

OUTCOME-BASED EDUCATION IN PROGRESS:  
AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT IN FIVE SCHOOLS

by

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1. INTRODUCTION

During 1994 a team of 'academic associates' from the Centre for

Professional Development in Education at Charles Sturt University has been working with five schools in Western Region of NSW constituting a 'roundtable' of the Innovative Links professional development project (funded by the National Professional Development Program). As co-participants in action research, the academics and teachers have been advancing and researching various agendas of outcome-based education (OBE) in the schools. The introduction of OBE by the schools has not been uncontested and neither has it been consistent across the schools. In this paper we provide some analysis of the discourse of outcomes, an overview of the structure and methodology of the action research project and a report on work in progress at one of the project schools. The three other papers in the symposium will report on aspects of OBE in other schools. In this symposium then, there will be

a report on four of the five schools represented on the roundtable.

## 2. COMING TO TERMS WITH OBE

Our initial visits to the schools brought us into immediate contact with the discourse of OBE and in particular, the term 'outcomes'. Whilst our explorations into that discourse are still somewhat tentative it is evident that there is a good deal of contestation surrounding the language of OBE and the movement as a whole (Guskey, 1994). It seems that when people are using the term 'outcomes' they are very often at cross purposes and talking about quite different things. One thing is clear, however, and that is the introduction of OBE into any education system or school involves a long-term process of change and professional development. One writer (Finn, 1990) describes it as "the biggest reform of all" and warns of the "policy earthquake to come" (p.586) as we begin to redefine education around outcomes.

Since a key dimension of monitoring change through action research is the nature of the discourse (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988), we begin by analysing the language of OBE. This implies a focus particularly on the ways in which specific language is defined, interpreted and manipulated to fit within and shape certain beliefs and understandings.

At issue here, of course, is the term 'outcomes'. From our work in this area we discern that there are at least two sets of meanings in use about outcomes and we now describe them as two frameworks or models that constitute the discourse of outcomes (see fig.1).

We refer to the two models as the 'syllabus outcomes' model and the 'exit outcomes' model. Those espousing syllabus outcomes are strongly focused on academic achievement at particular points in time across a variety of curriculum areas whilst those arguing from an exit outcomes viewpoint relate more to the generic competencies that they want individual students to possess when they leave the school or education system. Within the context of this project there is evidence of both

models in use in discussions at the schools and the roundtable meetings. Furthermore, in practice in the schools there is an attempt being made to fashion an approach which integrates and overlaps the two models.

On the one hand we have the outcomes and profiles approach which the NSW Department of School Education (1994) is pursuing in its development and implementation of syllabuses across the various key learning areas. Boston (1994) declares that:

In 1994 and 1995 NSW teachers will begin to incorporate an outcomes and profiles approach into their classroom teaching and reporting.

On the other hand is the notion, largely derived from some school districts and states in the USA, of Outcome-Based Education and its goal of exit outcomes. In recent times a number of professional groups and regions of the NSW Department have brought OBE consultants from the US or sent people over there to investigate it and report back. The ideas have spread quickly in some areas and have been resisted in others. There is a considerable amount of literature, both supportive and critical, on OBE with the work of William Spady (eg. Spady, 1988; 1993) perhaps the best known.

The proponents of the two approaches argue strongly about the benefits of their model. What we want to do here is unpack some of the beliefs and understandings that underpin each model and then to consider some of the tensions that schools face when they try to overlay the two

models in practice.

The syllabus outcomes model is founded on the belief that curriculum can be based on outcomes within a standards framework for describing student achievement that is relevant to all students across a whole system. The framework is divided into levels which are subsequently equated with stages of schooling, and, as is the case with the NSW English K-6 Syllabus for example, it is then directly related to specific age gradings. Outcomes are defined as "the knowledge, understandings and skills a student is expected to achieve within a course of study" (NSW Department of School Education, 1994:5). In the case of the national curriculum statements and profiles we have the syllabus outcomes model being put forward as a framework for curriculum development and reporting student achievement across the whole nation. Given the particular constitutional arrangements for school education in Australia, however, it is to be expected and it is the case that the statements and profiles are serving somewhat different purposes in the different states. In NSW for example, the national curriculum profiles are being incorporated "as appropriate" into the Board of Studies syllabuses and in that way are being brought to the attention of teachers.

