

# One Size Fits All: Models of Education, Historical and Contextual Issues within South Africa

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**Abstract:** *One size fits all is about context and the history of developing and implementing curriculum initiatives within South Africa (SA). Both historical and contextual issues have been stressed. It is speculated that many teachers are unaware of how destructive Christian National Education (CNE) was and the negative influence it still has on educational reform today. This paper examines why educators rely on imported models [For the purpose of this paper a 'model' will refer to any educational programme that has been adopted from another country or province in South Africa] to improve their teaching, despite the fact that most attempts to innovate have had more of a negative than a positive impact on learning and teaching in the classroom. The premise of this paper is based on the assumption that by importing models from other countries to improve the quality of teaching, context is ignored. It is contended that context is crucial to any form of educational reform. Importing someone else's reform agenda will not improve the quality of learning and teaching in the classroom. Assuming that models developed in other countries can simply be transferred to SA, even if they have been modified, is naive. The fact is that only through understanding all the needs in SA can anyone attempt to understand such issues that are implicitly embedded into the social, economic, political and historic fabric in SA today. For example, 63% of young children in SA suffer from severe poverty and 78% cannot read for meaning. When all these statistics are tallied, it is no wonder SA performs so poorly when bench marked against other countries in the world. Poverty and poor education will only serve to exacerbate the already high levels of crime in SA. Historically, the reason for this situation is directly attributed to a crass, and deliberately constructed system of education instituted by the National government, Christian National Education (CNE). This was the mechanism that continued to develop and consolidate Apartheid until democracy in 1994. After the release of Nelson Mandela, Outcomes Based Education (OBE) replaced CNE. Outcomes Based Education was epistemologically grounded in social constructivism. Owing to political pressure, there was a necessity to deliver a new curriculum that would redress the wrongs of the past. A 'quick fix' was needed, hence the adoption of imported models from first world countries. After 12 years it finally became apparent that there was a massive 'misfit' as OBE totally ignored the SA context. Drawing on the historical synopsis, and identifying assumptions and crucial concepts that support change, rather than negate it, makes it possible to understand why OBE was unsuccessful, and to this end, why further attempts to import models will also be ineffective. Finally, hope for the future lies in a wholly SA model that is presently being scaled up to macro level. The National Education Collaborative Trust (NECT) is sponsoring a unique SA model that takes cognizance of contextual issues. It is postulated that the process by which the curriculum is implemented, will ultimately bring about authentic change to education in SA.*

**Keywords:** South Africa, Education, Teaching, Learning, Outcomes education, Context, Epistemology

## 1. Introduction

It is difficult to accept that even after the failure of OBE and the destructive after effects, thereof, those responsible for education both at a micro<sup>1</sup> and macro<sup>2</sup> level continue to rely on imported models of education for improving the quality of teaching and learning in South African schools. The purpose of this paper, therefore, will be to acquire some form of insight as to why schools in SA continue to use imported education models, especially in Maths and English, to attempt to improve the quality of teaching. Such models, it will be argued, will not in any way improve the quality of teaching. Therefore, they should not be seen as a panacea to resolve the educational crises that face all schools in SA today<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, there is little doubt that Numeracy and Literacy are the building blocks for any form of further learning. Children, on completing the Foundation Phase of school have to read to learn rather than learn to read (Spull, 2017). If there is no foundation for future learning and the basics are not fully in place in the early years of a child's cognitive development, then it is reasonable to assume that if children are our hope for the future, something urgently

needs to be done to rescue the children of tomorrow (DGMT, 2015).

## 2. The Facts

According to the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), South Africa ranked second last out of 48 countries (Spull, 2013). The Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) that focused on 9 and 10 year olds in 50 countries, placed South Africa last. Additionally, PIRLS undertakes this study every 5 years to track progress. The results revealed that South Africa had made no progress since the last study. These figures serve to highlight the fact that if SA does not have some form of radical intervention in terms of literacy and numeracy, education in the poor rural areas will collapse, if it has not already. South Africa's pupils' reading ability, according to Kahn (2017), is in a severe state of crisis, with 78% children who cannot read for meaning. In 2011 this figure dropped to 72%. There is no doubt that the essential early learning years are from age 3, when the child is most receptive to learning. Two thirds of children under 6 years in South Africa are still not receiving the crucial services they need during the most important period of their development (South African Early Childhood Review, 2016). The findings of this review also indicate that about 3 969 000 (63%) of young children live in poverty and that this has an enormous impact on aspects such as health and physical, cognitive and emotional development. The review also defines that the period from conception to age

<sup>1</sup> Micro – single or clusters of schools.

