

TWO DECADES OF CURRICULUM TRANSFORMATION: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT AND WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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INTRODUCTION

In this lecture, I will revisit the implementation of a new curriculum in South Africa's schooling system and provide a brief overview of why curriculum change is so complex and fraught with difficulties. I will argue that an important reason for the failure of curriculum implementation could be ascribed to a relative neglect by policymakers of "teacher landscapes" or the beliefs teachers have about teaching. I will argue that it "matters what teachers think and do" and if policymakers do not take account of this reality, successful curriculum implementation will remain a challenge.

The lecture is organised into three parts. First, I will explore why curriculum change has been so difficult with the introduction of a new curriculum in South Africa and why the intentions of the new curriculum were not realised in the classroom practices of teachers. For this first part, I rely heavily on my own published research I conducted earlier in my career. Second, I reflect on the purpose and role that education should be playing to transform society. Finally, I consider the implications of this first wave of curriculum reform in South Africa and what the future might hold by identifying a few preconditions for curriculum transformation in both the schooling and higher education sectors.

CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION AND TEACHERS' INITIAL STRUGGLES

Why is successful curriculum implementation on a large scale so difficult to achieve? This is a question that intrigued me for a number of years when I first arrived in academia. Curriculum reformers often think that they only need to produce a technically sound curriculum and announce it to the world and implementation will proceed smoothly. This assumption is even more dangerous when such a curriculum is intended for a society that has been systematically subjected to under development through racial policies for the majority of its citizens. Elmore (1999: 263) argues that an important reason why policies seldom permeate the classroom practices of teachers can be ascribed "to the mistaken belief held by curriculum reformers that good curriculum models would create their own demand".

He further posits that it is quite easy to propose how educational practice could look different but that there are very few examples of a critical mass of teachers engaging in such practices in schools. This further illustrates how difficult it is to put ideas into practice. Change efforts could be derailed by a myriad of factors, "making it essentially a highly risky endeavour" (Blignaut, 2007:49).

In addition, reformers lose sight of the unpredictability of educational change, which takes place in an environment that is “increasingly complex and turbulent”. If we add and consider the multidimensional nature of educational change it “underscores the complexity, difficulty, uncertainty and ambivalence that accompanies all change efforts and explains why policy has struggled for over a half century to be mirrored in the classroom practices of teachers” (Blignaut, 2007:50).

For many teachers, educational change is also a deeply personal and emotional experience. Hargreaves (2000) cautions against approaches to improvement and change that are overly rationalist and that presents a view of learning, teaching, leadership, and change that is excessively cognitive, calculative, managerial and stereotypically masculine in nature. He continues by arguing that the emotional dimension of educational change emphasises the need to avoid reform strategies that create conditions of hopelessness, and feelings of guilt and shame. Such emotional conditions in schooling reduce teachers’ sense of efficiency and their ability to provide quality education for students (Hargreaves as cited in Blignaut, 2009). Teaching and learning are not about knowledge and learning alone as Hargreaves (2000) so eloquently reminds us. Many teachers are deeply upset when they encounter reforms that tell them that the way they have taught for 15 or 20 years was “wrong”. Generally, teachers want to believe that they have performed well in the past and are hesitant to believe that their efforts have failed (Blignaut, 2007). The manner in which C2005 was promoted created a clear distinction between the old and new curriculum and was contrasted in a language of binaries. A further complication that curriculum reformers often lose sight of is that no teacher comes to the act of teaching as a blank slate and without prior ideas and beliefs about teaching. Before they come into teaching they themselves have spent twelve years behind school desks, observing others teaching them in what Lortie (1975) has called “an apprenticeship of observation”. In my research in three diverse schools on teachers’ understanding of curriculum policy, I pointed out how teachers’ views about what constitutes good teaching contradict curriculum policy and how its implementation deviates from the official policy (Blignaut, 2009). Fullan (1991) understands this reality and implores policy makers to start where teachers are. Teachers are historical beings and Cohen (1990) captures this succinctly when he observes that they:

...cannot simply shed their old ideas and practices like a shabby coat, and slip on something new...As they reach out to embrace or invent a new instruction, they reach out with their old professional selves, including all the ideas and practices therein (339).

It would be strange if that was not the case as practices have histories and that any change effort has to adequately take that reality into account. The fact that most teachers’ epistemologies in South Africa were shaped by a markedly different education system that embraced rote learning and uncritical pedagogical traditions was a complicating factor. The epistemological assumptions that underpinned Christian National Education and by extension Fundamental Pedagogics were diametrically opposite to those that informed C2005.