The exit outcomes model is drawn largely from the work of Spady (1993), Mamary (1994) and Rowe (1994), and while they follow similar paths they each put their own imprint on the model. Historically, their ideas have developed from Bloom's work on mastery learning, Deming's studies on total quality management, Glasser's reality therapy and Carroll's exploration of the relationships between time and aptitude. The exit outcomes model is about a belief in success for all students founded on quality teaching and learning experiences over a flexible time-frame and high student self-esteem. OBE practitioners start by defining the knowledge, competencies and qualities they want students to be able to demonstrate when they leave school and, with these exit outcomes in mind, they design the curriculum with the intention that all students will be successful. As Spady (1988) argues:

By designing our education system to achieve clearly defined exit outcomes, we will free ourselves from the traditional rigidity of schools and increase the likelihood that all students will learn (p.4).

In Table 1 we attempt to compare the two models around some key headings.

Table 1

#### Syllabus Outcomes

##### Exit Outcomes

Definition of 'outcomes'

Describe in progressive order the skills and knowledge that students typically acquire as they become more proficient in a learning area  
Clear demonstrations of quality learning (Rowe)

An actual demonstration in an authentic context (Spady)

Purpose of outcomes

To provide building blocks for profiles and increase teacher accountability

Student learning and life long relevance (Rowe)

Preparing students for life (Spady)

##### Assessment Method

Varied but typically uses norm-referenced methods and in some cases system-wide basic skills tests

Varied but typically uses criterion-referenced methods with components of self-assessment and co-assessment

Purpose of Assessment

To grade students, to describe level of achievement

To help students learn

Time

1 year = 1 grade

Flexible (performing task at a high standard is more important than time taken)

Curriculum

Mandatory, determined by the syllabus

Flexible and negotiated to align with exit outcomes and student needs  
Standards

Predetermined framework, same set of outcomes for all

Negotiable, minimal acceptable requirements

End Result

Academic credentials define student's worth

All have inherent worth which is not dependent on credentials

A comparison of the two models reveals some similarities and also some contradictions. Firstly, in relation to the notion of success both models would claim student success as their aim, but the rhetoric is not necessarily matched by the structure. Whilst the syllabus outcomes model "recognises the progress of learning for all students", and "fosters dignity and self esteem through achievement focused on allowing all students to succeed"(NSW Department of Education, 1994:16), success for all tends to be negated through system imposed structures such as Basic Skills Tests, HSC examinations and the generally accepted relationship between ages and grades. Teachers may strive to create success within the classroom, but at given times this culture is eroded when students realise very clearly that they do not meet the expectations of the system.

The exit outcomes model, whilst not ignoring the imposed structures outside the school, focuses more on negotiating with local communities, parents and students to determine expectations of success. Within this process, minimal standards are set (ones that must be achieved by all students) though Mamary (1994) suggests that grading should not occur until the student accepts responsibility for learning well, and is ready to receive grades. Assessment of students should be based on what they know rather than what they don't know and its purpose relates to assisting with learning rather than grading.

Secondly, we need to consider content. The syllabus outcomes model is firmly based in predetermined content that, for instance, 'ensures the system acts on its equity policies by monitoring learning outcomes of disadvantaged groups', and 'promotes inclusivity, because the same set of learning outcomes applies to all groups of students' (NSW Department of School Education, 1994:16). In this approach it seems that equity is defined as equal access and there is an assumption that one set of outcomes will in fact suit all students. If this is the case, then we have to question the responsiveness of this model to individual needs and on this issue the exit outcomes model favours a more flexible

curriculum that is negotiated according to needs in real life.

