Outcomes–Based Education

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1. BACKGROUND

This discussion paper has been prepared for AISSA to provide background information on Outcomes-Based Education and to provide context to the current debate about proposals for national curriculum and issues associated with the standard of education in Australian schools.

In the local media outcomes-based education has become a matter of discussion and controversy. Some critics see this approach to education in very negative terms[1] and in Western Australia discussions surrounding the 'Outcomes and Standards' framework for public education has been quite heated. During these discussions, a Minister of Education has been replaced, major reports and evaluations have been commissioned, and substantial changes in educational policy and practice have occurred. An editorial in The West Australian for 24-25 March, 2007 was titled "Stop education patch-ups and kill off OBE."[2] In this climate it is relevant to reflect on the nature of an outcomes-based education and issues that are associated with its use in the Australian context. This paper is focussed on such a reflection.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1. Curriculum: An Issue For All Seasons

First, by way of introduction, it is important to note that issues of curriculum are, for every generation, properly matters of controversy and dispute. The shape and content of education should always be matters for discussion and argument.

In the middle years of the 19th century, major thinkers of the day saw problems with the contemporary education system. Writers like Charles Dickens and Matthew Arnold made their criticisms public, with Arnold, an Inspector of Schools, worrying about the "very foolish thing" that might happen when Commercial Travelers and Licensed Victuallers set up schools for their children.[3] In 1859 Herbert Spencer entered the debate about curriculum with his essay on "What Knowledge is of Most Worth?" Spencer's answer to his own question was straightforward – Science was the knowledge of most worth: for understanding human existence, parenting, citizenship, art, and moral and religious discipline.[4] For Arnold the answer was quite different: Culture was to be most valued. When a choice had to be made, it was more important according to Arnold, to be able to understand the key messages in Macbeth than to 'know that the diameter of the moon is 2160 miles!'[5]

Move forward to 2007 and Macbeth was again the topic of discussion about curriculum when, in a debate on the ABC, Judy King, the Principal of Riverside Girls High School in NSW, suggested that we celebrate, rather than denigrate, the possibility of multiple interpretations of the key messages of Macbeth.[6] The recent national summit on what history should be taught and how it should be taught, stimulated in part by the comments of the Prime Minister, provides another example of a contemporary curriculum debate.

2.2. Not A Single Idea

Outcomes-based education is not a single idea or set of procedures. Rather outcomes-based education is like democracy – there are many different versions practised in different ways in different places, all with the label outcomes-based education. Examination of the different curriculum frameworks in the Australian States and Territories shows this to be the case, for all show some influence of principles of outcomes-based education. Like democracy, there are family resemblances between these different versions of outcomes-based education, which makes it possible to comment on their similarities and differences.

2.3. One Contentious Idea Attracts Another

Debates about outcomes-based education are often not restricted to outcomes-based education. In Australia and overseas these debates often spread to include other contentious educational matters. Thus outcomes-based education has sometimes been packaged together with constructivism, post-modernism and progressivist education, all of which are contested in their own right.

2.4. Putting The Idea Into Practice

Finally, some of the debate, criticism and controversy that surround curriculum frameworks that are labelled as outcomes-based arises from the way that the curriculum is enacted. The way that a curriculum is operationalised can vary from place to place, and local features of a curriculum framework influence how it is received by schools and the community. The findings in a recent report on the WA Outcomes and Standards curriculum suggest that issues such as resources, support and workload have caused concern for teachers and others in that state.[7]

3. DIFFERENT FACES OF OUTCOMES-BASED EDUCATION

3.1. Introduction

There is no one agreed version of outcomes-based education and different versions may show an outcomes-based influence in different ways. However, we can make a broad division between curriculum frameworks where outcomes-based education has been mixed with an existing curriculum approach, and the more 'official' account of outcomes-based education that has been developed by William Spady and his colleagues. In the discussion below we will refer to the first, mixed, approach as 'lower case' outcomes-based education (obe) and to Spady's account as 'upper case' outcomes-based education (OBE).

