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The challenges of curriculum change challenges of curriculum change teachers in Limpopo province

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH: FRAMING THE PRESIDENT'S SCHOOLS PROJECT

> Government's goal of quality teaching and learning for all South Africans will not be achieved unless a culture of teaching and learning is restored. Clearly, new teacher policies will be a critical means to this end. To be effective, teacher policies must take cognisance of the current contextual realities, while developing teachers for a new future, and they must be combined with other strategies to bring about school reform. (Department of Education, 1997g, p. 2).

Broadly located in the area of curriculum studies, this thesis probes the relationship between curriculum reform and social transition in a postcolonial state like South Africa. It researches the challenges that a particular group of rural teachers in Limpopo (formerly Northern Province) faced as they implemented a new national curriculum in their classrooms. This introductory chapter begins by briefly reflecting on the processes of social and political change that led to the adoption of outcomes-based education[1] (OBE) as curriculum policy for all South African schools. A background history is presented to trace the roots of the President's Schools Project, the school development project that formed the basis of this research. In my role as a field worker in the project I found myself well placed to examine the complex intersection between sophisticated curriculum policy, initiatives to assist teacher learning, and the context of the developing world within which all these activities took place. In addition, the project provided me with opportunities to document crucial school-based perspectives of what happens inside traditional rural African schools. This thesis systematically expands these issues by using a qualitative research approach, including interviews and observations, as it probes project teachers' understandings of curriculum and change.

[1] The term outcomes-based education and its acronym OBE are used in this thesis to refer to the new national curriculum developed for South African schools.

OUTCOMES-BASED EDUCATION:
Setting the agenda for change

In April 1994 the African National Congress (ANC) under the leadership of Nelson Mandela became the first democratically elected post-apartheid government in South Africa. This new government inherited an educational legacy that was characterised by the contestation of authority emerging over years of opposition to apartheid. Included in this legacy was the rejection of Bantu Education and fundamental pedagogics, the form of teaching and learning associated with apartheid. While this section does not review the liberation struggle that eventually led to the adoption of OBE, it does briefly acknowledge some of the theorists who wrote about the process of educational change during this difficult period in South Africa's history. For example, Malherbe (1977) wrote about how the struggle against the apartheid system was located within the framework of broader socio-political struggles, while Wolpe (1988) clarified issues relevant to the changing struggle for national liberation in South Africa that he concluded was at a crossroads at that time. In an historical review that covered the period from 1870 to 1990, Pampallis (1991) focused on links between the liberation movement and the labour movement. In 1991, Unterhalter *et al* (1991) presented a collection of papers that probed the underlying assumptions of two different approaches to educational change, namely educational change from a transformational position or educational change from a reform position. Educational recommendations for a future non-racial democratic society were made by Hartshorne (1992) in a book that devoted a whole chapter to education in rural areas.

The new government was faced with enormous challenges relating to the tightly controlled Bantu Education system that was premised on notions of white supremacy, racial and ethnic separation and the centralised control of curriculum decision-making. Not the least of these challenges were the tradition of opposition and disruption in schools, the poor material provisioning of black[2]

[2] A term used in South Africa to refer to people of African, coloured or Indian origin.

schools and the social conditions of poverty, especially evident in rural South Africa. Christie (1997) summarises that education during the apartheid years left South Africa with:

> …more than a million school-age children out of school…high drop out and repeater rates, particularly in black schools…large-scale adult illiteracy and under-education (p.57).

The racially divided system was in urgent need of renewal, a transformational process to which the new government committed itself to in order to build a democratic society based on equity (Pampallis, 2002; 2003). It was within this context that a new and more flexible curriculum was needed to address past injustices and to reflect the ANC government's transformational agenda. As Jansen (1999a) comprehensively reviewed the complex and contested origins of OBE in South Africa from 1990 to 1996, this section highlights only the elements that are of particular relevance to this thesis.

