Education Training & Development Consultant), like other contributors, emphasises that OBE (adult training) entails a move away from a typically pedagogic subject-centered approach to a more behaviourist product-centered approach. Bellis then crucially adds that OBE entails a move 'to more cognitivist, gestalt approaches which, in delivery, focus on processes that express experiential learning' (p.225). Bellis effectively dispels the Cartesian competence vs. performance dichotomy (which is a vexing problem to at least some contributors) to: 'a key component of competence is performance' (p. 226). Bellis then shows that such an integrative approach to competence could lead to problem-centered learning programs where learners are led to explore problems for which they must generate their own particular solutions.

In chapter 13 Emilia Potenza & Mareka Monyokolo (Gauteng department of Education & Gauteng Institute for Curriculum Development) argue that

the critical factor in successfully translating Curriculum 2005 into practice is to ensure that the three pillars of curriculum transformation are in place and in alignment,

namely 'curriculum development, teacher development and the development, selection and supply of learning materials' (p. 231). From their subsequent comments it becomes clear that neither of the three are in fact in place yet, and that there is little co-ordination between teachers, the Department of Education, materials developers and publishers to make the introduction of Curriculum 2005 a success.

In chapter 14 Meg Pahad (Independent Examinations Board, Gauteng) reveals that 'At last consensus is emerging about several broad principles of assessment', but that 'there is very little help for teachers and other practitioners trying to assess learners within the new outcomes-based curriculum' (p. 247). She then shows that there are varying interpretations for such crucial assessment terms like formative assessment, summative assessment and continuous assessment in the department of Education's 1998 Draft Assessment Policy document:

This confusion about whether or not summative assessment is necessarily based on terminal examinations, whether continuous assessment is necessarily formative, whether summative assessment can be achieved by simply collecting and aggregating formative assessment, and so on, recurs throughout the draft policy discussion document (p. 250).

Pahad ends her contribution by listing and lucidly discussing a number of practical suggestions for improving assessment practice in the classroom.

Section E consists of a single contribution by one of the co-editors, Pam Christie, in which she characterises OBE as an

art of a suite of policies adopted by the post-apartheid government to restructure and transform the legacy of apartheid education and training (p. 279),

'a systemic umbrella' agenda according to which

education and training would be integrated in a system of lifelong learning that would articulate adult basic education and training, formal schooling, and learning programs for out-of-school children and youth (p. 280).

Referring to the acrimonious tone of exchanges in the curriculum debate, Christie points out that the denials and counter criticisms of policy innovators are not the most constructive responses, and that 'the task of winning the hegemony through intellectual and moral leadership cannot be side-stepped in the democratic state' (p. 285).

The image that emerges of OBE, and particularly of Curriculum 2005 from the contributions in *Changing Curriculum: Studies on Outcomes-based Education in South Africa* is that the alarm bells are ringing because we are about to take off on a journey in an aeroplane of which the body has not yet been bolted to the wheels, and of which the engines have not yet been bolted to body, let alone having a flight plan for the journey.



Jane Skinner's observations about the commodification of education, and its subservience to market forces dictated by economists who are slow to critical self-evaluation, are particularly relevant. This state of affairs will build such high levels of career redundancy into the social contract which civil society is based on, that social institutions—from governance to family relations—will be stressed and ultimately damaged. Global society is moving from the mechanical industrial age to the organic information age which demands of employees to constantly evolve their knowledge, career skills and personal values in order to remain viable. If implemented correctly, OBE has the potential of empowering learners to do just this.

Criticisms of the proliferation of OBE officialese are pertinent. Someone should close down the acronym factory. The terminological complexity in OBE has reached levels usually only found in subcultures and cult movements where slang and arcane terms are used to promote solidarity within the group, while at the same time excluding non-members from the group. The origins of words should also be considered before they are formalised as terminology. One of the most frequently used OBE terms, 'stakeholders' for instance, has its origins in the world of gambling. Complex concepts are best understood when explained in simple terms. When talking about every-day events, sixty five percent of what one wants to say can be done by using the first 1000 words of a language. While each discipline needs its distinctive terminology for the sake of precision and unambiguity, conscious efforts should be made to keep OBE meta-language to a minimum. Teachers who are supposed to implement OBE are bewildered by the number and the complexity of OBE terms.

A matter of great concern regarding *Changing Curriculum* is the fact that, with the exception of Andre Kraak and Ian Bellis, no other contributors refer to the cognitive dimension of the mind shift from teaching to learning. If eminent educationists fail to diagnose such a crucial flaw in the present implementation of OBE, we are in far more serious trouble than we think. Even more disconcerting is the fact that those that are critical of OBE do not present an alternative approach to replace the old style, authoritarian, content-driven approach that we dare not fall back on.

Finally, people in professional and technical occupations have all along been educated on outcomes-based principles. Would you trust your mechanic, your dentist, your surgeon or the pilot of the plane that you are flying in if it were otherwise? Educators do not use scalpels or joysticks. Their instruments are non-tangible, but nevertheless quite real, for they use knowledge to help shape minds, skills and values. Why are we then reluctant to base their education, and the education of our children on outcomes-based principles?

#### IV

If *Changing Curriculum* diagnoses what is wrong with the aeroplane that we are about to take off in, Helen van der Horst and Ria McDonald's *OBE: Outcomes-*

*Based Education, a Teacher's Manual* is the technician's manual needed to secure the plane's body to its wheels, and its engines to its body.

