

Getting rid of OBE

and other education fixes

By **Graeme Bloch**

Bloch is a specialist in education policy at the DBSA and author of *The Toxic Mix: What is Wrong with South Africa's Schools and How to Fix It* (Tafelberg)

Angie Motshekga, minister of basic education, announced a renewal of the whole education system on SAFM's After 8 Debate. "Yes, we need outcomes," she said. "We need to know what it is we are trying to achieve. But we don't need all the complex and unnecessary things that have gone along with this thing called outcomes-based education (OBE)." She continued: "Teachers are going to know what their aims and objectives are, what methodology they have to follow and what content areas they have to cover." (Cape Times, 3 Nov 2009)

Motshekga proceeded to announce the withdrawal of a whole set of unnecessary paperwork that has been burdening education, from the student portfolio to the number of required departmental files. She reduced learning areas from six to four in various phases. The basics of reading, writing and counting, especially in the foundation phases, would be emphasised. Teachers' workbooks are already being designed in a number of provinces and plans made at national level for centralised publication distribution. The minister's announcements were widely welcomed, both as a sign that she has been listening to the complaints of teachers and that she is prepared to take decisive action to improve education conditions and outcomes.

As we focus on the curriculum and specifically OBE, it is worth reminding ourselves that getting rid of OBE is not the silver bullet that will save education. Firstly, this is hardly the time to destabilise the system by overhauling the curriculum from top to bottom and unsettling the system again with another change of direction. Nor will the end of OBE mean that teachers can suddenly teach brilliantly, that their students will miraculously be ready to learn and strive for academic excellence, that principals and districts will suddenly supply all the support and assistance that is needed at administrative and pedagogical levels, or that the impacts of poverty on education will disappear overnight.



At the very least, however, getting OBE out of the way as a set of terminologies is, if not "signing its death certificate" as the *Education Roadmap* would have it, a first step to a wider focus on all the things that hold back change in education.

GOOD INTENTIONS

These are troubled and difficult times – of economic decline and crisis, war, of diseases such as HIV/AIDS that have ravaged our communities and diseases from new viruses that mutate as quickly as we identify them, of environmental degradation and global warming.

We must give our children a start, a firm foundation so that they may go confidently into this world – so that they can indeed, in a spirit of democracy, respect and human solidarity, create the kind of world that we imagine is possible. Schools cannot teach what we do not learn in our



homes and communities. It is no good sending children to the finest schools if the broader society is teaching them to be bullies, or to “kill” every “enemy” with whom they disagree.

Education both reproduces the problems and inequalities of society and has the contradictory potential to find a way out. It is the tried and tested route for individuals and societies to rise above historical circumstance and emerge from poverty.

We thought that educational change would be easier than the hard and complex challenge it has proven to be. OBE acknowledged the need to prepare children for the 21st century: technologically literate, open to rapid change, organised and able to plan, manage and implement innovative solutions for our troubled world. All South African students, black and white, would need to strive for global excellence and cutting-edge knowledge relevant to our times and social needs. Some of these yearnings were expressed in the initial formulations of OBE.

The curriculum is the crucial interface where pupils prepare themselves intellectually and academically, guided and inspired by knowledgeable teachers. Yet – as shown by former education minister Kader Asmal’s attempts to rewrite the OBE curriculum and the revised National Curriculum Statement (NCS) – the OBE curriculum was unrealistic and impossible to apply.

To really work, OBE requires the best infrastructure and resources. In our conditions, it created a shallow view of empowerment in which student voice was substituted for the hard task of learning the basics. It reinforced a tendency towards top-down edicts, saw poor training and development for teachers, and a host of form-filling and compliance rituals. Instead of support and capacity building, we (so often) set impossible outcomes and standards within an architecture that frustrated good teaching and innovation. A recent report to the minister on the impact of the NCS was devastatingly in its honesty and in identifying the confusion and multiple layers of bureaucracy that OBE had helped to put in place.

How did this happen? There was a combination of contributing factors:

- unrealistic and over-optimistic policy goals set largely by the returning exile and newly empowered academic community

- the cautiously bureaucratic approach of the first minister of education, Sibusiso Bengu, and his director-general
- the rapid demobilisation of the education mass movement led by the National Education Crisis Committee
- the labour movement’s insistence on a skills architecture that integrated prior learning with all levels of training so that qualifications would be portable – another noble ideal – was translated into the administrative and institutional nightmare of the SETAs and the qualifications authorities.
- With smaller and more narrow “unit standards” written for every outcome and educational task, it became harder and harder for service providers or teachers to find direction and support.