The contextual realities of schools were also largely ignored when a new curriculum was implemented. There is a persuasive body of literature that emphasises the importance of the

role that context plays in schooling as teaching does not take place in a vacuum, but is part of a unique context (Lortie, 1975; Bryk, Lee and Holland, 1993; Louis and Kruse, 1995). Each school functions in a different context that will impact differently on the teachers working in those diverse contexts (Blignaut, 2008). South Africa's schooling system is a bimodal one where one section serves the children of the affluent with relatively high school fees and another that caters for the vast majority of learners who struggle with even the most basic facilities and resources. With the implementation of the new curriculum there was a widely held view that teachers in disadvantaged schools have to be creative in mustering additional resources and inventing alternatives but without sufficient resources to sustain their efforts Vally (2003) observes was akin to providing teachers merely with a 'lamp and three wishes' (Blignaut,2008). Implementing a generic curriculum into such uneven conditions could only exacerbate inequalities, which were the hallmark of Apartheid education (Blignaut, 2009). A commitment to a vision of what should be has undermined the ability of policy to consider seriously what is. In short, the harsh inequalities and contextual realities of South African schools were overlooked (Blignaut, 2008). Policy makers should have adopted a theory of implementation that took the diversity of schools into account.

Probing ever deeper into the riddle of educational change Hargreaves (2000) reminds us that schools are characterised by incredible degrees of order, continuity and tradition, and remain impervious to much in the way of attempted change. He continues by saying that schools might be assailed by change but they are also places of great historical continuity. Hargreaves' depiction coalesces with Darling-Hammond's (2000: 642) portrayal of schools as having to cope simultaneously with "provocations to change and conservative forces to preserve tradition" (as cited in Blignaut, 2009).

The fact that the new curriculum's intentions were not reflected in the classroom practices of teachers cannot be solely blamed on them but rather a lack of capacity and support in the larger system. I agree with Huberman and Miles' (1984: 23) contention that "...large scale change bearing innovations lived or died by the amount and quality of assistance that their users received once the change process was underway". We know now that this kind of support was almost non-existent. Another important reason for the challenges that were experienced could also be explained by the lack of alignment between the school curriculum and teacher education in universities and colleges.

So what does this first attempt at curriculum reform in South Africa mean for future curriculum renewal in both the schooling system as well as at teacher education level but even more broadly at the level of higher education? There have been many criticisms levelled against the constructivist approach of teaching that was adopted and foregrounded in C2005, but I argue that that development was perhaps not the worst idea given the present juncture we find ourselves in, with the Fees Must Fall movement and students' insistence on the decolonisation of the curriculum in higher education. Whenever a curriculum has to change it cannot start from a blank slate but must take the previous effort at change seriously into consideration. So the Apartheid curriculum was premised on rote learning and memorisation and C2005 was completely the opposite privileging a constructivist approach. Any future change in the schooling system will be located somewhere between the two choices on this

continuum. In a Heraclitean sense we might say: “Into the same river no man can step twice”. Many critics have argued that constructivist teaching was not embraced by a critical mass of teachers, which is true, but what C2005 did succeed in doing was to put the idea of constructivism firmly in the public domain. Whether teachers embraced the approach or not it made them think and reflect about their teaching and classroom practices. The curriculum that reverted to a “back to basics” approach with CAPS is a temporary correction to give teachers a surer base and footing after extensive curriculum change. For the short and medium term, the status quo will probably remain, but considerations and thinking about curriculum development is an imperative of our times and will not go away. The introduction of a new curriculum in 1998 was a bold and courageous attempt by the state to bring about change and although that attempt was not successful because of a variety of reasons, it preceded any such effort in higher education. Today institutions of higher learning are precariously located right on the edge of the precipice. Events have surpassed them and they do not seem to have any choice but to seriously reconsider their curricula as students insist on the decolonisation of the curriculum. An important construct that was foregrounded in the school curriculum two decades ago, namely constructivism, becomes the starting point for deliberations about curriculum transformation in university.

Before we can consider any future curriculum for both the schooling system and higher education we have to ask ourselves what kind of society do we want to build as there is a direct relationship between a curriculum and the desired society? At the heart of curriculum decisions is a values question. Curriculum development has less to do with skill and neither is it about technique but it is all about virtue as William Reid (1992) points out. What is the purpose of education and what role should schools and universities be playing in a transforming society? The recent Fees Must Fall movement by students in higher education and calls for the decolonisation of the curriculum is a perfect opportunity to reflect on the existing curriculum in higher education in general and teacher education in particular. This window of opportunity or the timing of the introduction of a constructivist curriculum in 1998 was perhaps largely absent as it followed on a democratic election and euphoria about the creation of a “rainbow nation” after years of segregation. The economic and social benefits that the previously disenfranchised majority were expected to accrue have not been realised and we have seen the destabilisation of the social and political fabric of society through unprecedented service delivery protests in the last decade as the benefits of democracy were not forthcoming. Racism is an enduring problem that will require serious attention in any future transformation of the curriculum and I will return to this point later.

THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

I briefly return to the purpose of education in this section. Before I give an explication of the purpose of education it is important to consider what education can do and what it cannot do. There are two dominant views that either constrain or enable our role as social agents or subjects. One view is represented in reproduction theories that are premised on the idea that education can achieve nothing or either very little until the economic structures of society have changed as typically embodied in the seminal work of Bowles and Gintis (1976)

“Schooling in Capitalist America”. Although these insights catapulted our understanding of education and the role of structures powerfully forward, I always felt it was too pessimistic and deterministic. As someone who has dedicated 33 years of his professional life to the study of education, I always believed that education could do more although we must not overstate its role, as schools function within a larger socio-economic framework. The other view holds that education is a great leveller of opportunities and can change people’s lives around almost overnight. As educators our work is located somewhere in the nexus between these two divergent views.

The purpose of education is contested terrain and there are as many views as there are people (Blignaut, 2012:10) but two important functions of education according to Biesta (2013) have to do with socialisation and subjectification. Through socialisation the young are inducted into the mores and traditions of the existing society, in other words, to fit into existing social orders. Subjectification on the other hand has to do with the enhancement of human freedom and emancipation. An important purpose of education is to bring about autonomous individuals who can think for themselves and are able to make ethical judgements and decisions. The emancipatory interest for critical educators is crucial in their efforts to make visible what is hidden from those to whom their teaching effort is directed, hence the use of concepts like “demystification” and ideology critique. I agree with Waldo Emerson’s view that education should be as wide as humanity itself. Narrow and instrumental conceptions of education serve no one well (Blignaut, 2012:10). Universities and schools exert considerable influence in shaping society “...and thus bear a significant intergenerational responsibility” (Escrigas: 2016). Education institutions who see their role solely as imparting narrow skills and knowledge that prepare students only as part of the work force in a market economy negate the other important functions of education as contributing to the functioning of critical citizens in a democratic society. We should take heed of the British philosopher R.S. Peters (1966) words when he asserts that we should not ask what education is for but what it is. He continues by reminding us that to be educated is not having arrived at a destination but it is to travel with a different view. Through education and the curriculum, students should ask critical questions of society, e.g. whose interests are served by the curriculum as Apple (1990) so powerfully reminds us, whose narratives are included and whose narratives are excluded? A central task of education and the curriculum should be the cultivation of compassionate citizens who are deeply moved by a sense of justice and the creation of a more equal and humane society. The curriculum should strengthen students’ resolve and commitment to strive for a different social order other than the present preoccupation with individualism, and the promotion of capitalism and profitability. George Counts, the American social theorist posed this question as far back as 1932 when he provocatively asked “Dare the school build a new social order”? Given the nature of South Africa as one of the most unequal societies in the world and the perennial problem of racism there can be no doubt that any future curriculum should at least address these pressing issues. There is not a single week that goes by where incidences of racism and racist behaviour are not reported in the print and social media. A recent Weekend Post article (2016: 6) entitled: “New frank look at racism” argues that Port Elizabeth is the most divided city in South Africa where a group of concerned residents meet once a month to try and

address this social evil by also involving the church to counteract racism. As laudable as this effort is I argue that universities and schools are far better placed to address issues of racism, power, privilege, gender, patriarchy as they were historically created for teaching and learning. This is a moral responsibility that institutions of higher learning in general, and teacher education in particular, cannot avoid. I am firmly of the view that education institutions, both schools and higher education have not done enough in this area in addressing these pertinent issues in the nation's classrooms. Citizenship education where deliberative spaces are created for discussions about race and racism needs to happen at school level already since by the time these students reach university they have well developed ideas about race.

In a thought provoking article Zippin, Fataar and Brennan (2015) lament the over emphasis on the cognitive dimension in both the South African schooling system as well as in higher education and argue that the curriculum lacks a theory of the social. I agree with this depiction but extend this understanding and argue that the curriculum in South Africa lacks a theory of the political. We need to "make the pedagogical more political and the political more pedagogical" to borrow a phrase from Giroux (2004).