3.2. obe: lower-case outcomes-based education

Not all outcomes-based education is seen as a matter of great controversy. The word 'outcomes' is common in many statements associated with the curricula established by Australian education systems and university programs. The use of 'outcomes" in these curriculum statements reflects the fact that the curriculum designers have considered which outcomes of the curriculum are valued and

have used these in structuring the curriculum framework or to design the syllabus statement.

The South Australian SACSA framework uses 'outcomes' quite liberally:

> The final common aspect of the SACSA Framework lies in its approach to learner assessment. This approach comes from the tradition of outcomes-*based education...This tradition is based* on the belief that the curriculum process should begin with the explicit statement of the outcomes expected and that curriculum content, processes, structures and resources should *be planned to expand children's and students' opportunities to* achieve the outcomes.[8]

The NSW syllabus, which is viewed positively by some critics of outcomes-based education in WA, also places outcomes in a central position in its K-10 curriculum statements:

> The framework also provides a set of broad learning outcomes that summarise the skills, knowledge and understanding, values and attitudes essential for all students to succeed in and beyond their schooling.[9]

The International Baccalaureate (IB), regarded by some commentators as adopting a more traditionally-based approach to curriculum, also bases its system of assessment around the assessment of learning outcomes:

> Teachers assess students by selecting or designing methods of assessment appropriate to the learning outcomes they intend to capture.[10]

In some universities, including the University of Western Australia, outcomes-based education is advanced as a useful approach to curriculum design and enactment. In our university, Flinders University, staff establish sets of learning outcomes for each topic. It is therefore appropriate to identify many of the curricula in education systems and universities as being outcome-based.

Outcomes are frequently discussed when a new educational program, or a new curriculum, is being discussed. It is quite likely that in early planning meetings discussion will at some point focus on what students are expected to be able to do at the end of the period of schooling, or at the end of the program of study: "What should our students be able to do?" Discussion is also likely to develop about the qualities that students should possess when they graduate from the school or program: "What sort of people do we expect our graduates to be?" In both of these sets of discussion the focus is on outcomes. Curriculum planners could then proceed to plan the school curriculum or the program of study by working backwards from those primary objectives. "This is what we want to achieve, so what do we need to do *to reach those objectives?"* Indeed, at some point in the design of a curriculum it would be very difficult to avoid these considerations.

Although this approach to curriculum design does seem to reflect the recent influence of Spady's emphasis on the importance of considering the outcomes of education, it is also closely related to the widely used system of curriculum design advanced by Ralph Tyler in 1950.[11] The starting point in Tyler's

approach was specification of objectives, followed by the selection and arrangement of learning experiences relevant to those objectives, and the evaluation of the extent to which the objectives had been met.

Use of outcome statements in local curriculum documents is therefore not a radical move. While it might, implicitly or explicitly, reflect the influence of OBE, it also reflects the influence of earlier theories of curriculum design that have encouraged designers to focus on what should be achieved at the end of the program or period of schooling. There are however, elements of OBE that have stimulated quite a lot of debate.

3.3. OBE: Upper-case outcomes-based education

William Spady developed a systematic account of OBE in two major works.[12], [13] The major principles of his account of OBE have been summarized by Killen[14] and are discussed in a series of papers by Willis.[15]

A Total System
Spady focusses on the totality of the education system. OBE is designed to cover the ground between the aims of the system and what happens in classrooms. His perspective is strongly future oriented in that he asks us to imagine both what the future will be like and how we want our students to turn out at the end of their education. Once these outcomes have been identified it is possible to move to specification of how such outcomes will be achieved.

A flavour of the future orientation and of **how outcomes fit into Spady's overall vision for an education system is shown by the steps set out for "total" educational leaders** in designing their systems. This design process should produce the following:

- A brief but powerful listing of the beliefs and values that serve as a decision screen for all decision makers in the school system
- A future-focused mission statement that briefly and clearly states the purpose of the school system and the reason the school district exists
- A framework identifying the spheres of living and the future conditions that students will face once they leave school
- A set of future-focused student performance outcomes that explicitly identify what students will be able to do with what they have learned, and what they will be like after they leave school and are living full and productive lives
- A future-focused vision statement that will clearly and concretely state what the school system will look like in the future when operating at its ideal best.[16]