<sup>2</sup> Macro – development at provincial or National level.

<sup>3</sup> 'Imported', education models from other countries and South Africa, that ignore context.

<sup>3</sup> All schools implies; state, 'model c' and private.

six is crucial because the brain is still developing. With the rising levels of poverty and lack of food, it is not surprising that desperate people turn to crime. Goujon (2015) confirms from a study she undertook in 2010 that “education has a statistically significant effect on crime” (p1). She further claims that 8 billion dollars are spent in South Africa every year on public order and safety. She reasons that the after effects of apartheid created a polarized society. However, “the probability of committing crimes, including vandalism, threat, assault, decreased with years of education” (p3). Therefore, it can be deduced that the cycle of crime and poverty will continue. The hope for the future lies largely in education.

### 3. A Brief Historical Synopsis

In retrospect, with the new democracy in 1994, there was a sense of urgency to redress the damage that NCE (The driving force behind Apartheid, for over 40 years) had created. According to King and van den Berg (1991) the majority of black South Africans were exposed to a fundamental, linear and secretive curriculum that was developed to totally disempower the poor and placed the curriculum out of the teachers’ reach. Teachers of all races were only to administer a set of syllabuses handed down from South African educational ‘experts’. Under no circumstances were teachers permitted to engage in the development of educational material<sup>4</sup>.

There can be no denying that the sooner the NCE departed, the better. Notwithstanding, there was enormous pressure to radically change the existing curriculum, there was little time to implement a totally different form of National Curriculum. Instead of an introspective view of South African needs and developing an authentic South African Curriculum for the entire population, which would take time, the Department of Education (DoE) under extreme political pressure, made the fatal decision of ‘adopting’ a curriculum based on social constructivism from; Scotland, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and America. Be that as it may, the introduction of Outcomes Based Education (OBE)<sup>5</sup> was launched by the then Minister of Education - Sibusiso Bengu in 2005. It was hastily planned, as the date of implementation was not negotiable. Many national workshops were conducted. Most of these, however, served only to confuse an already perplexed audience. Although the intentions of OBE were admirable in theory, in practice they failed to such an extent that they totally negated the very principles of redressing such issues as equity and equality. Evidence from The Status Report for Minister of Education (1999) further confirms that the system was not ready for change:

Education delivery has proceeded while the apparatus of new educational administration and

governance has been under construction. Things have gone badly wrong in some provinces. In particular, suspensions or changes in top leadership, and crucial delays in appointments of key managers, have carried severe consequences (p. 3).

Jansen (2000) believes that OBE was most effective in further polarizing well-resourced schools from badly resourced schools. The irony is that OBE did more to entrench white privilege than CNE. Added to this, even ‘curriculum experts’ in South Africa had no real understanding of the purpose and nature of OBE. There was, according to Jansen, also good representation of foreign ‘observers’ from Scotland and Australia to ensure OBE was implemented. To further exacerbate this chaotic scene, ‘experts’ from different countries such as Spady from America were invited to deliver a whole series of lectures in various provinces in South Africa. The theory underpinning the work of Spady (1997) was rooted in mastery theory that was not aligned to OBE in that it drew from an objective epistemology. Many teachers clearly believed that they were teaching OBE, but in actual fact they were just teaching the same way they had taught for many years. One of the fundamental reasons third world countries fail in their endeavors to bring about improvement in education is because they adopt ideas from western countries (Mark, Epstein, Kirsten, Yenthias, 2012). Curriculum models are extremely expensive, and are textbook driven with little incentive for teachers to change the way they teach. Elmore (1996) summarized curriculum models as:

The complex process by which local curricular decisions get made, the entrenched and institutionalized political and commercial relationships that support existing textbook - driven curricular, the weak incentives operating on teachers to change their practices in their daily work routines, and the extraordinary costs of making large-scale, long-standing changes of a fundamental kind in how knowledge is constructed in classrooms (p.15).

