The Politics of Curriculum Review and Revision in South Africa

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This paper is about the politics surrounding the review and revision of C2005 and creation of the Revised National Curriculum Statement which became policy in 2002. C2005 and the Revised National Curriculum Statement were two steps in the process of curriculum revision undertaken since 1994. Curriculum revision was undertaken in three main stages or waves: the first involved the ‘cleansing’ of the curriculum of its racist and sexist elements in the immediate aftermath of the election. The second involved the implementation of outcomes-based education through C2005. And the third involved the review and revision of C2005 in the light of recommendations made by a Ministerial Review Committee appointed in 2000 (Jansen, 1999; Cross, 2002; Chisholm, 2003). This Review Committee recommended a major revision of the curriculum in order to make it more understandable in the classroom. The paper deals with these two main stages: the Report of the Review Committee (2000) and the creation of the Revised National Curriculum Statement (2000 – 2002).

I must at the outset state my relationship to these changes and the position from which this paper is presented. I was chair of the Committee to review C2005 and I also headed the processes of revision and creation of the RNCS. I had a direct role in the process I am describing. As such, I am reflecting on the experience rather than presenting a paper based on the usual accoutrements of research. I have also written several accounts of this experience and with each effort I try to develop more distance and greater understanding, each time confronting what were particularly difficult aspects of the process.

The first couple of papers I wrote all dealt in some way or another with the campaign of the religious right and grappled with Jansen’s approach to policy as symbol (Jansen, circa 2001; Chisholm, 2002, 2003). The religious campaign was particularly virulent and couched in a language reminiscent of the Cold War, darkest days of apartheid and American Bible belt. It came to a head with the release of the revised national curriculum statement for public comment. The Minister of Education diverted the heat of the attack from the curriculum to a policy on religion education for schools which has undergone a different process and is only now reaching some kind of conclusion but it is far from over. Apart from this campaign, the most striking thing, placed where I was, was the multiplicity of interests and influences that had an interest in the curriculum and that attempted to shape it. In trying to make sense of this combination of influence and non-influence, I argued that although there was a heterogeneity of influences, not all had an impact or were translated into curriculum outcomes. Indeed, the loudest and most strident voices, such as that of the Christian right and a homeschooling movement for a return to a religious curriculum, had little impact on the ultimate outcome.

What this paper does is try to come closer to those constituencies which did shape the curriculum, albeit in indirect ways. Both papers grapple with the question of ‘voice’ and the representation of voice. The first attempt conceptualised voice firstly in terms of the pervasiveness of the speaking voice as ‘capillaries of power’. It argues that multiple
voices had an influence on diverse, untold and minute aspects of the final phrasing of the curriculum in ways that are visible but will be hard to unravel. But it, secondly, also contested a literal approach to the understanding of voice and its influence: voice, pressure and positioning did not necessarily lead to the outcomes desired by the speakers. Thus, the loudness of the voice of the Christian right did not lead to the reassertion of Christian National Education. Claims to representing the majority of the population on the basis of faith did not carry social weight. Not all voices were thus ultimately represented equally in the curriculum. There was both representation and selection. Selection did occur on the basis of principles rooted in conceptions of South Africa as a diverse society in which the rights of all needed to be recognised. An approach to education about religion rather than education as a form of religious induction prevailed, as did an approach to history which emphasises historical skills and histories denied rather than a narrative of white progress. As such, there is a contradiction between voices and outcomes.

In national political processes such as curriculum making, voice is refracted through both the positioning of the voice and authority of who speaks. The authority of voice is derived from the positionality of the speaking voice. In addressing the authority and positionality of voice, the question of power is also critical: who exercises power, how and through which voice. The social power of the voice is critical. What the story of the Christian right demonstrated was the loss of social power of a conservative white minority seeking to reassert itself by ideological means. This paper argues that it is these voices with social power linked to the new state, amongst the babel of voices spoken and making an impact on the curriculum, that gave the Revised National Curriculum Statement its main discursive features: a rights-oriented, outcomes-based curriculum. Whereas many voices created the phrasing, a few voices with social power constructed the overall score.

