DIVERSITY AS A CURRICULAR CHALLENGE IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

A review of Outcomes Based Education (OBE) and the subsequent emergence of Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAP) point to the rhetoric about diversity in the South African schools’ curriculum. Our own experience and that of others suggest that learners’ experiences, on the basis of activities, that are internally produced and rendered meaningful in school settings, transcend the classrooms through cultural webs of myriad reconnections. Therefore, possible redefinitions require diverse narrative and performative spaces for addressing sensitive topics. We contend that CAP also treats content as neutral facts and not as constructions and interpretations, where a teacher needs critical lenses to deal with knowledge. Such views of knowledge should be revisited for the sake of bridging epistemologies of theory and practice, to the effect that a coherent, defensible whole slips away and makes a view of knowledge as seamless. Such an approach will make way for indigenous knowledge in a school curriculum.

Keywords: diversity, curriculum, challenge, schools

Introduction

Our thinking about this year’s theme for Spring lectures, “moving the centre – to accommodate indigenous knowledge systems (IKS),” we were reminded of the dilemma in which the African child finds himself. This dilemma is brought by the fact that he lives in two works, the western world, which is promoted by the school and his own African World, which he finds at home. We, then looked at how schools can think of creating space to allow him to think in ways that are consistent with his knowledge and experiences. This calls for new epistemologies of ontologies that recognize divergent ways of learning.
Our view and that of others (Waghid, 2002; Haussila, 2005), is premised on the notion of ways of learning that are embedded in social contexts, which regard knowledge as a social construct and therefore curriculum as a social contextual process. This view calls teachers to accommodate divergent views that learners bring with in a classroom. It also implies that teachers should use critical lenses to deal with new knowledge that is alien to what they are used to. But, also, that they be willing to revisit for their knowledge systems to critique their epistemologies of theory and practice that they imbibed at college or university. Even more importantly that, that coherent and defensible whole, that they are used to, slip away to give room to thinking of their own constitution and beliefs that that does not hinge upon what is prescribed by authorities somewhere beyond their reach. This approach embraces the need for considering context in understanding curriculum.

In seeking a deeper understanding of the daily experiences of teachers and students in schools, Nieto (2004:4) illuminates the importance of considering the broader sociopolitical context of education. She writes:

\[\text{It is clear that no single explanation (of academic achievement) is sufficient to explain why some students succeed and others. We need school achievement as a combination of personal, cultural familial, interactive, political relational and societal issues and this means understanding the sociopolitical context in which education takes place.}\]

Giroux (1992:162) further urges us to consider making visible the social problem and conditions that affect those students who are at risk in our society which recognizing that such problems need to be addressed in both pedagogical and political terms inside and outside the school.

It is within this frame that our paper seeks to suggest that in order for indigenous knowledge systems to make a way into classrooms, learners’ experiences, on the basis of activities, that are internally produced and rendered meaningful in school settings; should transcend the classrooms through cultural web of myriad reconnections. Such possible redefinitions call for diverse narrative and performative spaces for addressing sensitive topics which depend on multiple relations between the teller and the listener and the personal, cultural web and contextual circumstances (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2008). We argue that the present curriculum, does not allow this space, though it purports to be flexible and accommodative of diversity. To address this problem, the paper follows the following design: a) First, it traces the development
Curriculum as a postmodern text

To best understand the challenge of diversity in curriculum, it is important to understand it as a postmodern text. This will require a quick detour to give a snap description of how postmodernity evolved over the years and how it affected the curriculum field as it has other fields.

Postmodernity like its branches, poststructuralist and deconstruction is movement that emerged during the seventeenth century to oppose to structuralism and humanism, which structuralism had challenged earlier (Descombes, 1980). Post-structuralism had initially referred to radical innovations in the arts, in technology and in science. But recently it has come to refer to all epistemic and cultural breaks with modernism (Best & Kellner, 1991). It is mainly used by theorists as a paradigm shift from the traditional academic disciplines to a new cultural landscape. It is therefore both a cultural and a political movement.

