

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

SUMMARY

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 factor why implementation has been so spectacularly unsuccessful can be ascribed to an almost 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 problematic.

The lecture is divided 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 mirrored in the classroom practices of teachers. Second, I reflect on the role that education should be playing in a transforming society. Here I propose that we should move away from narrow and instrumental conceptions of education and should embrace a vision of education that will cultivate critical students and citizens. I further argue that any future curriculum cannot escape the central question of what kind of society we want to build in South Africa. 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 such curriculum transformation, in both the schooling sector and higher education. Central to the focus of such a future curriculum, I argue that educators in both the schooling sector as well as in university have the historical task to teach for social justice after years of Apartheid indoctrination but more importantly the fact that South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world. The recent Fees Must Fall movement throughout the higher education sector makes this task even more urgent.

Finally, I argue that to bring about meaningful and lasting change through the curriculum we need to embrace supplementary and alternative conceptions of knowledge since any curriculum essentially is about knowledge. Notions of knowledge as discoverable, objective, value-free, ahistorical and independent of time and place need to be located alongside other knowledge traditions, notably knowledge as a social construction, amongst others. The heavy influence that Posivist thinking has exerted over academia for centuries need to be challenged, and interrogated as we need a far more balanced and nuanced view of knowledge.

The task of renewing the curriculum in both the schooling and university sectors present this generation of teachers and academics with an ideal opportunity to contribute to this important national task. If we fail, the notion of a truly non-racial and just society will remain elusive.