Those who favour the syllabus outcomes model argue very strongly that one of the great weaknesses of the alternative is its lack of a concrete, mandatory curriculum ie. lack of content. The advocates of

exit outcomes respond by maintaining that curriculum content is very important but it is structured differently and for a different purpose.

For example, Spady (1994) argues that:

The content involves knowledge derived from significant problems, challenges and opportunities people are likely to face after leaving school. The content is what students need to know and to understand about interpersonal relationships, work and resource management, managing finances and civic and global issues, in order to be able to work and survive(p.3).

Besides the different meanings of the term 'outcome' there are also differences in the modality of the language in the two approaches. The syllabus outcomes model refers to outcomes that should be acquired whereas OBE is unequivocal in its mission statement eg. "All students will learn well" (Mamary, 1994). It is also worth noting the use of the word 'acquire' in the syllabus outcomes model and 'demonstrate' in OBE. These key words polarise the different understandings of the education process in two models. Syllabus outcomes still have overtones of an objectives education process that relates to what teachers do or what they make available to students as receivers of knowledge. In contrast the language of OBE is more firmly focused on learners being able to demonstrate their learning before it is claimed that education has taken place.

However, before we leap to conclusions about a lack of congruence between these two models in practice, we need to consider a much bigger framework. We need to recognise that the introduction of an outcomes approach in NSW, which is a very large system-based education organisation, cannot simply be equated with the school district organisation in USA. With any change process or transferring of new ideas from one situation to another, there will always be modifications to suit the new context. Consistent with this, what we are doing in this project is jointly reflecting upon the ways in which the schools in the Forbes Cluster are struggling with both syllabus outcomes and exit outcomes as they develop an outcome-based approach for their situation and in so doing begin to transform their schools.

### 3. THE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

The action research project during 1994 has involved a team of nine

academic associates from Charles Sturt University in partnership with five schools from the Forbes Cluster of Western Region, NSW Department of School Education. It has been and continues to be a process of mutual professional development for both academics and teachers.

Viewed wholistically, there are three distinct but interrelated aspects of the project. First, the conceptual basis of the change process is located in the OBE movement which was initiated by the schools prior to the beginning of this project. It all began in early 1993 with a combined school development day involving all primary and high schools in the Forbes Cluster. Whilst there was no outright coercion on schools to take up OBE, there was some attempted persuasion though the decision was left to the schools. In the event not all schools in the Cluster decided to move in that direction.

By Term 2 of 1994 when this project was launched there had been a wide range of information presented on OBE and it soon became clear that different strategies were being tried across the participating schools and there was considerable contestation over the ideas amongst

teachers. Further professional development on OBE has occurred during the year in the form of school-based meetings and discussions, reading material, visits from the Director of Schools, various consultancies and of particular significance, a two week visit from an OBE consultant from USA, Dr Alan Rowe. Rowe spent at least one day in each school conducting seminars and discussions with teachers and principals and a number of public meetings were held for parents to attend. He was also involved in meetings at Regional level and in a public seminar in Sydney which was well attended. There is a vast array of ideas, literature and strategies on OBE contributing to the change process.

The second aspect of the project is the use of action research. This is an agenda which was brought to the project by the academic associates and, especially in the early days, was largely a mystery to the teachers. At the first meeting of the Roundtable Steering Committee there was general disquiet about the lack of understanding about action research amongst teachers, particularly the action research coordinator in each school, and it also became evident at about that time that there were and still are different interpretations of the process amongst the academic associates.