While the South African Constitution (1993) set the broad framework for social and political change, it was the first post-apartheid *White Paper on Education and Training* (1995) that clarified this change in relation to education. The policy proposals set out in the White Paper focused on two main ideals: firstly, equity to redress past injustices; and secondly, human resource development aimed at empowering people through capacity building within organisations and communities. These ideals saw the re-articulation of old education and training concepts and the introduction of new ones. Some of the new concepts appropriated were, 'integration and competency', and, 'education and training'. The aim of this discursive shift was to improve the education and training of young people to better prepare them for the changing and challenging demands of the global workplace. Fleisch (2002) explains it this way, given the South African context:

UNISA

> By linking education with training, workers who had historically been denied access to social or job mobility would be in the position to gain new skills and knowledge. Their prior knowledge and skills, acquired through life experience, would be formally recognised within this framework. (p. 119)

The reality of South Africa at that time was that very soon local constraints and circumstances began to shape the trajectory of these debates into different configurations. Of specific relevance to this research was the shift from a broad-based competency approach to a more narrow outcomes-based approach strongly influenced by the ideas of the American educationalist, William Spady. Spady had become highly influential in curriculum debates in South Africa after 1994; his popularity probably due to the distinction he made between traditional, transitional and transformational OBE (Spady and Marshall, 1991). In particular, Spady and Marshall's contention that transformational OBE rests on the philosophy of "success for all" (p.67) made this a very attractive option in South Africa and one that was seen to have the potential of bringing about equity. In 1996 the newly formed National Department of Education produced a key document outlining its proposals for a national curriculum for schools in line with the Constitution and the White Paper. This document, *A Lifelong Learning Framework for Further Education and Training in South Africa,* saw a particular version of the pedagogy of OBE, officially named 'Curriculum 2005', entrenched in curriculum policy. Spady's influence could be seen throughout many official publications that stressed the transformational character of OBE, for example:

> We live in a rapidly changing world, and within a competitive, plural and increasingly polarised environment, a world that values people who are adaptable, inventive, ingenious and motivated, and we are confident that these are qualities that transformational OBE is well placed to encourage, rehearse and release (Department of Education, 1997b, pp. 8-9).

And

> South Africa has embarked on transformational OBE. This involves the most radical forms of an integrated curriculum….The outcome of this form of integration will be a profound transferability of knowledge in real life. (Department of Education, 1997g, p. 29)

The structural complexity of OBE and the range of terminology associated with it were very difficult for teachers to assimilate into their existing understanding of teaching practice. For example, the traditional school subjects were changed and clustered into eight new learning areas in an attempt to make the new curriculum more relevant and less rigid than its predecessor. Each of the new learning areas had its own set of outcomes that indicated the knowledge, attitudes and understanding that learners were expected to display in that particular learning area. A total of sixty-six specific outcomes, each attached to slightly more detailed range statements, assessment criteria and performance indicators, were finalised across the eight learning areas. It was immediately apparent that the specific outcomes were anything but specific, and were open to high degrees of confusion and misuse in terms of how they were interpreted. In the learning area named Languages, Literacy and Communication, one of the outcomes stated that learners would, "make and negotiate meaning and understanding" (Department of Education, 1996a, p.23). In Life Orientation, a specific outcome was phrased that learners will, "understand and accept themselves as unique and worthwhile human beings" (*ibid*, p.222). Any real notions of content and conceptual processes were missing from these and most of the other specific outcomes. Even Spady and his colleagues would probably have viewed this development with caution, as their definition of outcomes states that:

> Outcomes are *clear, observable demonstrations* of student learning that occur after a significant set of learning experiences. They are not values, attitudes, feelings, beliefs, activities, assignments, goals, scores, grades, or averages, as many people believe. (Spady *et al*, 1994, p. 29, emphasis in original)

In addition, twelve critical outcomes were also developed for all education and training and were aimed at the application of knowledge, skills and understanding. These outcomes included: being able to think and to solve problems; to collect, organise and analyse information; to work in a group as well as independently; to communicate effectively; and to make responsible decisions

(Department of Education, 1996a). It was not intended for these critical outcomes to replace other important aims of education and training, nor were they expected to replace curriculum content (Christie, personal communication, 4 February 2003). Rather, they were meant to run alongside the curriculum and to account for only part of what learners would do during lessons.

