WHEN RESISTANCE IS A POSITIVE INDICATOR

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Educational reform is invariably intended to meet social and economic goals as well as educational goals. This was the intention in the implementation of OBE in the South African education system. However, while it has not been easy to deal with structural reform, this is at least a fairly transparent process. Cognition or learning reform in the classroom is far more difficult to implement because it lacks public visibility. Assessment, however, monitors the activities in the learning "box". Recognising this, this paper examines how the newly implemented outcomes-based assessment is beginning to meet the goals for educational, social and economic reform in South Africa and the very real possibilities that the General & Further Education and Certificates can make a difference to the lives of learners. In particular, it proposes that the way in which various stakeholders with vested interests are resisting complete and comprehensive implementation of an outcomes-based assessment system, provides a clear indication that authentic outcomes-based assessment reveals whether or not transformation of education is taking place.

Education has always walked a fine line between maintaining the norms of society and preparing learners for the society of the future. The late 20th century has, however, been a time of education reform intended to meet new social and economic goals as well as educational goals. Educational reform often looks to a new curriculum or additional testing to effect the changes, and while it is commonly recognised that examinations can have a overriding impact on what is taught in the class, social and economic reform looks for an impact beyond simply the content taught in a classroom. Such is the case in the drive for reform in the South African educational system.

"Education has always been a contested issue and the extent to which the State should or could control it, the topic of debate, dispute and compromise. In many countries and

contexts, *what is taught, where, by whom, how and with what outcomes* have become issues for politicians to decide about, and teachers act on. The professional voice is muted, the pupil voice silent and the parental voice limited. " Kathryn Riley - Leadership and Systemic Reform.

There can be no doubt that the voice of the politician has been very strong in the reform of the South African curriculum and assessment systems but it must be remembered that, particularly in the first years of democracy, the politicians in power came directly from an opposition movement demanding reform. Not only politicians, but also the majority of citizens, looked to the education system to play a significant role in nation-building. In the preface to the Revised National Curriculum Statement for Grades R to 9 (Schools), the South African Minister of Education, Prof Kader Asmal, states: "At its broadest level, our education system and its curriculum express our idea of ourselves as a society and our vision as to how we see the new form of society being realised through our children and learners. Through its selection of what is to be in the curriculum, it represents our priorities and assumptions of what constitutes a 'good education' at its deepest level. This curriculum is written by South Africans for South Africans who hold dear the principles and practices of democracy. It encapsulates our vision of teachers and learners who are knowledgeable and multi-faceted, sensitive to environmental issues and able to respond to and act upon the many challenges that will still confront South Africa in this twenty first century." Importantly, and with good insight, he added: "The curriculum is and will be differently interpreted and enacted in diverse contexts… This requires the commitment and participation of all who work in education. We need the full cooperation of the Government, parents, teachers, learners and the community at large."

The statement that the curriculum was "written by South Africans for South Africans who hold dear the principles and practices of democracy" may be true, but not all South Africans who enjoyed a position of privilege under the apartheid government participated in the writing of the curriculum nor do they all approve of the curriculum. Whether they "hold dear the principles and practices of democracy" is yet another question, and not one to be asked here. Many people did, however, participate in the public comment process

which revealed that one teacher union largely supported the Revised National Curriculum Statement while another contested certain issues but was generally supportive. A number of other prominent, and highly vocal, groups, however, strongly opposed the curriculum for a variety of reasons, but were unable to prevent implementation of the strengthened and streamlined outcomes-based curriculum.