CURRENT ASSESSMENT

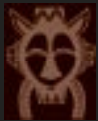
The absence of proper curriculum phasing and classroom goal-setting techniques created room for confusion and the failure of our school system to deliver. Noble goals failed to address the realities of backlogs, poor teacher skills and morale, and poor school organisation and facilities. While teachers with critical teaching deficits might occasionally feel “empowered” by asking groups of learners their opinions on knowledge, it was only the best teachers and schools who could turn this into meaningful education experiences. All of this was overlaid by drastic policy mistakes, like the teacher “retrenchment” package which allowed many good teachers to leave the profession, and the lack of any major benefit from shifting teacher training to the universities.

Even academic theorists now argue that “constructivism” should give way to hard content tasks like learning times-tables and ABCs. There are foundational basics, formulae and rules on which all other knowledge is expanded and developed. You must know how to add and how to read and write if you are going to be able to think.

Education outcomes in South Africa are known to be hideously poor, often the worst in the world. A “toxic mix” of problems combines the historical and the inherited with current mistakes. In-class challenges meet poor official administration and support in a society challenged by the conditions of poverty and deep inequality that affect education: gangs, language barriers, hunger, poor health, inadequate transport, overcrowding, and a lack of labs, staffrooms and libraries in poorer schools.

The reality is that South African schools – despite vast budgets and many resources – are failing to perform. Results are among the worst in Africa: only some 30 percent of children in grades 3 or 6 perform at the level required for literacy or numeracy. Our children are just not getting enough to compete and lead in a harsh international climate. We are not producing the engineers, the accountants, the doctors and the managers of change who can imagine a new world we have never experienced, design the ways to get there, and implement the processes and infrastructure that will sustain a new society of justice and development.

It is no good sending children to the finest schools if the broader society is teaching them to be bullies, or to “kill” every “enemy” with whom they disagree.



But more, while 50 percent or more of white children go on to university, 12 percent of black children do. Half of the children drop out before the end of matric schooling. Of grade 3 learners in former white schools in the Western Cape, 62.5 percent could read and count at appropriate levels. The corresponding figure in African townships was 0.1 percent.

I repeat: 62.5 percent against 0.1 percent. One in ten white kids gets an A-level pass in matric; only one in 1000 black kids does.

Such inequalities are unsustainable in a democracy seeking to redress ills of the past; that they take on a racial dimension makes them even harder to accept. For most of our kids, school only teaches the harsh lesson that there is no place for them in the hopes and dreams of the new society. Aspirations vanish and disintegrate in the failure of our schools. We are failing our children, and generations to come.

There are many reasons for this. We should never discount history and our terrible past – colonialism and apartheid demeaned educational and intellectual projects in our land. Education was for control, not liberation. HF Verwoerd, the architect of apartheid and bantu education, asked “Why should we show black people the green pastures in which they will not be allowed to graze?” Mathematics was virtually banned in black schools. Blacks were forever to be “hewers of wood and drawers of water.

FINDING SOLUTIONS

As I say in my book, this history combines in a toxic mix that is complex and difficult to change. The unsatisfactory outcomes of the past are reinforced by policy and implementation slippages of recent years. We cannot blame OBE for everything. I think there are many other examples where we fixate on the wrong solution to a complex problem, and often this “political posturing” is designed precisely to hide the difficulties of change.

Mamphela Ramphele has argued that we need to let go of the OBE bone: it has an odour! At the least, OBE is a red herring that has diverted us from the fundamentals of learning. But even if OBE disappeared tomorrow, teachers would still not know how to use textbooks, would still need to learn how to teach the basics as the foundational rock of learning. There would still need to be “in-class, on-time teaching”. There are a range of problems. OBE only adds to these challenges. We may have to bury OBE, but we may also have to find some ways around it.



THE EDUCATION ROADMAP

So much to fix... but we are not victims. Our past may be sad, but it is what we have. We can wallow in our failures, or we can set our sights anew and decide to be the best we can. In 2008, the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA) was asked to bring together a wide range of education stakeholders – ministers, teacher unions, government officials, NGOs, academics and policy experts – to develop a diagnosis and a set of solutions. Out of this came the *Education Roadmap* and a 10-point programme that has been presented to the public for discussion and forms the core of the debate about where to go.

A series of DBSA “Education Conversations” held around the country over the last few months identified a new mood sweeping the country – one of concern about what is happening in education and a desire to play a role in fixing things.

At school levels, it is true there has been immense progress and much to praise in the years of democracy. There are also enormous numbers of citizens – unorganised, organised, in business and NGOs, in “ploughback” movements and in community-based initiatives – who are prepared to put their shoulder to the wheel.