On the basis of the above arguments I make two propositions which in my view are inescapable for any future curriculum transformation project:

TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Race and racism have a long lineage which erupts at regular intervals and has become a dominant theme in the larger body politic of South African society. As I was preparing this lecture black girls at former white schools, one in Pretoria, one in Port Elizabeth, and one in Cape Town were embroiled in this phenomenon (Hyman, 2016). The Human Rights Commission fights an uphill battle to attend to the 10 000 racism complaints they receive annually. A partial explanation for the pervasiveness of racism could be ascribed to the complete inability to face up to this challenge in South African classrooms because of a variety of reasons. One reason is that educators generally prefer to avoid discomfort that this topic can cause within the classroom and another because South African students continuously insist that we should forget about the past and move on from the present. Such a view should take heed of the German social theorist Adorno's (cited in Kirsten: 1992) warning that a people without memory has no future. I argue that the curriculum through its content as well as the choice of pedagogies is one of the central vehicles that should be utilised to teach about race and racism. Identity and citizenship have not been settled, but is in the making in South Africa and it is through the curriculum that schools and universities should contribute in this area. Historically the curriculum in South Africa was used to advance racial iniquities and to socialise students into a particular worldview. Inversely, it could now be utilised to teach against racism and the enhancement of social cohesion. It is my contention that critical pedagogy can point the way in creating an alternative vision of society, one that takes the notion of justice and equality seriously. I agree with the postmodern educational theorist Gert Biesta (2013), who argues in his book "The beautiful risk of education" that through our

teaching we should “welcome the unwelcome, to give a place to inconvenient truths and difficult knowledge” (p.55). It is not the task of the teacher to make the learning process as smooth and as enjoyable as possible so that students leave as satisfied clients. Our teaching in public schools and in higher education should always be characterised by robust debate and dialogue and the purpose should always be to interrupt and disrupt common-sense understandings of the world. The approach I advocate is congruent with my understanding of education as a “risk” as Biesta (2013) also argues that education is the slow way, often the frustrating way and often the weak way because the aims of education can never be guaranteed or secured. “Critical pedagogy is ... one of the central means in the struggle for justice and liberation” (Biesta as cited by Tarlau, 372) and offers teachers tools to build a more equal society. As a starting point, my view is that humans can intervene in the world, and change it as they are not merely spectators. History does not simply march on as Paulo Freire (1970) so vividly points out that the human condition is “unfinished” and that the world is always in flux and in the making and that the future is undetermined. The view that as humans, we are not objects of history but subjects who can alter the course of events is a starting point for theorising about social transformation. A focus on only the present and the dominant and debilitating discourses of neo-liberal politics can be paralysing and prevent a focus on the future and stifle our imagination of what could be as Zygmunt Bauman points out that the only “real pessimism is quietism – falsely believing in not doing anything because nothing can be changed (Bauman cited in Giroux, 2004).

A focus on social justice is apposite in a society characterised by incredible levels of poverty and inequality as well as years of racial indoctrination and presents the best opportunity for striving for a more just and democratic future for all but more especially the youth. Maxine Greene puts it thus:

To teach for social justice is to teach for enhanced perception and imaginative explorations, for the recognition of social wrongs, of sufferings, of pestilences wherever and whenever they arise. It is to find models in literature and history of the indignant ones who have taken the side of the victims of pestilences, whatever their names or places of origin. It is to teach so that the young may be awakened to the joy of working for transformation in the smallest places, so that they may become healers and change their worlds (Zajda, 2010: p. xv).

Higher education institutions in general and Faculties of Education in particular should embrace a notion of pedagogy as articulated by Giroux (2016:2) ...”as a deeply civic, political and moral practice – that is, pedagogy as a practice of freedom.” Through our pedagogies the logic of racism should be challenged in our classrooms. I agree with Giroux (N.d.) that it is not sufficient for students to only understand the economic and political interests that shape and legitimate racist discourses but that they should also address the strong emotional investments they bring to such beliefs.

Students’ resistance in classrooms should be understood against Felman’s (cited in Giroux and Giroux, N.d.) observation that it is not so much about a lack of knowledge as it is about resistances to knowledge. Felman continues as follows on the productive nature of ignorance:

“...Ignorance is nothing other than a desire to ignore: ...It is not a simple lack of information but the incapacity – or the refusal – to acknowledge one’s own implication in the information”.

ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

Curriculum and pedagogical change will only succeed if we embrace new ways of viewing knowledge as well as accommodating multiple knowledge traditions in what Odora Hoppers (2016) calls a “pluralisation of knowledge”. Views of knowledge as discoverable, ahistorical, independent of time and place, objective, value-free, measurable, static and unchanging need to be supplemented with alternative conceptions of knowledge. If we abandon the notion that knowledge is objective and value-free and accept it as always provisional, incomplete and partial it paves the way for an “epistemological dialogue” between different ways of knowing. The enduring and dominant rational-scientific paradigm should be destabilised and should “shift from a focus on knowing to one on being” (Escrigas: 2016). We need a new “architecture of knowledge” that seriously considers other “intellectual contributions from diverse sources and worldviews” (Escrigas: 2016). Such a view of knowledge will enable a more democratic public sphere and enhance a more “activist sense of social responsibility” whilst breaking down the barriers between university-community partnerships. The long shadow and history of Positivist thinking which has its roots in Modernity and the Enlightenment, should be challenged and contested. As Odora-Hoppers (2016) points out, all knowledge traditions should have a place in the world “without duress”.

As I have indicated earlier we can never go back to where we were and that each preceding curriculum reform leaves its mark on the one that will succeed it. So we might yet again return to a more constructivist approach of teaching and learning in schools but as I indicated not in an ideal form as it will be a compromise between the old and the new. So in a strange way we might once more end where we first started in 1998. This is reminiscent of T.S. Elliot’s enduring words:

*We shall not cease from exploration.
And the end of our exploring.
Will be to arrive where we started.
And know the place for the first time.*

In universities in particular, it is not possible to teach students of the 21st century with transmission methods. Paulo Freire’s well-grounded critique of the “banking method” of education has been endlessly quoted over the years and resonates with W.B Yeats depiction that education is not about filling a bucket but about lighting a fire. If we consider knowledge as socially constructed as the British sociologist F.D. Young argues we open up new avenues for students to understand their world. As Fataar (2010:5) so insightfully illustrates when he quotes Moosa (2007):

*When knowledge becomes ours, we experience our human togetherness
through the act of imagination that enables us to share a common world*

and language over eons and centuries. It is the imagination that produces work which bears and invites re-readings, which motions to the future readings as well as contemporary ones, implies a shareable world and an endlessly flexible language.

No one form of knowledge can claim an elevated status above any other form or to put it in another way, no one has privileged access to truth. Viewing knowledge thus makes it plain that knowing is not exclusively cognitive, but is created, enacted and embodied as argued by many scholars (Dall’Alba, 2004; 2005; Schön, 1983). Once this step has been accomplished where conventional notions of knowledge transfer or acquisition has been questioned it paves the way for embracing other pedagogies that are less hierarchical. I want to insert a caveat here: The constructivist approach to knowledge I argue for is not an ideal type or in a crude form where the teacher is banished to the margins of the classroom but one where the teacher has much to offer in the dialogical process of knowledge construction. Such an approach will coexist with other approaches. Less hierarchical approaches are better suited to confront some of the pressing crises of the 21st century like peaceful co-existence, poverty, global inequality, pandemics and climate change and specifically racism as alluded to earlier. As teachers and academics we have not done enough to prepare the young for the coming and changing world in which they will be living. Education is always a preparation for the future and the young as Hannah Arendt (1963:196) so eloquently points out:

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hand their chance of making something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.

CONCLUSION

The curriculum as an instrument of social change that should drive education in both the schooling sector as well as in higher education is one that will enable our students to become critical travellers through the world. The image of the teacher we should be educating is one who is a social activist, one who not only will understand his society and the world but one, who will actively intervene to change the world. The curriculum I am arguing for is not a neutral and technical one, but one that is decidedly political in nature as education is never neutral.

We live in dark and uncertain times but with the tension that is so palpably present at this time and place, there is also hope as it presents us with an opportunity to rise to the occasion as intellectuals and contribute to debates around alternative curricula. It is our obligation to search for alternatives because alternatives are not given they are imagined. There has never been a more opportune time in our history than right now. What we need more than ever before in South Africa is what the Greeks call a “metanoia”, a complete about-turn or change

of heart, literally a spiritual conversion, a new way of seeing and perceiving. We need new frameworks of thinking as the old ones have become moribund and a new grammar to describe the world we live in.

We have come a long way in South Africa where the first two decades have been dedicated to reconciliation and nation-building but if we do not transform the curriculum and education in meaningful ways, the dream of a non-racial and just society will remain an elusive ideal.

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I have relied extensively on my three publications of 2007, 2008 and 2009 in writing the first part of the paper where I deal with teachers' initial struggles with the curriculum.

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