With the outcomes-based curriculum came a new perspective on assessment and its role in the teaching and learning process. In coming to an understanding of the resistance to outcomes-based assessment in schools in South Africa, it is necessary to understand the historical and political implications of assessment, judgement and evaluation in education in the South African context. Assessment in outcomes-based education demands a paradigm shift in understanding the purpose of assessment but assessment is also more of an emotional issue than curriculum because assessment can directly affect the life chances of learners, and much of the worst of South Africa's history has been about life chances. In the Christian National Education system favoured by the previous government, tests and examinations were summative and final, and while at the time teachers in the system complained about the unfairness of the system of one-off testing, there was a sense of security in a system that was simple, definitive, known and understood. In the same way that "the curriculum is a result of choices that are made" and which "reflect the values and beliefs of the dominant groups in society at a particular time[1]", the assessment system likewise reflects the values and beliefs of the dominant group in society. Examiners acquired power and status that set them above ordinary teachers in a system that was intensely autocratic and hierarchical in nature. They were part of a secret world with its own secret code, and these examiner teachers became the ones with the most to lose in a system that has been careful not to demand equity and redress in school staffrooms.

Wiggins[2] points out that " the legacy in student testing is (of course) long-standing, with its roots in the world of autocratic religious power and the hierarchical, guild mentality of the Middle Ages - a world filled with many adult "secret societies". The secret test, as we

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[2] Wiggins P. Grant *Assessing Student Performance*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, California, 1993

know it, came from this world, where professors saw themselves as members of a guild, where status transcended rights and was granted by "degrees" to only a few, where the assessor had the historically unquestionable right to demand (orthodox) answers of the test taker without justifying either the questions asked or the evaluation of the answers."

During the 1980's the People's Education Movement in South Africa attempted to overthrow the secret system of power in the South African education system by demanding that the authorities "Pass one, pass all." This negated any struggle for power in the arena of examinations most effectively as it is hard to fight against those who simply don't engage in the battle and so the rallying cry from the traditional world of education was for the maintenance of "standards". It was here that the battle lines were drawn between those who wanted to "transform" education and those who felt that politics had no place in education. Not only was there not a common understanding of the need for changes in the system, this reluctance to forgo a position of status and power in the world of assessment may be one of the reasons why outcomes-based assessment has been so strongly resisted in some quarters. A greater emphasis on school-based assessment has, in fact, proved to be truly democratic in character for it has distributed some of the "power" of examiners traditionally held by examiners amongst all the teachers.

Not all teachers were caught up in the various edu-political battles and for many teachers "on the ground" these processes passed them by, or they may have taken the view noted by O.L. Davis Jr. in "New Policies and New Directions: Be Aware of the Footprint" in the *Journal Of Curriculum and Supervision (Vol 8 No 2):* "Perhaps their reluctance to face these unpleasant …eventualities, relates to educators' naïve generalization that political administrations come and go and that as they maintain low profiles during this stressful period, these new policies will fade away." Many teachers, and especially those from the previously privileged schools, have opposed outcomes-based education from its first inception in South Africa, stating that it has failed in all other countries and that it results in standards dropping. There have been complaints about poor training, a confusion of terminology and an unhappiness that the curriculum is no longer prescribed and static.

While this may be true, it is not necessarily a bad sign as Michael Huberman and Matthew Miles[1] point out that the absence of early difficulty in a reform effort is usually a sign that not much is being attempted or that superficial or trivial change is being substituted for substantial change.

In 2003 a letter written by a group of teachers in Cape Town states that "we are still unsure of how to 'get going' effectively or correctly." It seems inconceivable that highly trained professional teachers have been unable to find adequate training, literature or any support of worth whatsoever in five years. Possibly the truth lies in the hope that the Review of Curriculum 2005, undertaken in 1999 and reported on in 2000, would have led to a return to the old ways, buttressed by discourse of the "Back to basics" movement over the last ten years in the United Kingdom and other countries.

However, O.L. Davis adds that, " They (teachers) can take no comfort from escapism. … The recent history of educational centralization and the imposition of controls over curriculum standards and testing in the United Kingdom, at least, are instructive. … When (after the fall of the Tory Government) the New Labour politicians assumed leadership of the national government, they did not dismantle the Conservative-enacted initiatives. Instead they set out immediately to refine and strengthen them."