Foucaultian notions of power, authority and voice as dispersed and heterogeneous informed my first attempts to reflect on the making of the Revised National Curriculum Statements. This attempt is informed more deeply by the understanding that even as many voices speak, some are dominant. While acknowledging power as a dispersed phenomenon, it is also necessary to recognise that there are dominant players. These, the paper argues, are the African National Congress inside and outside government, the teacher unions (including the South African Democratic Teachers Union, National Association of Professional Teachers Organisations in South Africa and the Suid Afrikaanse Onderwysers Unie) and university-based intellectuals. The positions they took on key issues and how they shaped the broad, rather than specific, curriculum outcomes are highlighted. My concern here is with philosophies and approaches to education rather than the specifics of learning areas.

Here too, however, simplistic notions have no place. Numbers and physical representation are not equivalent to voice and influence. Just as the physical loudness
of the voice may not guarantee selection and representation in the curriculum, so the absence of physical presence guarantees neither selection nor omission of the voice. Here the question of South Africa’s ‘stakeholder driven politics’ becomes significant. Throughout the 1980s and much of the 1990s, in the waning days of apartheid and the forging of the new democratic state, policy was formed by ‘stakeholders’. Several writers have drawn attention to the complexity of the stakeholder ‘voice’: as a form of representative democracy, it privileged the voices of the socially powerful: business and labour, the outgoing government, men rather than women (Unterhalter, 1998). ANC education policy in the immediate post-apartheid period, when the new state was fragile and under pressure, was accordingly also developed in terms of an overarching approach pioneered by business and labour (Chisholm and Fuller, 1996). The National Qualifications Framework, which gave birth to outcomes-based education and Curriculum 2005, was the educational expression of this social alliance.

This paper argues that a new set of social forces, more firmly based in education, shaped the revision of Curriculum 2005. Before examining these three constituencies and their influence, it is important to outline briefly the elements of Curriculum 2005 as implemented from 1997, the critique of the Report of the Review Committee (presented in 2000) and the results.

Curriculum 2005 is a form of outcomes-based education. Outcomes-based education has meant different things to different people in theory and in practice (Hargreaves and Moore, 2000; Harley et al, 2000). As the guiding philosophy of C2005 in 1997 it was, for its initiators, the pedagogical route out of apartheid education. In its emphasis on results and success, on outcomes and their possibility of achievement by all at different paces and times rather than on a subject-bound, content-laden curriculum, it constituted the decisive break with all that was limiting and stultifying and in the content and pedagogy of education. OBE and C2005 provided a broad framework for the development of an alternative to apartheid education that was open, non-prescriptive and reliant on teachers creating their own learning programmes and learning support materials (DOE, 1997a, b and n.d.)

The Report of the Ministerial Committee established to review the curriculum in 2000 gave a wide-ranging critique of the curriculum. It argued that while there was overwhelming support for the principles of outcomes-based education and Curriculum 2005, which had generated a new focus on teaching and learning, implementation has been confounded by:

- a skewed curriculum structure and design
- lack of alignment between curriculum and assessment policy
- inadequate orientation, training and development of teachers
- learning support materials that are variable in quality, often unavailable and not sufficiently used in classrooms
- policy overload and limited transfer of learning into classrooms
shortages of personnel and resources to implement and support C2005
• inadequate recognition of curriculum as the core business of education departments.

All these areas were seen as requiring attention. Their weaknesses were underpinned by and required adequate resourcing, manageable time-frames for implementation and regular monitoring and review.

In order to address these issues the Review Committee proposed the introduction of a revised curriculum structure supported by changes in teacher orientation and training, learning support materials and the organisation, resourcing and staffing of curriculum structures and functions in national and provincial education departments. Specifically, it recommended a smaller number of learning areas, including the reintroduction of history, the development of a Revised National Curriculum Statement which would promote conceptual coherence, have a clear structure and be written in clear language, and design and promote ‘the values of a society striving towards social justice, equity and development through the development of creative, critical and problem-solving individuals’ (Chisholm et al, 2000, viii) The Revised National Curriculum Statement was duly produced and became policy early in 2002. The players shaping the process of review and revision and the politics attendant on this process is the subject of this paper.

African National Congress and C2005

The review of C2005 in 2000 was extremely controversial within the ANC. Most of the actors in the drama were all ANC-linked and so these represented divisions over directions and who gave direction. The key players were the Minister of Education, South African Democratic Teachers Union, Departments of Education and Cabinet. The main issue here was outcomes-based education, its nature, manifestation in C2005 and whether it ought to be revised or not.