Jansen (1999), who many educators consider to be the Guru of Curriculum in South Africa, referred to OBE as ‘an anachronistic albatross’. It lasted 12 years. In one of his most renowned articles, Jansen listed 10 reasons why OBE would fail. Predictably, every one of Jansen’s insights was correct. OBE was revised several years later. The lack of thought given to issues such as ‘change’, is not simply a linear concept that can be dropped into any system, especially in education. Implementation, evaluation and lack of understanding of the South African context to mention just a few, are the main reasons as to why it ultimately failed. The Revised National Curriculum Statement, (RNCS)<sup>6</sup> was intended to simplify the jargon of OBE, make it less bureaucratic and easier to understand. Be that as it may, by simply taking out the jargon of OBE left RNCS fundamentally flawed, as the underpinning knowledge base no longer exists. This helps us to understand why there is

<sup>4</sup>The main reason why teachers today, find it so difficult to embrace educational change

<sup>5</sup>The introduction of OBE did more damage than good. With a lack of quality teachers and a totally different form of epistemology, South Africans were further polarized. The rich well-resourced schools did well and the poorly resourced schools continued to struggle.

<sup>6</sup>RNCS is now referred to as CAPS (Curriculum, Assessment, Policy, Statement)

such a mismatch between teaching and assessment. Inasmuch as RNCS has no authentic foundation and is supposedly easier to understand and implement, it is very much the 'same of old', traditional teaching. CNE was based on a traditional, linear, scientific, epistemology. Teaching methods included transfer of learning from teacher to child, and assessment was based on content, with little emphasis on skills such as critical thinking. (Cohen, 1988; Cohen & Spillane, 1992; Freire; Lockheed & Verspoor, 1991; Prawat, 1992). Outcomes Based Education was grounded on a very different epistemology – social constructivism. Teaching strategies included facilitation, discussion and co-operative learning (not group work). The epistemology is based on the premise that individuals come to understand knowledge in their own way through social constructivism. Such a process requires highly skilled quality teachers who have a clear understanding of the way knowledge is created ((Hill, 2002); (Jordan, Carlile & Stack (2008)). There is, therefore, a substantial schism between teaching and assessment in that it is impossible to teach from a traditional paradigm and assess from a social constructive paradigm.

#### 4. Assumptions

It is now possible to comprehend the reasons why teachers often rely on imported models to improve their teaching. It is taken for granted that teachers can develop their own curriculum be it for a single subject or whole school curriculum. However, drawing on the historical synopsis, it is apparent that CNE was developed deliberately to disempower the majority of black people in South Africa. An implicit assumption is that underprivileged teachers were the most affected during the apartheid years. Inasmuch as this cannot be denied, teachers in the better-resourced schools (private and former 'model C schools') were also restricted from any form of discourse. Their job was simply to deliver a syllabus. It has been argued that the advent of OBE did even more damage to education than CNE. It was a top down approach and strictly reserved only for a minority of white people. Ironically, for this reason many educators from the poorer black schools perceived white education to be superior, and that the best way to enforce the new curriculum was to use an authoritarian approach based on power and control. Outcomes Based Education therefore became nothing more than an autocratic educational system, very similar to CNE.

To accept the premise that an imported model will inevitably respond to context is ignorant. Learning portability, programmed learning, imported models for Maths and English and Outcomes Based Education (OBE) are all good examples of adoption that have failed in SA. Attempts to bring about educational change in SA can be likened to what Fullan (2000) calls the 'adoption era' (p.6). He describes how reform initiatives by the United States government in the 1950s through to the 1960s to improve Maths and Science were ineffective because little attention was paid to contextual issues. The goal for reform was to get innovation 'out there' by flooding the system with external ideas to bring about desired improvements. Hitherto, for some inexplicable reason, South Africa continues to adopt or borrow Maths and English models from all over the world. Such a notion clearly ignores two major underpinning