Three levels of learning were also defined within the policy framework for the compulsory schooling phase known as the General Education and Training Band (GET). The first level was named the Foundation Phase and ran from Grade 0 to the end of Grade 3; the Intermediate Phase was the second level and included Grade 4 to Grade 6; and, the third level ran from Grade 7 to Grade 9 and was named the Senior Phase. As the specific outcomes were identical across the three phases of the GET, teachers also experienced problems with curriculum differentiation and pacing. Another non-compulsory educational level, namely the Further Education and Training Band (FET) was defined to accommodate those learners from Grade 10 to Grade 12 who wished to continue on to tertiary educational institutions in the future.

One of the many challenges facing the Department of Education was how to support and develop teachers so that they would be in a position to play their part in the reform of the education system in general, and in the implementation of OBE in particular. OBE had begun to place particular demands on teachers as key agents in educational transformation as they were required to individualise instruction, plan remediation and enrichment, administer diagnostic assessment, keep extensive records, and select appropriate content, methods, resources and organisational procedures. In a scathing comment on why he believed that OBE was destined to fail in South Africa, Jansen (1999a) argued that flawed assumptions were made about the kinds of teachers that existed within the education system. He maintained that the manner in which OBE was conceptualised in the curriculum policy document suggested that South African schools were staffed with highly qualified teachers who were not only able to make sense of the theoretical underpinnings of OBE, but were also able to apply

them successfully in their classrooms. This was definitely not the case in most South African schools during the 1990s, more especially in rural areas where the teachers themselves were products of Bantu Education and fundamental pedagogics at their very worst. As a solution to the problems facing South African schools, OBE had few connections with the real life of classrooms in general, nor specifically with disadvantaged rural classrooms such as those in Limpopo. The deeply carved inequalities of apartheid were not easy to bridge and, as Christie (1997) wrote, the move from fundamental pedagogics to OBE served to introduce "new enclosing orthodoxies" (p. 64) which privileged those social groups that were already privileged.

Jansen and Christie's criticisms were part of a fierce and public debate that sparked in South Africa after the publication of Curriculum 2005. Another key element in this debate was the announcement early in 2000 by the second Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, of a curriculum review committee chaired by Professor Linda Chisholm of the University of Natal. In the face of ever increasing criticism, the Minister requested a substantive review of the new curriculum and its implementation. In a personal submission to the review committee even Spady stressed that OBE in South Africa had taken on an "uneasy form" (Chisholm *et al,* 2000, p.11). However, the committee's brief was to focus the review on the structure and implementation schedule of the new curriculum, and not on OBE as pedagogy. It was taken for granted that OBE could allow for different learning contexts, curricula, assessment, and learning pathways to be articulated in a single national system for all schools; an assumption that remains to this day.

THE PRESIDENT'S SCHOOLS PROJECT:

Tracing the roots of the project

During 1996, President Mandela challenged local businesses to demonstrate commitment to social transformation through their involvement in education. He

personally raised R19 million through Gencor, a South African-based mining company. This money was used to refurbish six primary schools in the rural province of Limpopo. Each of the three ex-homelands of the apartheid era, Gazankulu, Lebowa and Venda that were incorporated into Limpopo, was represented in the project by two schools. These six schools became known as the 'President's Schools' and in 1997 became the focus of a school development project funded by the Flemish Government. To fully understand why the President's Schools Project unfolded in the manner that it did, and to acknowledge the impact it had on teaching and learning in the six schools, a brief history is provided that explains the role that Sacred Heart College (SHC), a private school in Johannesburg, played in the project.

The year 1976 was a turning point in the history of education in South Africa when, on 16 June, learners in black schools in Soweto and in other parts of the country began a decade of resistance to apartheid education. For a small number of black learners it also signalled the start of their integration into the classrooms of 'white' South Africa as, in particular, the Catholic Church resolved to break with long-standing practices and admit learners of all races to its previously segregated schools. It was in this context that SHC admitted its first black learners in 1977 and became a 'non-racial' school. The College was one of the first schools in South Africa to racially desegregate in defiance of apartheid, embarking on a process of school change that pre-dated the 1994 democratic elections by nearly twenty years.