An ANC Minister, Kader Asmal, had called for the review and the Review Committee itself consisted of sympathisers and active members. But this Committee, in a major departure from existing practice, was not representative of constituencies and so did not include the teacher unions as unions, although there were several people on the Review Committee who were themselves union members. The relative independence of the Review Committee members from the ANC meant that the Report of the Review Committee was also independent from the views and approaches dominant within the bureaucracy and teacher unions.

The calling of the Review and publication of the Report precipitated a major crisis within the ANC and a key constituency, the teachers union, within it. The conflict played out as a conflict between the Minister of Education and teacher unions. On the one hand, the Minister presented the proposed revisions as necessary in the light of
existing inequalities and the realities of under-resourced schools which had large classes and teachers largely untrained in learner-centred education and making their own curricula. The Report and the Minister received widespread tacit and public support for an unpopular move. But the teacher unions and many departmental bureaucrats - footsoldiers of C2005, the people who had themselves created, identified with and implemented it - were hostile to the changes and presented them as an overturning of the legacy of the first post-apartheid Minister of Education and a return to the past.

The South African Democratic Teachers Union published research which echoed the findings of the Review Committee. But they took up the cudgels against the role given to experts, an apparent watering down of the fundamentals of outcomes-based education, and the recommendations for a simplified language, greater content in subjects such as mathematics and giving history a special place in schools. These were all seen as hostile to outcomes-based education. The common ground that was found between the Minister and the unions was outcomes-based education, the underlying philosophy of education. Although its interpretation remained contested, and a broader interpretation gradually took root, the result was that outcomes-based education remained a core element of the curriculum reform process. Whereas the Minister emphasised outcomes-based education as an active, learner-centred approach to learning, SADTU emphasised the new language that it introduced, the integrated character of knowledge, teachers’ roles as facilitators of learning and the importance of learning resources as opposed to textbooks. All these remained key features of the philosophy underpinning the curriculum.

Ultimately the matter of the recommendations of the Report was settled by a Cabinet decision that accepted the Report and its findings. It rejected those recommendations which called for a reduction of the vocational elements in the curriculum: the integration of science and technology into one learning area and economic and management sciences and life skills. These were highly symbolic recommendations and by reinforcing these, Cabinet simultaneously sent out two messages: first, its pragmatism on issues of educational reform and second, its alignment with symbols of modernity.

Once Cabinet had accepted the recommendations, revision could begin. It was here that the role of departmental bureaucrats who had presided over the initial introduction of Curriculum 2005 became critical. The press frequently presented the difficulties as being about differences of style and approach between the Minister and his Department. He had come in, brought in outsiders to the Department and rode roughshod over policies and unfinished work that they had a critical hand in bringing to fruition. Would they support or undermine the process? They had the power to do both. The Department is as complex a structure, however, as the ANC. And, like the ANC, it is also a hierarchical structure in which the ultimate authority resides with the top officials, in this case the Minister of Education, his Director-General and provincial
Ministers of Education. Here there is also a distinction between political and bureaucratic authority. In all instances the political authority takes precedence over the bureaucratic. In this complex architecture of authority and its impact on the curriculum, the political prevailed, but the bureaucratic also made its influence felt. This it did in one main way – the insistence on dilution of the influence of outsiders to the Department in the composition of the committees to revise the curriculum.

The composition of the committees established to produce the Revised National Curriculum Statement was highly contested. The Department made a public call for nominations. Once these were received, selections were made by the Ministerial Project Committee established by the Minister and Department of Education. They were constituted on the basis of the 50/50 ruling and made selections of the people to serve on the working groups on the basis of a ruling that half of every committee was to consist of departmental employees and half of ‘outsiders’ – curriculum developers based in schools, unions, NGOs, consultancies, teacher training institutions and universities. In addition, selections of the 150-strong team were made to ensure regional, racial and gender representivity and on the basis of subject specialism and experience in curriculum development and writing. Working groups were established for each learning area as well as for three cross-cutting areas: human rights and inclusivity, qualifications and implementation. Through the composition of the working group committees, the Department ensured that there was some continuity between the first and second versions of Curriculum 2005 and that the ‘outsiders’ did not recreate the curriculum from scratch. It is both possible and likely that either a less or more thorough revision and simplification would have occurred had the groups been composed differently.