Given its inclusiveness, it may be regarded as a dissension rather than a consensus. It therefore denies all that is foundational, transcendental, or universal truth. It pays attention to language, power, and representation as discursive categories. As Deulenze and Guattari (1977) rightly put it, postmodernism believes in totalities that are peripheral. In diversity in what is often taken as absolute truth. Therefore, to believe in postmodernism is to engage in modes of cognition (Pinar & Reynolds, 1992) and methods of critique and analysis (Cherryholmes, 1988) and versions of contemporary history and versions of contemporary culture (Jameson, 1991) which challenge the taken for granted (all that is modern).

Such an understanding of reality has far reaching implications for teaching and learning. Teaching provides access to various forms of discourse, which enable individuals to define themselves in ways that defy the state’s classification of them. From a Foucauldian vantage, such
self-determination is tantamount to the exercise of freedom Howley & Harnet in Katharin (1996). It is this kind of freedom that seems to be absent in the current curriculum because obsession with pursuance of objectives has the danger to stifle the noble goal of education, which to develop the individual freedom to be what he wants to be (Peters, 1977). Peters (1977) saw education as the production of desirable tastes of minds rather than acquisition of facts. He rejected the notion of education as instrumental, For example, its end being the production of clerks and computer producers.

It was Taubman’s (1979) work that could be regarded as ground breaking in the field of curriculum to introduce post structuralism in the curriculum. His doctoral thesis entitled: Gender and Curriculum: Discourse and the Politics of Sexuality at the University of Rochester. His work challenged the old standing conceptions of curriculum such as Tyler’s (1979) famous Basic Principles of Curriculum Instruction. The famous work of Bloom’s (1956) Taxonomy of Educational Objectives and Schwab in Hollins (1996) Extension and Application of Tyler’s basic principles came under scrutiny. His work marked a radical departure from a view of curriculum as document rather than as a process.

Also, breaking the ground in understanding curriculum as a postmodern text was the work of Doll (1993a) who came up with a model of a transformative curriculum entitled: A Post-Modern Perspective on Curriculum. He used one useful conceptual tool for analyzing curriculum which he called megaparadigmatic. The concept meant that curriculum should shift from the separation of subjects (Descartes’-separation of mind and body) to integration (characterized by openness, indeterminacy, self-regulatory). A “currere” (race course) orientated curriculum that focuses not only on external attributes of the race course but on the process of traversing the race course of negotiating self and others.

Seeing curriculum as a post-modern text may be summed up as: a) curriculum as composition of, notes, “expressibles”, expressed and expressing, b) curriculum that does not exist but happens c) a simulacrum (a copy of which the original does not exists) and d) curriculum as always moving or to use Deleuze’s ( word, as nomadic. This conception of curriculum allows a teacher and learners a space to create their own knowledge. It is here where Pinar’s (2004) idea of curriculum as a currere, curriculum in action (that which we do in the classrooms) and
complicated conversations (how we think about what we do). Nieto (2004) is right when she writes that it is the responsibility and challenge of every teacher and researcher to make explicit the image of students and our society that is implied in our interactions in the school context. She continues to note that aims for education, the hopes we have for our students, the abilities, knowledge and opportunities that we as a society intend for them, are written in the daily interactions with them. This is the currere in the clearest sense. Currere as a verb encompasses the infinitive autobiographical nature of lived experience. As a method, it requires both the inward and outward reflection and imagination. In practice, it is temporal, tentative, historical and social (Pinar et al., 2004).

**OBE and diversity**

It is here where OBE, we think, falls short. Despite their anti-positivist rhetoric, OBE proponents are bent to prescriptions of what should be taught and learnt. Even with its imminent demise and emergent CAP, there is little hope, we think, of a radical move or breakaway from its “religious”-adherence to the notion of national curriculum as against core curriculum. The former stifles any possible meaningful shift from the old Eurocentric curriculum to African one that gives space to indigenous knowledge system, for instance.