Responsibilities of Schools
Spady also sees OBE as encompassing all students and that all can be successful in achieving the outcomes established by the education system. As we see below, he expects that different students will follow different paths to these outcomes. He places major responsibility for the achievement of outcomes on the school and teachers:

> schools are expected to fulfil their obligation of equipping all students with the competence and qualities needed to face the challenges beyond the schoolhouse door.[17]

Transitional and Transformational OBE

Spady makes a distinction between OBE that is organised around the achievement of the outcomes that will enable students to fulfil "the complex life roles they ultimately would occupy as young adults"[18], and OBE that acknowledges the importance of such roles but does not make them function as the central organising themes of the curriculum.

The former, termed transformational OBE, is Spady's preferred type and is concerned with developing understanding of the nature of human beings and of human potential and developing learner empowerment.[19] The second type, transitional OBE, gives recognition to important overarching outcomes, but does not place these at the centre of the education system. When viewed in light of this distinction, most Australian state curriculum frameworks, with their focus on essential learnings, attributes of lifelong learning, key competencies, and so on, are more transitional in nature than transformational.

Organising Principles

Spady identifies four organising principles of OBE:

1. Clarity of focus: all teaching and learning activities must be systematically related to the broad and specific outcomes identified for the educational program and these must be must be clearly identified for students. These outcomes may be achieved in different ways.

2. Designing back: Curriculum content should flow clearly from the most general valued outcomes, to related more specific outcomes, to class lesson activities. Assessment should be integrated with these outcomes in a coherent manner. In this way the program of study for a student within and across year levels would have a clear relationship to curriculum goals.

3. High expectations for all students: This principle requires that successful and challenging learning experiences and achievement of high standards be part of learning for all students. Identification of the achievement of high standards of performance in relation to criteria established for achievement of outcomes becomes the focus of assessment in OBE.

4. Teachers must provide expanded opportunities to allow for achievement of outcomes in a variety of ways: Associated with principle 3 is the view that different learners may take different routes, and different amounts of time or different numbers of attempts, to achieve the same outcome. A consistent theme in Spady's work is that OBE "systems make WHAT and WHETHER students learn successfully more important than WHEN and HOW they learn it."[20]

Links to Mastery Learning

The emphasis in OBE on successful learning by all students en route to the achievement of authentic outcomes that will set students up for productive lives presents an optimistic outlook for an education system. Principle 3 draws explicitly on earlier theoretical work of John B. Carroll who outlined a model of school learning[21] that was later taken up in the development of mastery learning.[22] Carroll proposed a definition of aptitude in terms of time taken to learn, and Spady's principles 3 and 4 are closely related to the other factors that Carroll's model identified as major influences on student achievement. For example, in Carroll's model the opportunity for

learning, the quality of instruction and the student's ability to profit from instruction are all seen to influence achievement.

The OBE Vision

There are visionary elements of OBE which some people find unsettling. In recent work[23] Spady proposes the need for educational leaders to engage in empowerment thinking, visionary thinking and future-focussed thinking that looks to the world as it should be in the future. He criticises 'educentric thinking' that focuses only on how the education system is at present. In a recent address to the Australian Primary Principals Association Spady described an advanced paradigm for educational reform in the following terms,[24]

>Paradigm 5: Inner Realisation
>>Essence of the Model: *Expanded consciousness of one's spiritual* nature/potential
>>Nature of Learning: *Developing one's intuitive connection to* universal wisdom
>>Major Outcome Measure: *Taking full responsibility for one's life* and experiences
>>Key Pedagogy: Meditative exploration by quieting the conscious mind
>>Temporal Structure: Learner-controlled timing/group-enhanced experience