The product of these working groups, the draft revised National Curriculum Statement, was also submitted to several professional and political processes: it was submitted on an ongoing basis to a Reference Group consisting of major educational constituencies, presented to the Council of (provincial) Education Ministers, the Heads of Education Departments, and senior departmental managers before it was released for public comment and revised. Once revised it was once again presented to Parliamentary committees, teacher unions and finally to Cabinet. In the process of presentation to the Reference Group and departmental structures, earlier tensions over outcomes-based education resurfaced. These were pushed to the background when the report was released for public comment and the battleground shifted to one between the ANC and the Christian Right over the values that informed the Revised National Curriculum Statement.

**Teacher Unions and Curriculum 2005**

Teacher unions play a powerful role in South African society. They are divided along lines determined historically. At an organisational level, the face of teacher unions has changed considerably since 1990, reflecting the changed socio-political landscape; the
nature of teacher-state relations has also changed. (Govender, 2003). The South African Democratic Teachers’ Union is by far the largest union, with some 210,235 members in 2002. The National Association of Professional Teachers Association (NAPTOSA) consists of some 95,988 members and the Suid Afrikaanse Onderwysers Unie (SAOU) of 41,315.

SADTU is the most powerful and closest to government. Borne in the years of anti-apartheid struggle, it defined itself in opposition to the existing racially-based professional associations as being concerned with issues wider than the narrow workplace and salary concerns of these associations. Many of its members were catapulted into leadership positions in the new national and provincial departments after 1994. The union thus has close personal and political ties with new departmental officials, although it often finds itself at odds with them over policy. This relative weakness is offset by a strong relationship with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). The current President of the Congress of South African Trade Unions comes from the South African Democratic Teachers’ Union, a sign of the diminished strength and role of the traditional mining and manufacturing unions and increased power and influence of the public sector unions. This association with COSATU has, in turn, propelled the union into taking a greater interest in workplace issues. Both NAPTOSA and SAOU, once hostile to unionism, have thawed in their attitudes to unionism and there is considerable cooperation between the unions.

All three union federations played a role in the formulation and implementation of Curriculum 2005 from 1997. Their exclusion from the Review Committee ‘marked a shift from the visible, stakeholder driven approach to democracy that had featured in the immediate post-apartheid years (Unterhalter, 1998; Kruss, 1998; Govender, 2003). For SADTU it represented a shift from ‘consultation to unilateralism’ (Govender, 2003). All three were included in the revision process. Whereas SADTU played a critical role in keeping the fundamentals of outcomes-based education on the agenda, NAPTOSA and SADTU were insistent on a workable curriculum in the classroom and NAPTOSA in particular played a substantial role in the working committees and galvanising members’ comment to revise the draft.

When the draft was released for public comment in October 2002, for a period of three months in July 2001, it provoked a storm of controversy. On the one hand, departmental and ministerial fax machines were jammed with petitions, letters and appeals from a religious constituency. On the other, teacher unions, universities, non-governmental organisations, government departments and other members of the public submitted comments which supported the overall direction of the revision, but made specific recommendations for improvement.

The Christian campaign consisted of an amalgam of a Christian organisation for homeschooling (Pestalozzi Trust), a Christian organisation for evangelising Africa
(Frontline Fellowship), a Christian political party (the African Christian Democratic Party) as well as the New National Party and other Christian groupings. The campaigners argued that the new policy violated their human rights and constitutional rights to freedom of religion (Chidester, 2002, p. 94). Common elements of the discourse were opposition to evolution in the curriculum, to the alleged values of “secular humanism” that informed the curriculum, “interfaith religion”, sexuality in the curriculum and exposure of their children to “pagan” faiths and cultural practices as well as the Africanist values that underpinned the history curriculum. A common demand was the right to “private conscience, private enterprise and family values”.