The Steering Committee decided to arrange a one day workshop on action research (which subsequently also included information on Total Quality Management as well) for two people from each school and as many of the academic associates as could attend. The approach to action research adopted for the workshop and hence for the project as a whole was drawn from Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). This approach emphasises a collaborative ethos in action research and a cyclic and spiralling structure. The four 'moments' of action research viz. plan, act,

observe and reflect seemed to be appropriate to the task at hand as did the ongoing nature of the process as a means of monitoring and researching the development of OBE in the schools. It seemed feasible to introduce the teachers to the understandings and research techniques so that worthwhile data collection could be jointly carried out as a basis for co-authored case studies to be written. Additionally, from the action research literature, the ideas of contestation and institutionalisation surrounding a change process had considerable purchase in relation to OBE in the schools. Finally, the three domains of individual and cultural action - language, activity and social relationships provided a way of focusing on the major elements of OBE in dynamic tension with more traditional forms of schooling. On the day, the workshop discussions produced two more domains which seemed to be important in terms of developing a comprehensive view of the project results - student learning outcomes and individual teacher change.

The third aspect of the project which has shaped and formed it in certain directions has been the formation of a roundtable of the Innovative Links project and the provision of funds through that project from the NPDP. It needs to be understood that the OBE project had started prior to the announcement of the Innovative Links project with an initial meeting of a number of principals and academics and it had been intended that it would proceed irrespective of the outcome of the submissions for funding. Indeed a separate submission had been to the NPDP to fund the OBE project and it was only when a letter arrived from DEET that it was finally known that it was to be incorporated into the Innovative Links project as a roundtable. What this means is that the OBE project was not initiated by funding from NPDP though the subsequent provision of that funding has had an important influence on its progress.

An issue that arose quickly was the question of what the funds could be used for - should the money be spent on activities to promote and

advance OBE in the schools or should it be available only for activities related to the action research process. Though it is not always easy to separate those two issues in a clear-cut way it was resolved that the latter would apply and furthermore that the majority of the funds allocated to the schools should be used to release a teacher on a part-time basis to carry out the role of action research coordinator. Each school developed an agenda of achievable targets for the year to enable the 'roundtable plan' to be developed and submitted and it was agreed that the role of the academic associates would be co-researchers where possible, advisors to the action research coordinators on research methodology where appropriate and consultants on the school agenda when invited.

#### 4. OBE AT FORBES PRIMARY SCHOOL

Teachers at Forbes Primary School became aware of the Outcome- Based Education movement at a combined school development day in early March 1993. The information presented received a mixed reception with some teachers still declaring, some eighteen months later, that they were put off the whole process at that time. Other teachers, however, were more receptive and were challenged to begin working with OBE. The staff decision to proceed with OBE strategies in the school resulted from discussion around the following points:

- staff agreeing that there was a need for schools to change and keep changing if we are to equip students to succeed in an ever changing society,
- employers suggesting change as they feel that schools are not producing the type of people they require,
- teachers feeling there is a need for greater alignment between Y6 and Y7 to avoid gaps occurring in the education process or to avoid reteaching in Y7,
- the accountability of teachers - both to students and parents and to the wider community,
- a desire to have greater ownership and direction over the learning of the children in the school.

One of the school's greatest difficulties has been how to define OBE adequately for our situation and then how to feel comfortable with the classroom strategies and be sure this was indeed the correct path for the school to follow. These issues took a considerable amount of time and for some teachers are not yet entirely resolved.

Through staff meetings, input from parents and discussions with other schools in the Cluster, the school drafted a set of desirable exit outcomes for children leaving Y6, aligning with those of students leaving Y12 from the local high school. The school decided that they wanted the children to:

- be self- directed, independent learners;
- have mastery of the curriculum;
- possess skills of communication, problem solving, critical thinking and decision making;
- have high self-esteem and self-awareness;
- have a positive interaction with people and the environment.

To do this the staff had to believe that:

- all children can learn and experience success, talent can be developed and maximum progress can be achieved,
- the school curriculum should be aligned to quality teaching and quality learning,
- teachers make the difference - effective learning depends on quality teaching and learning which responds to research, reflection on practice and knowledge of the learner,
- positive attitudes and expectations will make a difference (if we believe we can make a difference, we will),
- co-operation and collaborative planning involving teachers, administrators, parents and the school community will promote genuine ownership of the learning process.