One of the ten points identifies primary schools and also early childhood development (ECD) as the base on which all else must rest. Other points range from getting “in-class, on-time teaching” and developing support for teachers, to finding ways for management and district officials to do their jobs and do them effectively, and social compacts and initiatives to put us on track. The final points are less important in their detail than in the call and challenge they imply.

The *Roadmap* is structured by an understanding of three key levels where we are held back. Firstly, the most crucial level for support is in class, where teachers and learners interact, where knowledge is shared and intellectual hunger for learning grows. There are so many problems here, but teachers are undoubtedly the key: how they are trained, what they know, how they feel, how they are paid and supported, whether our young are inspired to see teaching as the noble profession it should be.

The second level is schools: are schools resourced with textbooks and materials, does the principal manage and inspire staff? Do the education department and its district machinery assist teachers in their fundamental task of teaching? Many school districts fail to provide pedagogical and administrative support. Many officials make schools fill in forms and comply with policy while they fail miserably to do what civil servants should actually be doing. Most schools lack libraries, labs, computers, sports fields and staffrooms, sometimes even water and toilets. They are not nice or inviting places to spend the day.



And lastly, of course, the social level. HIV/AIDS, child-headed households, gangs, intestinal worms, foetal alcohol syndrome, poor transport, hunger and overcrowding all make it difficult for children to learn. Their parents are under-educated, struggle to help with homework, feel intimidated in the face of teachers, and are not a part of a confident learning nation that is boldly looking ahead.

The *Education Roadmap* makes three implicit but crucial points.

- *We are in this together.* Any attempt to fix things must be a stakeholder-driven process and must be based on society-wide agreement. Together we can do more! – as the ANC slogan says.
- *We need to prioritise.* We can't do it all, so we need to decide where to start and what will have the most impact. We need agreement on which course to pursue.
- *We need a vision and a plan.* We need real targets and a set of outcomes we can pursue and measure to see if we have made progress. We need to look to the sky with our feet firmly on the ground, as Amilcar Cabral used to say.

In-class challenges meet poor official administration and support in a society challenged by the conditions of poverty and deep inequality that affect education: gangs, language barriers, hunger, poor health, transport and overcrowding.

The *Roadmap* does not have the answers. Yet we have managed in this country to create a policy space where many things are possible. Since the peaceful revolution at Polokwane where Thabo Mbeki was democratically replaced by Jacob Zuma as ANC president, and the national elections where our masses delivered their choice and their verdict, education has risen to a national priority. It is considered the major priority of the whole nation and not just the concern of the education authorities. Government and civil society are called on together to play their part in the renewal of education.

It is in this space that we are called to work and to mobilise. If we are going to rest, if we are going to wait for the government to do it all, if we are going to moan and to complain, we will soon end up back where we were.

We can set ourselves on a path of progress from which there will be no retreat or we can continue to fail the generations of our children to come. We have a window of opportunity to really make a difference. 🌱

THE EDUCATION ROADMAP 10-POINT PLAN

In-school proposals

1. Teachers must be in class on time, teaching. Teachers will be required to use textbooks in class.
2. Effort must be focused on improving the quality of early childhood education and primary school education, including implementing government's Foundations for Learning campaign, which emphasises the promotion of language and numeracy.
3. External tests must be conducted for all grade 3 and grade 6 pupils each year, and the results must be provided to parents so that they receive an accurate and early reflection of the quality of education.
4. Effective evaluation of all teachers must occur, with the improved performance of pupils influencing their remuneration.
5. The teacher recruitment process must be improved and teacher development strengthened through bursaries to attract quality students and student loan repayments to attract young graduates. Teacher unions should be given a formal and funded role in teacher development.

Support-to-schools proposals

6. Schools' management capacity must be strengthened by incorporating skills from the private sector, civil society and the public sector. An additional infrastructure budget is a suggested incentive for schools that deliver improved teaching and learning.
7. The use of information and communication technology in education, including the use of audio-visual teaching materials in the classroom to supplement teaching, must be increased.
8. National-provincial alignment must be improved, as well as education expenditure, through procuring textbooks nationally and allocating resources to improve district capacity.

Societal proposals

9. The development of a social compact for quality education. This will include a National Consultative Forum dedicated to clarifying the "non-negotiables" and performance targets for key stakeholders, and the monitoring thereof. Communities will be mobilised to participate in education issues such as school clean-up campaigns, supporting food gardens, and encouraging young graduates to enter teaching.
10. The implementation of poverty-combating measures to improve the learning and teaching environment, such as nutrition programmes, social support and counselling for children.