3.4. **Spady's** Critique of Non-OBE Systems

Spady advances a strong critique of a range of features of non-OBE approaches. He attacks the use of the school year as the key organising unit for advancement, rather than achievement of an agreed standard. In OBE, time allowed for achievement of an outcome is assumed to vary between students. Thus he argues for achievement-based, rather than time-based, progression. He rejects the use of norm-referenced systems of grading and student-comparative evaluations as dominant forms of assessment, arguing that these guarantee that some students will emerge from their schooling as failures, thus violating principle 3. He is critical of the use of national standardised testing which he sees as closing off, rather than expanding, opportunities for students. Measuring students' performance against standards, rather than simply against the performance of other students, is also debated in other educational circles. The implications of norm-referenced assessment for students' self-efficacy, achievement goals and self-theories of intelligence must also be taken into account. [25, 26]

In Spady's view, effective alignment between outcomes, the content of teaching, teaching methods and procedures used in assessment is more likely to emerge from an OBE system than from other approaches, because the 'working back' from agreed outcomes encourages greater coherence. This idea of constructive alignment between outcomes, subject matter, pedagogy and assessment is not recent, nor confined to Spady or to OBE. Key writers in education, such as Cohen[27, 28] (in 1987) and Biggs[29] (in 1999) also promote constructive alignment at all stages of teaching, learning and assessment.

A significant challenge posed to other approaches by OBE is **Spady's view** that the outcomes that should be established for education systems must be centred around **"life roles" and the perspectives set out in Spady's Paradigm 5 noted above**. In his adoption of this position Spady challenges the wisdom of curriculum frameworks that are based solely around forms of knowledge represented by traditional disciplines.

4. ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH OBE

4.1. Introduction

In this section we outline a range of issues that have emerged in international and local discussions of outcomes-based education.

4.2. Challenges to OBE Principles and Premises

One of the premises of OBE is that schools (and teachers) control the conditions that determine whether or not students are successful at school learning. Contemporary views of learning as a self-regulated activity argue that students also bear significant responsibility for their learning, so that ultimate responsibility is seen as shared between school-teacher-student and parents/caregivers. However, this locus of responsibility issue provides an example of how different people interpret OBE in different ways. For example, Sue Willis, in support of **OBE, argues that both schools and students must take responsibility for students'** learning, and further, that part of each school's responsibility is to teach students the self-regulatory skills that will enable them to take on such responsibility.[30]

The view of **the timing of students'** progression in OBE creates an issue for a schooling system. The view underlying OBE principles 3 and 4, that emphasises the need to make accommodations for all students, has been challenged in terms of its practicality.[31] Widespread adoption of individual progression, rather than age-related year level progression, has substantial structural implications for schools.

A related issue associated with OBE principle 4 concerns the amount of variation within teaching programs needed for students who are progressing at different rates. Venter sees a system-wide structural problem in schools if OBE is interpreted as requiring complete individualisation.[32] On this individualisation issue, most systems opt for redundancy as a means of dealing with such variation **in levels of students' knowledge**. As students progress from one calendar year/grade level to the next there is an amount of backtracking built into teaching programs to help students to catch up. Under this current system some students do not catch up, and some students are not extended to achieve their full potential.

4.3. The Structure of the Discipline

There are alternatives to obe/OBE for establishing the aims of an education system or **curriculum. For example, Donnelly advocates a 'discipline-based approach' and criticises OBE for failing to come to terms with the 'structure of the discipline'.**[33] In this, **Donnelly builds on the idea of 'forms of knowledge' advanced** by Peters and Hirst.[34] The 'forms of knowledge' perspective is subject to important criticisms, such as that it is narrowly focussed on only intellectual objectives.[35] However, it is the dominant

approach used in the specification of Key Learning Areas which provide the basis of most curriculum frameworks in Australia and internationally. For example, a recent ACER report

> estimated that 90 per cent of the content of Advanced Mathematics courses, 85 per cent of the content of Physics courses, and 95 per cent of the content of Chemistry courses in the senior school was common across all Australian states and territories.
>
> The study also found a high level of consistency in what subject *experts considered 'essential' curriculum* content in these three subjects.[36]

The discipline-based approach is more input-focussed, starting from consideration of existing forms of knowledge that are valued generally in society. In most local curriculum frameworks the discipline-based approach has been married to an obe approach, to produce the sets of outcomes that are specified as being associated with, say, the study of the novels of Patrick White or the history of the Eureka Stockade. Still, these valued forms of discipline-based knowledge are also subject to controversy, as evidenced by a recent exchange between Kevin Donnelly and Judy King