implicit assumptions. Firstly, change is complex and not something that can simply be dropped into a learning environment. It is not a linear concept that is planable, predictable and governable (Muller, 1994). Popkewitz (1984) contests that development seen from this perspective assumes a particular relationship between knowledge and power, and between expertise and politics. Secondly, an imported model that has been developed externally, no matter how much it is adjusted to compensate for lack of context will fail because it will not respond to the unique needs of SA. As Fullan (2000) quite rightly assumes, you cannot use someone else's reform agenda to bring about change. To this end, teachers often defend their decisions for adoption of models by assuming that taking 'pieces' from other models and putting them together like a puzzle will inevitably ensure that context is taken into account. This notion is misleading for the following reasons: Books do not assist or change teaching pedagogy, and are only a break down of the syllabus to be used in different Grades. Textbooks or models cannot bring about reform. In order for this to happen will depend on quality teachers using the books correctly, according to the theory that underpins the textbook. Moreover, most of the models have copyright protection and cannot be copied or used to develop another product without the author's permission. Inasmuch as the theory for CAPS is supposedly social constructivism, it has been argued that the type of pedagogy that exists in schools today will not support this form of epistemology. Some teachers are coerced to use models that they know nothing about, even in extremely well resourced schools. Only quality teachers can bring about quality learning. Learning should not be based on imported models, but on how the teacher excites and motivates children to learn. However, where will these teachers come from? Especially when Rust and Dalin (1990)<sup>7</sup> claim there has been little change in the way teachers are educated and in the way they teach. They further acknowledge that this is mainly true for teachers of disadvantaged children, who are poor and live in rural areas. Quality teachers focus on 'how' subjects are taught and not so much on the content, or 'what' is taught. After all, it is more important that children learn skills and understand concepts rather than rush through a syllabus that it is assumed will only result in a superficial understanding of the topic. Motshekga (2017 as cited in Kahn, 2017) admits there is a dire shortage of good Maths teachers. To this end, it is conjectured that models like 'Singapore Maths' are appealing in that they offer 'quick fixes'. Investing in models from other countries implies that South Africa does not have the expertise or time to develop a curriculum that will address the social injustices of the past. To implement a curriculum of such magnitude is a huge task to undertake. As already stated, the values embedded in OBE were noble. However, if more time had been taken to research the huge discrepancies between the best resourced and the worst resourced schools, and upgrade fundamental systems (basic facilities, buildings, water, electricity teacher education, support, text books and above all good nourishment for all children) before the inception of OBE, then perhaps it could have succeeded. Jansen (2000) refers to this period (the

<sup>7</sup> Again, although these authors live in America, there research is mainly focuses on the developing world and therefore useful for this study

switch from NCE to OBE) as the window of opportunity. However, to simply adopt educational models (Macro or Micro) from other countries assumes South African educators and teachers know nothing about their own country and cannot design, develop, implement and evaluate a curriculum for South Africa. This is a false assumption. Inasmuch as teachers have to implement the curriculum, they must be considered the most crucial stakeholders. To exclude teachers from curriculum issues makes no sense. It is strongly conjectured that by including teachers in curriculum discourse would help with implementation issues (as it has already been established they are the most experienced when it comes to what will work or not work in a classroom setting). Furthermore, the inclusion of teachers would make the process of implementation more transparent.

In discussion with M. Metcalfe (personal communication, Metcalfe, May 5, 2017) The National Education Collaborative, Trust (NECT) is presently funding an exciting curriculum development programme in Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN) to improve learning outcomes (PILO). The driving force behind PILO is *Jika iMfundo*, which when translated to English means "What I do matters", an excellent example of teachers making a difference. The project which is being piloted at the moment is to upgrade curriculum coverage (focusing more on quality than content) in KZN, and presently involves 1 200 schools. If successful, it will then be 'scaled-up' and introduced into other provinces. This initiative is already making a genuine difference to education in South African rural communities.

Metcalfe argues that rural schools had extremely poor systems in place prior to the intervention by PILO, which made it difficult to implement any form of curriculum or professional development. This restricted any opportunity for authentic learning. Added to this, it was clearly evident that the after effects of apartheid and the prescriptive national curriculum had created the very opposite effect. Instead of improving issues of equity and equality in education and leveling the playing field, educational changes only accelerated inequality.