The discourse of the Christian opposition in South Africa mirrored that in the United States where “the sheer number and range of these protests by religious conservatives exceed those by all other groups”. (Apple, 2001, 111) For many of these religious groups, morality lies in the market. As soon as the state enters, morality departs. Faith in an inerrant scriptural authority underpins the belief that man is created by God. A feeling of persecution and victimisation accompanies its reaction to change. Many feel that the secular world has declared war on Christians. To be a Christian is to be persecuted. This claiming of victimhood is a powerful rhetorical device, enhancing legitimacy at the same time as it calls for redress. It is also linked to the feeling that Christian rights are being denied as they were in state bureaucratic socialist countries. This sense of being oppressed and yet being chosen to take the good fight into the world, is fundamental to these groups’ sense of themselves.

As Apple has so eloquently written on the subject, there is behind this a sense of loss – loss of faith, of imagined communities, of a vision of like-minded people who shared norms and values in which the Western tradition reigned supreme. Behind it is also an intense fear of the Other and of freedom. The world feels out of control. There is a horror of mixing. On the one side is purity. On the other is danger. The danger lies in public institutions, non-believers in Christ, women, people of colour, gays, lesbians, the poor, the dispossessed. There is a strong racial subtext as well as an intense anxiety about equality.

The intensity of the campaign in South Africa resulted in the Minister and Department of Education calling a Public Hearing on the Curriculum on the 12th November 2002. Various religious organisations, teacher unions and other stakeholders were invited to make presentations on the curriculum. Significantly all three teacher unions distanced themselves from the religious campaigners and what they represented. In this moment, the question was over the values in the curriculum and whether these provided a foundation for support or not. The effect of the campaign was to unify the different strands within the ANC and those loosely allied to it around the revised curriculum. It also served to unify the teacher unions around the way forward.
A middle ground was thus first found around outcomes-based education and then around a secular curriculum whose values were oriented to the achievement of a democratic and diverse South Africa.

**Universities and C2005**

University-based intellectuals participated in the process in different ways: as critics of the curriculum before it was reviewed, as members of the Committee to review the curriculum, as curriculum developers and as critics of the revised National Curriculum Statement. Key university-based intellectuals were both for and against outcomes-based education and Curriculum 2005 but on the whole the balance of opinion amongst university-based intellectuals was critical of Curriculum 2005. It is thus necessary to examine the role they played as critics and as participants in Curriculum 2005 and its revision.

The most influential critic of outcomes-based education and C2005 once it started to be implemented in 1997 was undoubtedly Jonathan Jansen. His paper, ‘Why OBE will Fail’ (1997/2001) 'created a considerable stir' (and) ‘became the focal point for an extended debate on Curriculum 2005 and OBE at universities and technikons, in provincial education departments, among NGOS, at workshops and conferences and seminars, etc.’ (Jansen, 1999, p. 10) In this period, as Jansen points out, the debate was much wider than that in the United States in that the primary criticism came not from fundamentalist Christians who objected to the liberal humanist values of the curriculum, but from academics who analysed its conservative ideological and philosophical assumptions ‘bathed in popular education discourse' (Jansen, 1999, p. 12), its ‘implementational contexts' and ‘equity consequences’. (ibid). Although the critics were not confined to intellectuals, they reached their high point in a Conference held by the Western Cape Education Department at the end of 1999, Jansen and Christie’s edited collected, *Changing Curriculum: Studies on Outcomes-based Education in South Africa* and Taylor and Vinjevold’s *Getting Learning Right: Report of the President’s Education Initiative* (1999). This report underscored the criticism that outcomes-based education was not working in classrooms.

In addition to these specifically curriculum critics, there were a growing number of critics of the National Qualifications Framework of which the curriculum framework was a part. These critics saw the dominant model of educational development in South Africa post-1994 as inspired by neo-liberal educational approaches which paid more homage to the needs of the economy uncritically conceived than to social justice. For
these, the main problem with Curriculum 2005 was its linkage to the National Qualifications Framework which introduced a complexity and narrowness of vision that had been absent in previous approaches to education. (Samson and Vally, 1996; Chisholm and Fuller, 1996).

Little wonder that the Minister of Education chose a substantial number of intellectuals to head the Review of Curriculum 2005. Some of these were associated with the public criticism, but others were not and were, rather, associated with the elaboration of Curriculum 2005. Both defenders and critics were represented on the Review Committee. They presented a united report arguing that outcomes-based education was not the issue but the design of the curriculum and aspects associated with its implementation: the teacher training, learning support materials, provincial support and time-frames.