> Judy King: If that means in history they have to have a plural sense of many stories, the story of the dispossessed, the story of recent arrivals and migrants, the story of women, that white Australia has a black history – now, if the politicians cannot cope with students that are equipped to deconstruct the spin doctors and deconstruct crisis co*nstruction, then too bloody bad....*
>
> *Kevin Donnelly: ... I was a literature teacher for many years and*, when *I look at subjects like history and literature, I'd argue the pendulum* has moved too far towards this post modern approach, where there are no truths, there are no absolutes, everything is relative, everything *is subjective...*[37]

The curriculum frameworks established in the States and Territories show the joint influence of OBE/obe and the more traditional discipline, or forms of knowledge, structure. Discipline-based learning areas provide the major structure for the curriculum, but exist alongside two sets of outcome statements.

The first of these sets of outcome statements are the very broad statements that **approximate Spady's** OBE statements of life roles. In the various Australian states **these are termed 'key competencies', 'overarching learning outcomes', 'essential learnings', 'attributes of lifelong learners', 'employability and lifelong learning skills' or just 'skills'. These types of outcomes are close to Spady's focus on the life roles of** students and indeed many have an explicit focus on skills needed for employment. Such outcomes are replicated in international frameworks, such as UNESCO

> In order to prepare young people for life and work in a rapidly changing world, education and training systems need to be re-oriented to impart a broad range of lifeskills. These skills should include the key generic competencies and practical capabilities that cut across fields such as ICT, the ability to learn independently, to work in teams, ethical entrepreneurship, civic responsibility and awareness to diversity and multiculturalism.[38]

The second set of outcome statements included in State and Territory syllabus documents are learning-area specific outcome statements. These are typically general statements that are of practical significance and subsume outcomes within the higher-level key learning area or discipline structure.

Lack of a syllabus has also been raised as a point of critique of OBE.[39] In Australia the word syllabus is used in most curriculum statements. As noted below there are, however, variations in the degree of specificity of statements made in syllabus statements in different systems.

4.4. The Nature of the Outcomes

Some critics have found the language of Spady's vision for OBE problematic. Some outcomes are seen to lie outside the province of the school, or to privilege some cultures or perspectives over others.[40] Others see the outcomes as vague and difficult to define in ways that make them useable by teachers.[41, 42] The Louden Report in WA reported that a substantial number of teachers expressed difficulty in translating broad outcome statements in a pedagogically meaningful way.[43]

It has been argued that some outcomes, in particular those related to creative activity or personal dispositions are difficult to specify and assess. An alternative argument is that methods for assessing and reporting creative output do exist in school systems. In addition assessment of dispositions/attitudes/traits is well established in the vocational and psychological assessment industries. In WA, outcomes seem to have been stated at more general levels than those in NSW syllabus statements, suggesting that it is the way that the outcomes are defined (e.g., their clarity; precision), rather than the specification of outcomes per se, that is problematic.

Some disagreement about the outcomes that are selected to be the ultimate focus of an education system is to be expected: We see evidence at regular intervals in the media of issues that arise in modern life that are accompanied by a call to include these issues in school curricula. So the debate here may be "Which outcomes" rather than outcomes per se.

4.5. Control of the Curriculum

In the WA case, and also in the current debates about the establishment of a national curriculum, a lot of discussion centres around the problem of finding an appropriate balance between central and local control of the curriculum. If the expression of outcomes at the State or National level becomes too specific, then critics both for (e.g., Willis) and against (e.g., Donnelly) OBE warn that the professional responsibility of teachers is eroded. Again this is not an issue that only arises in the context of an outcomes-based curriculum.

4.6. Assessment

A major issue in curriculum frameworks is whether and how outcomes are to be formatively and summatively assessed and reported. In the Andrich report in WA, David Andrich argues that there is no in-principle incompatibility between OBE and modern assessment theory.[44]

However, the WA experience suggests that there are issues related to assessment. These emerge in both the Andrich and Tognolini Reports:

- Ensuring that there is a coherent relationship between specific assessment procedures and outcomes (Tognolini Report[45]).