I joined the teaching staff of SHC in 1981 and, at that time, along with my colleagues assumed that merely admitting black learners to the school would be enough to counter the racism of apartheid. Thus we continued to follow the official Transvaal Education Department (TED) curriculum developed exclusively for white learners and developed high levels of competency in content-based teaching. However, in 1986 when widespread rioting in black townships caused the total disruption of schooling for many children, and an increased number of black learners enrolled in SHC, external factors began to impact directly on the

curriculum at the college. This event proved to be the catalyst that led SHC teachers to finally come to the realisation that the TED curriculum was unsuitable for a school that was striving to become more egalitarian and multicultural in tone, policy and curriculum, and that a shift in approach was clearly necessary. Most of the school's learners now came from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds in township schools where English was a second or even a third language. It became increasingly apparent that these learners would benefit from different teaching methods and from a curriculum that focused more on developing critical thinking and language skills, rather than one that focused exclusively on a particular body of racially oriented content. The educational processes and learning environment that were previously dictated by the official policy of segregation gradually began to change at SHC, resulting in a curriculum that was more culturally relevant and contextualised for learners' needs and for the needs of a future integrated society.

Initially these curriculum developments at SHC were only implicitly underpinned by such transformational goals, but by 1991 these goals were formally documented into learner, curriculum and teacher aims which bear some resemblance to the twelve critical outcomes of OBE. With an overall focus on a concern for social justice and empowerment, the following skills and values were formally documented in the curriculum policy of SHC: creative and independent thinking; education for democracy; building a national culture; and developing a dynamic and relevant curriculum (Sacred Heart College, 1991). Thus an integrated model of the curriculum was conceptualised to break down the barriers between subjects and to give due attention to concepts and skills as well as to content. This curriculum was named 'Integrated Studies' and became more popularly known by its acronym, IS.

The curriculum initiatives at Sacred Heart College were teacher-driven with teams of teachers being responsible for developing curriculum and classroom materials. These teams worked together within a highly resourced context, both in terms of physical resources and in terms of human capital, to develop the

learning materials for the classroom. Together, groups of teachers made decisions regarding the content of lessons, the sequencing and pacing of topics and materials, teaching methods to be used, forms of assessment that were appropriate and the critical thinking and language skills that would be the focus of lessons. Teachers at SHC became very adept at making decisions in line with Bernstein's (1971) three message systems of curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation. During this curriculum development process, where the focus had shifted to transformation and critical thinking skills, the issue of pedagogy took the central position in the teachers' discussions at SHC, as they were already competent in terms of implementing a content-based curriculum. By 1992 SHC had established a development unit to co-ordinate all curriculum initiatives within the school; this unit became known as Sacred Heart College Research and Development (SHC R&D). The introduction of IS fundamentally transformed SHC and earned it the reputation of being one of the leading schools in the country in terms of racial desegregation and curriculum development, thus attracting an increasing number of black children whose parents would later become government ministers and bureaucrats in the post-1994 South Africa; this included the grandchildren of Nelson Mandela.

During this process of transformation the principal of SHC, Dr Neil McGurk, had become a significant educational actor with established links to the democratic movement (Christie, 1996). This led to him being appointed national programme manager of the Culture of Learning Programme (COLP) by Dr Chabane Manganyi, Director General of the National Department of Education, in October 1994 (McGurk, personal communication, 4 July 2000). COLP, one of the projects in the national Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), was responsible for restoring a culture of learning in South African schools, which was defined in that context as school infrastructure renovation, school governance and capacity building (Govender *et al,* 1997). This new position led McGurk to establish contacts with the newly formed provincial Departments of Education and with international donor agencies keen to invest in educational programmes in the new South African state. In this COLP capacity, McGurk met

with the President and the Minister of Education of the Flemish Government when they visited South Africa in 1996 to strengthen historical bonds between the Flemish Community and Limpopo. The purpose of this visit was to explore the possibilities of a joint project between the Flemish and the Limpopo Department of Education to give concrete expression to cultural co-operation and exchange. In preparation for the visit, Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, then Minister of the Executive Council (MEC) of Education in Limpopo, met with representatives of the Flemish Office for International Co-operation and Technical Assistance (VVOB) and the RDP COLP, where the decision was made to draft a discussion proposal in line with the needs of Limpopo. This high profile project was much needed for the Limpopo Department of Education as in 1995 it had been noted that it was lagging behind the other eight provinces in putting proper administrative structures in place (Govender *et al*, 1997).