Most importantly, our growing understanding of achieving change in the education system can be applied to other 'objects of change'. For policy intentions to 'land' and be received on the uneven and unequal contours of contextual realities so that we accelerate the reduction of gross educational inequality, our understanding of what drives and institutionalizes change must be deepened (Metcalfe, 2018).

Therefore the first task that had to be dealt with was to grow teachers professionally, by developing more coherent structures that would impact directly in the classroom. Furthermore, structures must be systematic and consistent, and be underwritten by clear policy. Change cannot just happen in a vacuum and to this end, Metcalfe (2018) believes existing behavior cannot simply change by 'magical thinking'. Rather, PILO helps in policy implementation by providing tools for change. Inasmuch as teachers' attitudes are deeply embedded in values, a set of tools that may come in the form of guidelines and reference books will not bring

about change (Popkewitz, 1984). For this to happen there must be a strong understanding and belief in the purpose and nature of change. Change requires new knowledge and skills, and the ability to understand why it is necessary. Metcalfe believes that to achieve such fundamental change will require a system-wide capacity for change. This again is supported by Popkewitz, who says that change, if it sustainable must be supported by all stakeholders. The Programme to Improve Learning Outcomes (PILO) has recognised this point, and believe that sustainability is supported by key stakeholders who are passionate about education and truly wish to make a difference. To sustain ongoing change also requires a system to monitor and track the changes made so to ensure that teachers and policy implementers remain on track and can also accelerates at pace when necessary. Successful change requires both time and pressure. The balance between these two elements is vital. Outcomes Based Education is a good example of political pressure to change a radically flawed system far too quickly. This is an essential factor to achieving improvements in learning outcomes. Metcalfe, drawing on the work from Elmore (2000; 2005; 2010) ascertains that process of change is two-fold; firstly it must be some form of internal accountability, such as clarity of roles, working within a team, and expectations. Secondly, reciprocal accountability, which involves giving support to teachers so that change can happen. Inasmuch as teaching and learning takes place in schools, this should be the home for professional growth and development. In this way, any form of change will always remain pertinent to schools and the community they serve. Once systems are developed continuous systematic support is crucial for sustainability. Peurach (2011) states that positive outcomes will never be realized by making insignificant and uncoordinated changes. He argues that systematic support is required for change to ultimately succeed. He says that issues arising must be understood as within a system, and not by tweaking one problem at a time.

According to Metcalfe (2018) any form of curriculum design or intervention has to be thoroughly costed to take account of school resources and contextual issues. She argues that pilot trials do not work and only where necessary, financial cuts made – even if this meant further appraisal. The Programme for Improving Learning Outcomes on outset was intended to be cost-effective, scalable and replicable. Metcalfe's final caution regarding implementing large-scale change is to focus on the main design issues and to prevent 'curriculum fatigue' by remaining steadfast in their intentions of the purpose of change. For many involved in PILO and for *Jika iMfundo*, their message was 'we are improving learning outcomes by improving curriculum coverage.' There is no doubt *Jika iMfundo* strongly believes, and is deeply committed to making a difference.

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to put forward a strong case that 'borrowing' or adopting models of education from other countries will not work in SA. Such models, it has been contested, could be counter productive. For example, instead of addressing serious issues of equity and equality, OBE

further polarized the wealthy from the poor. Despite this, SA educators continue to import models. This, I believe is based on two driving factors. Firstly, the after effects of CNE are still very evident today, and teachers are either uncertain or uncomfortable to make changes. Therefore, models especially in Maths and English are better left to experts to develop. This stance, it has been argued will not bring about any fundamental change. For this to happen the emphasis should switch from importing models, to professional growth and development in schools. Schools also need to be aware that ultimately they should be held accountable to parents and children for not thoroughly investigating a model before it is implemented. It is extremely costly to implement models and children become little more than experiments. Secondly, context and the myriad of nuances such as the complexity of change are usually taken for granted. The assumption that once a new curriculum is designed it just has to be 'dropped' into a learning environment and teaching and learning will improve is not logical. The lack of any form of evaluation is a serious concern, and many other contextual issues are basically ignored. Jika iMfundo, however, has taken into account all the above elements and more, to bring about authentic change, even within the complexity of a South African setting as it is continually evaluated through PILO.

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