- Excessive assessment required of teachers (Andrich Report).

- Assessment using levels and bands is too crude – Percentage marks were reinstated in WA to enable greater precision in teachers' judgements.

- Both Andrich and Tognolini remarked on the lack of assessment guidance for teachers in WA.

- The WA experience suggests that the necessity for tertiary selection created problems for the use of levels – therefore compulsory exams have been reinstated.

There is criticism of the sole reliance in OBE on criterion-referenced assessment (see Donnelly and Manno), though these two critics come to opposite conclusions about the desirability of OBE.

4.7. Coherence

OBE has been criticised for resulting in the specification of an excessive number of outcomes.[46] This has also been represented as a difficulty in maintaining coherence between the broad outcomes and the succeeding levels of outcomes statements. However, problems in maintaining coherence during the translation of broad statements into specific teachable and measurable learning activities is not unique to OBE/obe.

4.8. Workload

In WA, workload emerged in both the Andrich and Louden reports as an issue related to the requirement to formally assess and report a large number of outcomes.

4.9. Attention to Learning Processes

This criticism has been made by Donnelly. However, it seems hard to argue that the principles of OBE support a lack of attention to processes of learning, such as developing well connected subject-matter knowledge or metacognitive skills for learning. This could be a complaint that arises from misunderstandings that incorrectly translate principles of constructivist learning into apparently constructivist pedagogical practices. For example, a simplistic interpretation of constructivism proposes that constructivist learning requires unguided discovery learning, when, in fact, proponents of constructivism argue that well-constructed knowledge requires well-structured, expertly facilitated, and carefully guided construction of new knowledge.[47] The widespread use of unguided discovery approaches is not well supported by evidence.[48] This seems to be separate argument that has become swept up into the OBE debate.

4.10. Concern for Standards

The strong implication to be drawn from sources such as **Donnelly's 'Dumbing Down' book title is** that an OBE approach does not impose standards of performance. However, as is clear in the description of the WA curriculum as an **"Outcomes and Standards" approach, there appears to be nothing in OBE** that is logically incompatible with the establishment and use of educational standards, or of students being required to achieve those standards.

In this respect, whereas some commentators suggest that an OBE approach must, of **necessity, result in 'dumbing down' of a curriculum,** Spady suggests that if the OBE principle of setting high expectations and standards for all students were taken **seriously, such an approach might in fact result in 'clevering up'.** The argument that a decline in standards is a necessary consequence of an outcomes-based education system remains to be made in a systematic manner.

4.11. The Western Australian OBE Issue

As noted above, some of the controversy surrounding OBE in WA seems to have been associated with issues of assessment. The significance of this issue in WA is indicated by the fact that two reports on technical and practical aspects of school assessment, including assessment for years 11 and 12 were commissioned.[49,50] The reports, and related articles, by David Andrich, identify some features of the OBE approach used in WA that are not problematic, and some that are problematic.[51,52]

In broad terms, Andrich points out that outcomes-based education is, in principle, compatible with modern test theory. The hierarchical levels structure of each of the eight learning areas is quite compatible with the Rasch scale approach used in most modern assessment systems. The conceptualisation of a **student's growing competence in an area like English as spreading across eight** levels, or bands, each of which includes the previous level, can be readily modelled for assessment purposes. The specification of sublevels within each of the levels can also be handled in a satisfactory manner. The recognition of strands, such as reading and writing, that make up a single learning area of English is similarly uncontroversial. **Andrich's observations can also be appli**ed more generally to most State curriculum arrangements.

However, the Andrich and Tognolini reports did identify issues of assessment that seem to be related to the public discussion in WA:

- The use of levels **as a single indicator of a student's achieve**ment did not provide a sufficient degree of precision for the multiple functions required of an assessment and reporting system, such as both recognising the end point of schooling and also providing a basis for tertiary selection.

- Use of levels and sublevels on their own failed to provide the required degree **of differentiation between students' performance. The use of marks that** would allow more precise differentiation of student performance was recommended.