OBE stands for outcomes based education that implies putting together all teaching and learning experiences together in the education process for propitious success and attainment by learners. Furthermore, it demands of educators and learners to work within clearly defined pathways with specific focus on what is to be done, learner performance and instructional trajectory, including assessment blueprint (Spady, 1994). Proponents of OBE visualize it as a treasured replacement of the traditional model of relative ranking by ability and getting credit for merely sitting through class. Liberal politicians often support OBE because of its vision of high standards for all groups. Conservatives like the idea of measuring outputs rather than inputs, e.g. money spent or number of hours of lecture given, and insisting that students demonstrate learning rather than just showing up.
OBE proponents believe that all students can learn, regardless of ability, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender. Furthermore, OBE recognizes that a complex organization is more likely to produce what it measures, and to downplay anything it considers unimportant. The adoption of measurable standards is seen as a means of ensuring that the content and skills covered by the standards will be a high priority in the education of students.

The standards-based education movement rejects social promotion and the inevitability of inferior performance by disadvantaged groups. While recognizing that some students will learn certain material faster than others, the standards movement rejects the idea that only a few can succeed. All students are capable of continuous improvement.

The opportunities that were previously afforded to those at the top of a bell curve are opened up to the diversity of all students, in a democratic vision, sometimes connected to social justice.

The movement presents the following positions and viewpoints on OBE:

- All students will complete rigorous academic coursework so that they leave high school prepared for college or technical training, without remedial courses.
- All students, including those who live in poverty, will meet district, state, and national standards.
- Staff will maintain high expectations and standards, believing all students will succeed if kept to high expectations.
- Students should be measured against a fixed yardstick, or "against the mountain" rather than against other students.
- We need higher world class standards for the 21st century (though no state has yet found a precise definition of the term "world-class standards").
- Students should demonstrate that they have met standards, not just put in seat time to advance to the next level.
In essence, OBE seeks to reject a rank-ordered definition of success by essentially promising that all students will perform at least as well as the stated standards. In practice OBE often results in large increases in spending as more resources are poured into students who were previously allowed to graduate while being functionally illiterate and innumerate. OBE's objective standards also put a brake on grade inflation, to the distress of students who prefer high, but meaningless, grades. Within this (OBE) paradigm teachers and learners have specific roles and responsibilities that are predetermined and not: emergent, nomadic, indeterminable, open, unpredictable, and self-organizing.

Although its proponents have continually denied this, OBE seems to be located in the modernist thought because it operates within the objectives model of curriculum development (structuralism) (Newton, Descartes) and it follows the techno-rationality and scientism (Bobbitt, 1918).

If features of African views of knowledge and ways of learning are to make way to the centre of curriculum in this country, which hinges, as we argue in this paper, on IKS, are to be taken seriously our conception of curriculum need to shift from being static and prescriptive to a more. The present canonizations of and ways of knowing, need to be revisited and redefined in a manner that empowers the teacher and the learner, to cross and or extend boundaries of knowledge horizons, and bridge dualities of the great divide. And we think that such a movement is reachable. Curriculum designers and policy makers need to pursue such a line of thinking if an in-road is to be made into the centre of what counts as valid knowledge, valid pedagogy and valid evaluation (Bernstein, 1977) for IKS.

Curriculum designs that construe teachers as technical implementers of curricular programme which are designed elsewhere are bound to fail to deliver IKS. If curriculum could be thought of as a social contextual process (Cornbleth, 1995) and not as a cut-in-stone product, new ways of thinking about IKS may emerge. We suggest as others do (Peters, 1977; Darling-Hammond, 2005) that the teachers’ space in the curriculum should be broadened than it is at present.
A teacher inhabits and embodies such a critical space, intellectually and physically through which transformation assumption of IKS can make a way to the classroom. Any view that undermines the role of teachers as curriculum mediators do so at their own peril. Teachers matter in translating the rhetoric of diversity into practice. This type of curriculum and pedagogy takes seriously how ideologies are lived, experienced and felt at the level of everyday life as a basis for student experience and knowledge (Giroux, 1992:176).


Astute critics of OBE’s national curriculum, argue that it was not only the academic objectives that animated its endorsement of the objectives model of curriculum development, but labour union movements, with focus on skills development to develop the economy. Thus, despite its academic patina, the long range purpose was neither personal development of individual learners, nor real social reform but political power.