It consists of nine lucidly written chapters. Beginning with why educational change is needed in present-day South Africa, Van der Horst and McDonald outline what OBE is, set out the major aspects of OBE, and end with a future perspective of education in South Africa. The chapters are:

Chapter 1: Understanding Outcomes-Based Education

Chapter 2: From a content-based curriculum to outcomes-based learning programmes

Chapter 3: Three types of outcomes

Chapter 4: Quality assurance

Chapter 5: Planning for classroom management and discipline

Chapter 6: Classroom teaching in OBE

Chapter 7: Assessment in Outcomes-Based Education

Chapter 8: The successful learner in Outcomes-Based Education

Chapter 9: New possibilities ahead—looking at the future of education in South Africa

*OBE: Outcomes-Based Education, a Teacher's Manual* is not merely an excellent account of the main aspects of OBE. It is also a model for how OBE learning materials should be organised and presented. Each chapter begins with a table of contents, followed by a very general, uncomplicated graphic representation that primes the reader for that chapter, followed in turn by a series of focus questions that engage the mind of the reader—all of this before s/he actually starts reading. The text is interspersed with a variety of highlighting boxes that provide directives, induce reflection, give examples, draw comparisons, and set tasks.

The authors consistently show a clear understanding of the cognitive basis of OBE. They for instance understand that learning is based on comprehensive, interrelated aspects of cognition such as being in command of verbal communication, having intellectual skills (like critical thinking, reasoning and reflection), manifesting the appropriate values and attitudes for particular occasions, and being in command of particular motor skills to implement knowledge practically. Van der Horst and McDonald stress the importance of basic forms of cognition, such as the mastery of content, for the development of higher order thinking skills and problem solving skills.

Van der Horst and McDonald outline the overall organisation of OBE, and the nature of the various learning areas in easily understood terms. They have a very good chapter on how a classroom should be organised and managed in OBE. They bring clarity to the confusion that is said to reign regarding the different forms of assessment in OBE. Their chapter on the learner as active participant in the learning

process is concise and crystal clear. Involving De Bono's extended metaphor of the six thinking hats for the basic forms of critical thinking is inspired.

My impression as a cognitivist is that, in general, the crucial role of cognition is poorly understood in the demarcation of learning areas in OBE. Cognitive principles will therefore not be systematically applied in the development of learning programs.

The exception however seems to be Van der Horst and McDonald, because of the comprehensive and consistent way in which they ground OBE on cognitive principles. This makes *OBE: Outcomes-Based Education, A Teacher's Manual* mandatory reading for any educator who wants to master the principles and practices of OBE. For the teacher in the classroom it is nothing less than a survival manual.

## V

For the benefit of those that despair at the prospect of introducing OBE under the daunting circumstances outlined in *Changing Curriculum*, I want to end this review article on a personal note. Looking back on my own formal education, I consider my grade 10 year to be the most significant formative year, for in that year I had the good fortune of attending a parochial school that taught an international academic curriculum, which in retrospect came quite close to present-day Outcomes-Based Education. The reason for this was that the particular school mainly catered for the children of businessmen and missionaries from Europe and America who were stationed elsewhere in Africa.

A particular feature of that school was that its mission was to educate the head, the heart and the hand. As part of training the heart and hand (otherwise known as inculcating proper work ethics) all learners had to engage in supervised practical work for one hour a day, for which we were paid by the hour according to American wage standards. Such work ranged from janitorial duties, laundry duties, carpentry, basic engineering, farming, cooking and coaching to supervising. If one's grade point average was high enough one was permitted the luxury of holding down more than one job at a time. I to this day do my own cleaning, cooking, pruning, carpentry and plumbing by using skills that I acquired in my grade 10 year.

In the carpentry shop we learnt to convert our three dimensional drawings, made in technical drawing class, into actual tables and chairs, and doing so made it easier for us to visualise more complex technical drawings. In the engineering shop we learnt the realities of force dynamics while installing water pipes, taps and geysers, and by having to bleed air locks out of our constructs.

Coming from an Afrikaans background and having attended government school up to then, I arrived at the new school with a reasonable passive understanding of English, but unable to properly express myself either verbally or in

writing. The result was that my grades plummeted. Spotting my predicament and frustration, my English teacher offered to give me extra lessons if I complied with three conditions: I had to read and summarise the contents of one novel a week over and beyond my prescribed books, I had to make at least one English speaking male friend, and I had to get an English speaking girlfriend. My extra lessons mostly consisted of my personal verbal reports on what I had read, and what my friends and I got up to during the previous week. Our English curriculum incidentally included not only mastering grammar and interpreting literature. We also learnt to write sonnets and haikus, to make verbal presentations before the rest of the class, and to conduct parliamentary style debates on topical issues.

While learning English communication skills that year I also gained invaluable interpersonal life skills. Rubbing shoulders with peers from America, Britain, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Spain and Portugal, and having to measure my views against theirs, drastically and permanently altered my perspectives of South Africa and myself, and significantly influenced my personal values.

The following year I decided to attend a parochial school closer to home—unbeknown to me a school that taught the standard South African curriculum. It was like having been subjected to a frontal lobotomy.

Having personally experienced the cultivating, empowering and liberating effects of comprehensive secondary education in a multicultural context during my grade 10 year, and having had to go through grades 11 and 12 in the old regime again, I think it will be an indictment of this country if we choose to remain shackled to the old-style authoritarian system of education. In this context, the two books reviewed here, are important milestones in the history of education, training and learning in South Africa.

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