Similarly, in South Africa the review led not to an abandonment of outcomes-based education, but to a streamlining and strengthening of the outcomes-based curriculum. Unlike some reform processes, the drive for reform in education in South Africa is not simply a fad. The National Curriculum Statement is a vehicle for infusing the values of the new South African Constitution, which embodies the values of a democratic society, in the lives of all young South Africans. The curriculum must "Infuse the classroom with a culture of human rights, ensure equal access to education, promote anti-racism in schools, use sport to shape social bonds and nurture nation-building at schools, free the

[1] Michael Huberman and Matthew Miles, *Innovation Up Close: How School Improvement Works* (New York, Plenum, 1984)

potential of girls as well as boys, deal with HIV/AIDS and nurture a culture of sexual and social responsibility." (RNCS Grades R-9 (Schools)

For many teachers their culture and worldview is deeply embedded in the hidden curriculum and this attempt to change even the hidden curriculum evokes a deep personal and emotional response. Avoidance is sometimes the chosen route for dealing, or not dealing, with these deep-seated issues. A letter by a group of teachers at a primary school in Cape Town in June 2003 asks the question: "Is it acceptable for us to continue on our route of caution as we develop 'our curriculum' during this transition period? Can we tailor our curriculum as we see it best?" For both the Education Department and these teachers, the issue is clearly about matters other than a narrow understanding of curriculum. Why is such a question posed by these teachers after five years of not implementing the new curriculum? The answer lies in the way in which assessment, especially external assessment which is soon to be imposed on all Grade 9 learners, calls into question activities in the classroom.

In 2002 Common Tasks for Assessment were introduced to Grade 9 classes in schools in preparation for the introduction of a General Education & Training Certificate. These tasks were externally set in all eight compulsory learning areas and assessed learners in a variety of ways that demanded a variety of skills beyond mere recall for a pen and paper test. Immediately the newspapers were filled with stories of work overload and teachers being stressed by the need to assess learners continuously. These cries of dismay need to be evaluated in the light of the fact that "continuous evaluation" was introduced into education policy in 1995. In investigating these complaints, curriculum advisors found that some of the "best" schools with "high standards" had completely ignored national curriculum policy since 1998 and could not implement the Common Tasks for Assessment because they had not implemented Curriculum 2005. Still other schools were "doing Curriculum 2005" on Fridays only and teaching the old curriculum for the rest of the week, thus ensuring that there was not a real shift in values and attitudes. Such "passive resistance" to reform in curriculum was no longer possible once external assessment was conducted in the form of the Common Tasks for Assessment.

Not only does assessment force schools to implement the new curriculum, but if assessment truly assesses the principles and values underpinning Curriculum 2005 or the Revised National Curriculum Statement as it should, it will force teachers and learners to engage with issues of environmental and social justice, human rights, inclusivity, etc. If the format of assessment changes from regurgitation or controlled questions under strict examination conditions to school-based assessment that demands that learners become independent, critical thinkers who can work both independently and in collaboration with their peers and who are assessed in a variety of ways, teachers will have to teach differently. Teachers will have to let go of the tight rein that many have held for so long. They will have to forgo the position of being the "fountain of all knowledge" if the learners are to engage deeply in research work. To develop critical thinking in learners, teachers will have to allow learners to contradict them and they will have to recognise unorthodox views in the classroom.

Teachers will have to allow learners more than one opportunity to show attainment; they will have to allow learners a variety of ways of showing that they can progress and attain. Teachers will have to give learners credit for what they have attained throughout the year and not control the learners by holding them on a string until the end of the year when the teacher could almost unilaterally declare the learners to have passed or failed. Teachers will not be able hold learners back simply because they are slower or need more attention because teachers, and parents, will be obliged to give the support needed by learners to attain outcomes. Learners will be able to appeal with dignity if they feel they have been unfairly assessed, not plead for extra marks or seethe in silence as is currently the case. Assessment can no longer be used as a weapon, held like a sword of Damocles over the heads of learners by autocratic teachers. And thus the paradigm shift takes place from an authoritarian world to a democratic one in which learners will learn to live in a society based on respect for democracy, equality, human dignity, life and justice.