**CAP and diversity**

Curriculum and Assessment Policy seeks to provide a coherent, systematic content and knowledge to satisfy the specific aims of the curriculum. Curriculum policy and guideline documents, seeks to address concerns of transition between grades and phases, assessment, particularly continuous assessment, learning and teaching support materials (textbooks). It argues that the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) failed to help teachers to select socially valued knowledge, which is the scope, sequence, depth, skills and content. That instead it concentrated on national building and the broad philosophy underpinning the education system, and left schools and teachers to apply it to their contexts.

Another area was concern was assessment. There were no clear policy guidelines resulting in confusion of implementation. The use of various forms of assessment, which resulted in too much paper work, became onerous for teachers. The training of teachers was inadequate
especially in subject area/subjects of specialization. Language policy, mother tongue instructions (Grade 1 or 3) is of great concern in this regard.

CAP seeks to give teachers the latitude to interpret the curriculum. The danger of centralization of the curriculum in pursuit of coordination may lead to throttling of diversity, which is the key to postmodernity. Although the concern for what they call provincial layering is a genuine one, should lead to disfranchising teachers from curriculum development. Discouraging the notion of provincial curriculum development is regrettable and step in the wrong direction. (Department of Education: 2010: 27)

Teachers are burdened with a myriad of planning that should be done, which reduce them to a technocratic approach to curriculum. For example they have to plan for a: learning programme, work schedule and lesson plan. These are too prescriptive and do not allow teachers a room to maneuver. Another area of concern is the assessment. The manner in which assessment is planned put more emphasis on a more standardized and centralized approach. There is little room for school based assessment especially in grade nine where there common assessments set by the districts. While this is a good move to ensure quality, the danger is that it does not take into account the different levels at which learners in different schools. But, even of more concern is the amount of paper work that goes into this process. For example, teachers have to produce: i) related school assessment plan, ii) a teacher assessment plan a portfolio assessment plan, iii) a Continuous Assessment (CASS), iv) a mark schedule and v) a learner portfolio. All these processes are cumbersome and disempower, rather empower the teacher.

This emphasis to paper work and administration is a departure from the curriculum implementation literature emphasizes the central role that teachers play in how a curriculum is realized in practice. Whereas an attempt to address this concern is evident, our worry is that it does not seem to disentangle itself frame of modernity, which is prescriptive in nature. For example, the desire to move away from provincial autonomy or contextualization may stifle that freshness that would give a balance of national identity and provincial diversity. If the provincial peppering is taken away it may difficult for learners’ experiences to make a way into the classroom.
Curriculum and Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS)

If IKS is somehow to make headway towards the center of what counts as legitimate school knowledge in South African schools, we suggest that there should a “paragmactic” shift in terms of accommodating divergent cultures that learners and teachers bring along with in the classroom. We argue that such a shift will require the philosophical conversion from modernity to post modernity, which celebrates diversity rather oppose it. South African schools are still far from this view. Most of the indigenous knowledge that learners bring along to the classroom are still regarded as invalid and illegitimate. For example, teachers still see a dichotomy between school knowledge and everyday knowledge especially if emerges from the previously disadvantaged groups such as Africans. If a learner, for instance misses a class and upon return, indicates that she attended a traditional function after the death of a family member, her explanation or evidence may not be taken as authentic because such an explanation does not fall within what is regarded as legitimate and valid knowledge. What is valid knowledge is seen as being western.

Thus the question of whose knowledge is of most worth remains unanswered since the days of Dewey. This problem can best be explained by employing Bernstein’s (1977) theory of class, codes and control. His work and many others in sociology of education (Durkheim, 1954; Apple, 1978; Young, 1971) can provide useful tools to a system study of curriculum as organized and codified reflection of societal and ideological interests, rather than viewing curriculum as value neutral. The latter view is problematic because it will not bring about social justice that South Africa cannot do without given its hideous past in education in particular.

In conclusion we argue, therefore that if IKS is to find its way into the school curriculum, teachers should think of creating space to allow learners to think in ways that are consistent with their knowledge and experiences. This calls for new epistemologies of ontologies that recognize divergent ways of learning.
References