- The identification and description of different levels in a continuum of achievement needs to be carried out carefully to ensure that it supports valid

and reliable assessment. Assessment tasks need to be related in a coherent manner to outcomes and there needs to be reasonable comparability across learning areas.

- Analytical marking schemes and tests need to be carefully developed by experts and teachers working in collaboration. These schemes need to be valid and reliable.

- The amount of assessment required of teachers at years 11 and 12 could be reduced without compromising the technical adequacy of the assessment system.

- Professional development should be provided to officials, teachers and students on matters related to assessment, in particular on the context surrounding assessment at Year 12 and the procedures required to generate appropriate assessments.

The WA curriculum framework is now described as being based on an "Outcomes and Standards" approach. It is clear in websites established for lobbying about OBE[53] that the 'outcomes' part of that title still has strong negative connotations for critics of education in WA.

The recently released Louden Report on the Curriculum Improvement Program Phase 2[54] developed by the WA Department of Education and Training indicates that there is still a level of dissatisfaction with the curriculum framework in that State, especially the arrangements established for the final years of secondary school. Although there is some concern among teachers and officials about the meaning of learning outcomes, this is but one of a number of areas of dissatisfaction. Resource levels, methods of reporting, understanding of assessment procedures, workloads and issues related to student learning are also matters of concern.

4.12. Some positive Features of Outcomes-Based Education

In the previous section we have focussed upon problems that have been raised with OBE in a range of local and international commentaries. However, it is clear that there is a substantial outcomes-based influence in local education systems and not all of these have experienced the problems evident in WA. So we finish the paper with consideration of some positive perceptions of outcome-based education approaches.

4.13. Design and Designing Back

The quite wide use of outcome statements in local and international curriculum frameworks indicates that many curriculum designers usefully employ the processes of developing program outcomes and designing back from those to generate more specific outcomes. Curriculum designers use this approach even though they may not accept all of OBE.

The 'designing back' principle then allows curriculum designers to establish a framework that should have a high degree of coherence. In this respect OBE brings the curriculum designers to explicit consideration of the key decisions that face any designer of curriculum.

4.14. The Work of Sue Willis

Sue Willis[55] was influential in the establishment of the WA outcomes-based curriculum. Her work includes a number of papers arguing the positive case for OBE. In particular, she argues that OBE supports,

- Clarity of focus that can enhance the coherence of what is actually taught to students. As Willis notes, it is not revolutionary to propose that we specify outcomes. It is important is to work out ways to help students achieve those outcomes and to monitor whether they do achieve them.

- A commitment to common outcomes that can enhance equity. OBE does provoke consideration of the degree to which we succeed in addressing the needs of all students. Such consideration is appropriate for all education systems.

- An accountability that respects collective professional judgement and decision making in schools. The decision to specify outcomes need not compromise the exercise of responsibility by teachers about how to achieve outcomes. This will always remain an area where there is a need to provide for individual preferences among teachers about the need for specification.

- Shared responsibility for achievement of established outcomes. Willis notes the responsibility of students to engage with their studies, the responsibilities of principals to provide curriculum leadership and of teachers to examine the basis for their teaching approaches.

- The importance of aligning learning, teaching and assessment.

It is interesting that Willis' views, including some of the comments above, about the strengths of OBE, canvass some of the same issues, such as local level teacher responsibility and individual student achievement, that are posed as criticisms of OBE by other commentators. This does point to the different ways in which OBE/obe is interpreted.

5. SUMMARY

This paper provides an overview of the key characteristics of Outcomes-Based Education and its application in various contexts.

We recommend you utilise the pages to inform school-based curriculum review and as a resource if staff are engaged in discussion about this approach.

We would welcome comment on the paper, in particular any additional points that may inform the debate on Outcome-Based Education. Comments can be provided to Garry Le Duff via email at leduffg@ais.sa.edu.au.

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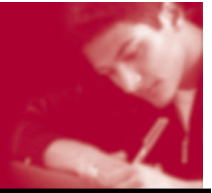
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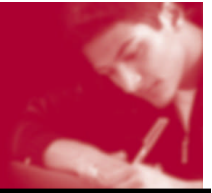
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