

Wake up parents – the crisis in education affects us all

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The past 18 years have been disastrous for education. Changes intended to transform and uplift South African society have been unbelievably costly, resulting in almost the worst system in the world (2nd from the bottom, according to the WEF) despite spending 21% of our national budget on it.

Everyone plays the blame game... blame government, blame corruption, blame apartheid, blame the unions, blame the teachers... but where does the real fault lie? If we can't identify the problem, we have no hope of fixing it. It's easy to trace the demise of education to the introduction of Outcomes Based Education but not so easy to answer the question "What went wrong?"

The problem with OBE is not that it's a great first world concept that didn't work in a third world country. OBE did not fail because of lack of resources. OBE failed because it is fundamentally unsuited to the nature of human beings. Children are not products to be defined and measured according to predetermined outcomes. Every child is a unique person with unknown potential. They are not raw material waiting to be turned into ideal citizens with state-sanctioned values and attitudes.

Outcomes Based Education is a misnomer. When you focus on the outcomes, and tailor what you teach in order to achieve those outcomes you are engaging, not in education, but in manipulation. Social engineering will never foster a love of learning, a delight in excellence or a response of creativity. It cannot develop a free citizenry. It is doomed to fail and, tragically, it dooms our children to fail too.

About three years ago I wept tears of relief and hope when I read that our education minister, Angie Motshekga, had repudiated OBE and all its acronymical spawn (C2005, NCS, RNCS). Along with thousands of teachers, I welcomed the promised return to proven methods and content. Two years later, we got CAPS.

Certainly the writers of the CAPS documents had commendable intentions; teachers were consulted and high standards were set. However, these standards are proving to be unattainable for the same reason that OBE could not attain them. CAPS stands for Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements. Like OBE, CAPS focusses on the ends, not the means. It measures children as if they are products coming off a factory line, instead of living, growing individuals.

One has only to listen to teachers to know that CAPS may prove to be the last straw. Teachers are so busy with assessments that they have no time to teach. They are expected to assess according to a schedule decreed by the province, whether or not students grasped the concepts in the assigned time. They lurch from one test to the next, conscious of gaps they have not filled. "Don't worry" say the CAPS writers, "they'll catch up next year when we revise", but they seldom do. The school day is longer than ever but children are learning less and less. Homelife is disrupted by endless homework and assignments. The family budget stretches to cover remediation and private tutoring. Dedicated teachers are giving up, exhausted and disillusioned. It is only a matter of time before the whole system implodes.

Middle-class parents, it is time to wake up. The crisis in education is no longer confined to the poor, dysfunctional schools "out there". Cracks are showing in the model-C schools where teachers strive to maintain the standards of the past, working harder than ever to make an unworkable system work. Stress and strain make learning joyless. Our children are subjected to over-crowded classrooms, tiresome busy-work, "fill-in-the-blank" worksheets, and simplistic "text" books with little text but lots of cartoons. Their crowded hours leave no space for quiet reflection or free play – essential to assimilating knowledge and developing wisdom. Faced with such pressure, some kids burn out; some seek relief in the extra-mural program; others simply give up. Almost all are denied the kind of education that would equip them to live in freedom as capable, confident, discerning men and women.

Only when we abandon the flawed ideology of the outcomes based model, with its focus on the product instead of the process, can we provide education that nourishes the natural curiosity that every child possesses. We need education that is liberal in terms of rich, generous content, with a variety of great literature, classic and modern books, art and music of the highest quality, and exposure to the history and philosophy of many cultures. We need education that is liberating because it cultivates self-discipline, freeing children from debilitating habits of laziness, impulsiveness and carelessness. Parents need freedom to choose alternative educational models, teachers need freedom to teach and universities need freedom to set entrance examinations. What we don't need is more state regulation, more state meddling or more state spending on the same model of education.

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