Assessment can thus undoubtedly change the values in society, but this in itself does not address one of the most critical areas targeted by reform - poverty relief. Assessment assesses that which we value, but it is those with money and position in society who have

access to that which is valued in the curriculum. Even knowledge, although not the preserve of the middle and upper classes, is certainly more easily acquired by children from comfortable socio-economic backgrounds. These children have greater access to knowledge and have time to devote to study and preparation for assessment. Furthermore, outcomes-based assessment demands a greater ability to interact verbally with questions. Aside from the fact that in South Africa the languages of education are not the languages of the poor, research attests to the fact that literacy skills are generally stronger in more affluent homes.

Are we in a catch 22 situation where no matter what one does to make education more relevant and accessible, the odds will always be stacked against the poor? If that is the case, then there is indeed a case for greater support for the poor in order to achieve reform, and this is precisely what is advocated in the (South African) Education White Paper 6 (July 2001). The White Paper determines that Inclusive Education refers not only to those excluded from mainstream education, or from success in mainstream education, due to medical or physical disabilities, but that barriers to learning also include particular life experiences and socio-economic deprivation. The White Paper makes it very clear that, in a system designed to support learners who experience barriers to learning, assessment for learning, appropriate interventions and additional support to ensure progress are critical and areas to which special attention must be paid. Inclusive education is key to achieving social and economic reform because the idea is not to expect less from learners who experience barriers, but to give them more in order to achieve the same outcomes, thus ensuring that when they leave school they are equally equipped to face the world.

There has been enormous resistance to this shift in the interpretation of inclusive education because in the past huge amounts of money were spent on a small number of learners from privileged backgrounds with physical or mental impairments, not only because this interpretation of Inclusive Education means a change in the way funds are allocated, the result is a movement away from an exclusive, hierarchical society to a society in which every citizen has equal opportunities.

How is all of this held together for transformation of education and society? The answer lies surely in the fact that the aim of the new system is to issue a single, externally moderated certificate for all school-leavers at the end of the compulsory phase of schooling (General Education and Training Certificate) and a single, largely externally assessed certificate at the end of the further education and training phase (Further Education and Training Certificate). The FETC will allow access to the tertiary education band regardless of the route one takes, or institution one attends, to acquire one's qualifications. If the system of Inclusive Education is fully implemented, providing additional support to those who need it to achieve certification, transformation can be built into the system, allowing all learners leaving school at either of the exit points with an equal chance in life, at least to the extent that educational achievement is the requirement.

There can be no doubt that the current resistance in South Africa to outcomes-based assessment and to the new certification processes is an acknowledgement of the fact that assessment will drive changes in values and principles espoused in the classroom and in society, and in terms of life chances at exit points for young people in South Africa, thus ensuring reform in South Africa.

What then is the way forward in South Africa? Certainly, the proposed introduction of a General Education and Training Certificate at Grade 9 level is drawing commitment to the curriculum. The curriculum for the new Further Education and Training Certificate will be underpinned by similar values and the resistance that we have experienced at the lower level is preparing the ground for greater resistance at the FET level. Resistance to the principles of the curriculum and the "restructuring" of domains of power will be greater at that level because the stakes are higher, but how much resistance there is to assessment of a curriculum that some are reluctant to implement will depend on the outcome of the GET interplay.

Finally, it is critical for nation-building and for ensuring the integrity of the education system that once the battle for power is over that attempts are made to ensure that

everyone in the system is able to relate to the educational, economic and social values that are espoused in the National Curriculum Statement and assessed in the General Education and Training Certificate as well as the Further Education and Training Certificate.