

Curriculum demystified

Only time will tell whether reworked Curriculum 2005 is practical enough

Daisy Jones

TODAY's release of a new curriculum statement for schools will no doubt be welcomed by all, except the most ardent critics.

The statement is the product of six months of intensive work by 150 hand-picked education experts. Their brief was to clarify, simplify and improve Curriculum 2005 (C2005) — which has been the source of more teacher headaches in the past three years than any amount of undone homework, piles of marking or depressing salary slips.

When the educationalists met for the first time in January, they were told they should focus on making the curriculum easy for teachers to implement. They should hack away at the jargon-heavy language; provide guidance around appropriate textbooks and other learning support materials and give teachers a much better idea of how to test pupils to ensure they are learning the right lessons in the right way.

Prof Linda Chisholm, who has led the rewriting process, refused to be drawn on features of the new statement. All she would say is that she thinks the reworked, 237-page document is "a great curriculum".

It is fair to assume the educationalists have done what they were told. However, we will only know in three years how successful they were.

The curriculum needed to be made easier to implement, and time is the only test of applicability. Chisholm's statement, though, is not a magic wand and those who welcome it today

CAST IN STONE: WHAT SA CHILDREN MUST LEARN AT SCHOOL

- Creative and critical problem-solving
- Teamwork
- Self-responsibility in their work
- Intelligent information collection and processing
- Effective communication through different modes
- Use of science and technology in projects
- Problem-solving in the context of related systems
- Multistrategy approach to learning
- Responsible citizenship
- Cultural sensitivity
- Openness to education and career opportunities
- Links between projects and entrepreneurial opportunities



Source: CRITICAL OUTCOMES, CURRICULUM 2005, MARCH 1997

should beware of celebrating prematurely. The 1998 challenge for teachers remains: to shift from apartheid style to outcomes-based education.

Last year's review of C2005 found that there was overwhelming support from teachers for the principles of outcomes-based education, including independence and critical thinking.

Situating OBE, as it is known, at the heart of the curriculum neatly addressed two huge problems in the system: it provided a tool for transformation and brought SA up to date with international practices.

But the hard work fell on the teachers. Despite their principled rejection of the previous system, or their embrace of a more child-friendly model, they

had to break the classroom habits of decades.

The old paradigm is a simple one, and one most over-30s in SA understand: neat rows of desks; pupils chanting information back at Sir, Miss or Ma'am; parroting answers in endless tests and exams; and being ridiculed for asking "stupid questions".

The theory behind the paradigm advocates filling the empty vessels of children's heads with selected information. In contrast, OBE says children already possess all the mechanisms and knowledge they need to learn. The role of teachers is to turn on their brain machines and point them in the direction of relevant information, so they can piece the puzzles together themselves.

In practical terms, it means

80 30/7/01
something like this: don't make a nine-year-old copy and memorise a labelled diagram of the cross-section of a hibiscus flower in the hopes that she will then understand reproductive behaviour in plants. Rather, put her in a group, tell the group to go outside and collect the bits off plants. When they return, ask them to describe where they found the bits; are they heavy or light, sticky or colourful, and so on. Through discussion and deduction — but especially through personal experience — the children take themselves on a learning journey, which in this case will culminate in an understanding of how different plants reproduce.

According to OBE theory, work in all subjects should be thematically linked. In the above example, plants might be an overarching theme in every class for up to a term.

Through OBE, the teacher is dethroned as the mediator of all knowledge; in current parlance Ma'am is merely a "facilitator".

Some teachers will tell you they have employed OBE methods for years. For other teachers — perhaps with scantier resources, a lower level of education or simply less confidence — the prospect of collapsing the conventions remains daunting.

Chisholm's committee has done its work. But Education Minister Kader Asmal should not consider the process wrapped up. Realistic time frames will be required for implementation. The education department will have to offer support to weaker provincial administrations. Perhaps most importantly, enough money must be set aside for teacher training and learning materials.