The staff felt that in order to achieve this they had to restructure the school to provide and promote maximum learning conditions by:

- introducing staged vertical grouping,
- developing pupil profiles to reflect progression of the education continuum,
- eliminating re-teaching of known skills,
- developing a structure to link profiles to teaching programs, classroom practice and assessment and reporting procedures,
- re-aligning the student welfare practices to directly reflect the school core beliefs and exit outcomes,
- promoting mastery of curriculum to enable maximum progress of students of incorporating acceleration of grades/subjects, early entry to school and early intervention, individual enrichment and gifted and talented programs and catering for individual learning styles.

They realized that careful management of the introduction of OBE through a long-term plan would be required to allow time for conflict to be resolved and to preserve the self-esteem of staff.

Part of the long term plan was to focus on the introduction of the new K-6 English syllabus using an OBE approach. This plan also had to be flexible enough to accommodate change, new ideas and staff development needs as well as maintaining clarity of overall direction. Flexibility indeed became the key issue when the K-6 English syllabus was issued to teachers, initially in draft and then in final form, and the complexity of the syllabus as well as the issue of outcomes hit home. Not only were teachers grappling with the new language of outcomes but they also had to contend with the new language of functional grammar!

Professional Development for OBE and K-6 English

To decide what should be done to further develop OBE and assist teachers to come to grips with the K-6 English syllabus we needed to

find out what they understood and felt about both the syllabus and exit outcomes. In August 1994 the action research team, comprising the school coordinator and academic associates, carried out semi-structured interviews with all teachers in small groups of 3-4 at a time. Arrangements were made to release teachers for about half an hour and questions were jointly prepared in advance and provided to teachers on the day before the interviews. Also prepared in advance and provided to teachers was a flowchart of professional development activities relating to OBE and English over the past 18 months. We felt that this preparation would encourage more in-depth reflection and analysis by

the teachers.

The teachers were generally frank and honest in their responses and all had agreed to the interviews being taperecorded. The presence of the taperecorder did not appear to detract from the discussions though the quality of recording was not good and the transcripts are not complete.

#### Questions and Selected Responses

1. Which activity over the last 18 months has impacted most on your understanding of Outcome-Based Education?

Most teachers mentioned the school development day at the High School as the first they had heard of it but it was the visit by Alan Rowe that clearly had the most impact.

I think Alan Rowe's visit did a lot to help us. He gave us real life situations, the practical side of it and a lot of the theory.

For me it was the Alan Rowe visit. Before that it was just a haze but after that it became clear.... up until then we were all talking about it but when someone comes and tells you how it works, that's when it started to come clear...

2. Do you think the movement towards OBE will contribute to more effective classroom practices and student learning?

Teachers expressed a good deal of confusion over the 'movement' but generally felt that they are heading in the right direction.

I think the movement is very confusing... (though) to me it looks like the direction to go

I think its going to make teachers more confident in the way they present their lessons...

Very airy fairy a lot of it ... it was more or less said that all students would be able to read right through and I said no, some of my

children could not possibly achieve...and once people at the top started to come down and say yes all children can achieve at different rates. When they started to acknowledge that I started to become more interested...

3. What has been the effect of working with the pupil profiles and the development of the report formats?

Teachers were generally positive about the profiles developed at the school for English and Maths but not so positive about the proposed report formats. A school development day held to work on these aspects seems to have been well received.

I think we achieved a lot in our staff development day...although a lot has to be refined into presentable documents it made us more aware of the areas on which we worked...and I also think it gave the staff ownership and I think that's important rather than somebody in an external position saying this is what thou shalt do to implement in your school...I see ownership as the paramount thing.