In line with his close links to SHC and in acknowledgement of the role the school had played in the struggle against apartheid, President Mandela recommended to the Limpopo Department of Education and the Flemish Government that SHC R&D should be the implementing agent for the project planned for the President's Schools. SHC R&D considered itself well placed to work with the six schools in the areas of curriculum, school management and governance, and committed itself to sharing the college's resources and experiences through this development project. In January 1997 I stopped teaching at SHC and joined SHC R&D as one of two curriculum field workers. This thesis is a product of my experiences with the teachers in the project.

RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS

This thesis focuses on the challenges that curriculum change brought to the teachers in the President's Schools Project. In order to do this, the research was structured around three central aims. The qualitative nature of this research is reflected in the questions that explore, in detail, each of the three central aims.

The first aim was to critically examine outcomes-based education in the South African context (1997 to 1999). The following sub-questions focused this aim: What were the origins of OBE? Why was the pedagogy of OBE selected for South Africa? What assumptions did the introduction of OBE make about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment? To what extent were the content and methods of OBE appropriate for rural schools? And, what impact did the historical context of South Africa have on the manner in which rural teachers responded to OBE?

The second aim was to describe the approach the project used to implement OBE in the President's Schools. This aim was underpinned by the following questions: What was the historical trajectory of the President's Schools Project? How were the teachers in the President's Schools initiated into the new curriculum? How did these teachers negotiate their own meaning of curriculum change? Why did the teachers interpret the curriculum change in the ways that they did? And, what unintended outcomes arose out of the implementation?

The third aim was to investigate the ways in which rural primary teachers in the President's Schools responded to the curriculum implementation. This aim was explored through the following questions: What were the teachers' perceptions and expectations of the change? What value did the teachers place on this change (for themselves, their learners, their schools, their communities)? Did the teachers express confusion and/or conflict in relation to the change process? If so, how were these expressed? How relevant did the teachers perceive these curriculum changes to be? How did the teachers conceptualise their role in implementing the new curriculum? What were the implications for classroom practice based on the ways teachers interpreted curriculum change? And, in what ways were the teachers' practices informed and/or constrained by their perspectives?

UNISA

SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

Literature in the broad areas of teacher learning and teacher development is reviewed in *Chapter Two*. Conceptions of teacher learning in terms of practice, knowledge and pedagogy relevant to this research are considered. Debates on the nature and complexity of teacher development initiatives in South African rural schools are also probed.

Chapter Three explains the qualitative nature of the research design and the research methods. The processes and techniques employed in the collection of the data are described, and the analytical framework used in this thesis is conceptualised.

The findings of the research are introduced in *Chapter Four,* which signals the second part of the thesis. This chapter critically analyses the professional development initiatives employed by the project to induct these particular rural teachers into the new OBE curriculum. It demonstrates how the teachers shifted these initiatives towards a focus on teacher collaboration, thus establishing a new social practice in all project schools. The concept 'participatory community' is used to capture the breadth and depth of the new collaborative social practice. The assumptions the project made about the links between teacher collaboration and improvements in teaching practice are also signalled in this chapter.

Chapter Five probes the struggles that the teachers went through in the six schools to shift their practice from isolation to collaboration. It details the new discursive practices that were established in the schools in relation to those struggles, and theorises about the curriculum roles that emerged from this process. After demonstrating that three of these roles were common to all project schools, the chapter shows that the role of the teacher as leader was evident in only two of the schools. The assumption that school-based teacher leadership had the possibility of enhancing teaching practice in both of these schools is considered at the end of the chapter.

UNISA

An analysis of the teachers' actual classroom practices is presented in *Chapter Six.* This analysis reveals the teachers' collaborative understanding of OBE and illustrates how that understanding was translated into actual lessons. Extracts from lessons observed are used extensively in this chapter to make the tacit pedagogical and content knowledge that these teachers associated with OBE explicit. The chapter ends with a comparison of lessons between schools with teacher leaders and schools without teacher leaders.

Lastly, *Chapter Seven* draws together the conclusions of the preceding chapters and derives from them suggestions for improving the work of teachers in similar rural-based projects. This chapter also reflects on the limitations of the research and suggests areas where future research is required.

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