In the process the Report subjected the curriculum to a critique based on the theory of knowledge which underpinned the curriculum and introduced concepts in its analysis of the critique which had not yet been public. The Report of the Review Committee struck a blow in attacking the constructivist theory of knowledge which underlay the curriculum: some of its members described it as being hostile to the poor insofar as it deprived the poor of knowledge which is taught in schools. This critique had been made before, but it had not yet been brought to bear on constructivism as official knowledge. (Muller and Taylor, 1995). This was a radical critique of the official ideology of learner-centredness, all the more dramatic for being made from within an officially-constituted body. The critique was not, however, a complete one, given the differing positions on the matter within the Review Committee as well as the constraint of official policy.

In part, the battle that ensued between the teacher unions and those who stood for this position in the ‘Review Committee’ was a battle over learner-centredness in theory and in practice. For the radical critics, who questioned the gap between theory and practice, the solution was greater attention to knowledge and conceptual formation amongst teachers and taught. Politically, the source for this was the Gramscian view that the poorest deserve the best and the best is not always to be found in the immediate environment but requires learning about the new and unknown in new and unknown ways introduced by the school. While learner-centredness may be a necessary tool to break down decades of learning habits formed to create uncritical and unthinking persons, it was argued that it was undermined in large under-resourced classes with poorly qualified teachers who were unconfident of their subject knowledge. Here the
emphasis needed to be not only on learner-centredness but also the introduction of new knowledge and concepts but also on the values of social justice and human rights. This was the view that ultimately prevailed as a result of contestations both amongst and between different proponents on the issue.

In addition to bringing to bear a new approach to the curriculum debate, the Report of the Review Committee was also unorthodox in so far as it did not seek stronger but weaker links with the overarching National Qualifications Framework. In seeking a curriculum solution for schools separate from the world of training, it broke the umbilical cord that had hitherto existed in all references to the apparently integrated worlds of 'education and training.' This Report was unequivocally about education and schools which were presented as needing distinct attention from the world of training, no matter how important this world is. The concerns could not be subordinated to the concerns of the economy and the industrial training: a general education required differed curricula and modalities from those in industry.

These were and continue to be highly controversial issues. The Report of the Review Committee brought together all the critiques that education and university-based intellectuals had been making since shortly after new education policy began to be articulated; they disarticulated the curriculum from the dominant ideology and forced a new way of looking at it.

Having made their mark in the Report of the Review Committee, these critical intellectuals played a lesser role in the revision of the curriculum itself. But here, now, professionally-based university intellectuals began to play a role. Leading members of the working groups established to revise the curriculum were drawn from institutions of higher education devoted to teacher training. The mathematics, languages, social sciences, natural sciences and economic and management sciences working groups were all led by teacher-training and/or university based intellectuals. The life skills, arts and culture and technology working groups were led by departmental officials and an NGO-based person. In the course of the development of the curriculum, particular university-based lobbies or interest groups also brought their interests to bear on the curriculum: these included those concerned with the environment and indigenous knowledge. Their role within the curriculum as a whole and science in particular was uncontested, but was nonetheless fought for. In addition, university-based interests in ensuring that school-based science had some relationship with fields of knowledge in science were also influential. On the whole, universities as constituencies were as
important as teacher unions and the bureaucracy in bringing their weight to bear on the shaping of the curriculum.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the politics of the curriculum revolved around the weight and role of particular players: although there was a heterogeneity of actors and interests there was not a direct relationship between voice and outcome. The loudest voices were those of fundamentalist Christians.

But they were certainly not the most decisive influences on the curriculum. The dominant players were the ANC, the teacher unions and university-based intellectuals. The ANC introduced a modernising, liberal humanist, pragmatic approach to reform. The teacher unions on the one hand reasserted the importance of outcomes-based education as foundational philosophy for the post-apartheid curriculum, and on the other established the necessity for a workable and implementable curriculum. They united around the need for a secular, liberal humanist, rights-based curriculum that recognises the diversity of South Africans. Radical intellectuals, by contrast, were critical in creating the context for democratic debate and discussion of the post-apartheid curriculum and for providing the theoretical and empirical climate for reform of the curriculum. These were the dominant influences on the curriculum.
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