(The profile) gives you a broader perspective on the child because you are actually looking at specific things...it's the little bits that make up the whole and you focus on the little bits as well as the whole...

My impression is that the report is going to mirror the pupil profiles... it is still being developed (but) how big is this thing going to be...I am not saying they don't want more information but we are overloading them with information that they don't understand anyway. It's alright for us in the language we use but you get parents who haven't got a clue what you are talking about. It's going to be an interesting development.

4. Do you think vertical grouping, once refined and further developed, will assist with the implementation of the new English syllabus?

Responses indicated considerable concern about the effect on self-esteem of older students being grouped with younger ones, particularly if the vertical grouping is extended beyond two grades.

Yes, with reservation. The reservation I have with the vertical grouping isn't so much kids who are working above their chronological age but those who are working below. How far are you going to go, I mean here's a big strapping kid surrounded by eight and nine year olds, how's he going to feel.

The only problem I can see in having done it at another school is that having vertical grouping meant they were aged from (grade) four to six

for the whole of English, having a bottom group meant having their self-esteem destroyed.

In summary several themes can be seen to have emerged:

1. Alan Rowe's visit did much to clear up the notion of OBE for staff.
2. There is confusion over the terminology of OBE. Some teachers are referring to exit outcomes when in fact they are talking about syllabus outcomes.
3. The idea of using English profiles gives a much broader picture of the 'whole' child and where they are at in their learning.
4. There was considerable concern about vertical grouping in relation to children's self-esteem.
5. Teachers were unhappy with the draft K-6 English syllabus and preferred the school document.
6. There was a strong feeling that professional development should be provided from outside the school on K-6 English.
7. At present, for most staff, English outcomes and the school's exit outcomes made little connection.
8. In planning any professional development there is a need to take account of different levels of interest, expertise, commitment and understanding of staff members.

As a result of these findings the school planned a School Development Day on 7 November with the Regional English Consultant. To plan the program he spent a day working with two of the English committee who wrote the school policy document. A program for the day was planned to cover:

- correctly placing a child in levels
  
- text types
- functional V's traditional grammar
- using units developed by the Department
- using Big Books
- group work

A week after the school development day the action research team again interviewed staff; this time a selection of five teachers and the principal on an individual basis. We tried to make the situation as informal as possible and a list of issues for discussion was provided

in advance to teachers so that they could think about them and prepare.

Responses to the school development day ranged from "confusion" to "quite good" in relation to the K-6 English syllabus. Some teachers are clearly having great difficulty in making sense of the document, particularly functional grammar, and are perplexed about how to make use of it in the classroom. Further professional development activities with a focus on practical classroom teaching and management of the outcomes approach in English would be beneficial.

On the question of expanding the vertical grouping structure for English there are various options being considered and there seems to be guarded support provided that the issue of student self-esteem can be managed sensitively. The use of profiles is now quite strongly supported though some teachers would like more guidelines for placing children in the various levels. Whilst there is some concern about too many changes being made too quickly and there is questioning about how the changes will benefit children, the teachers are not despondent and most are prepared to "give it a go". A complex process of change towards an outcomes approach in the school is well underway and is being carefully managed. For one teacher the move to an outcomes approach was clear but still contentious:

I used to find a book and then decide what to teach from it. Now with the outcomes approach, I am supposed to focus on the outcome and then find the resource. That's what I try to do but its not always easy to manage that.

The final issue explored concerned the differences and similarities between syllabus outcomes and exit outcomes. As with the previous round of interviews, there continues to be confusion on this point for most teachers. Such confusion, however, is entirely understandable given the nature of the discourse on outcomes and the tensions that are to be expected when a school takes on the difficult task of integrating both types of outcomes into its daily life.

Where to from here?

With ongoing funding the roundtable will continue in 1995. With agreement of staff the project at Forbes Primary will continue and it is now clear that further professional development on outcomes and English K-6 would be helpful for teachers. Some renegotiation of roles, particularly for the academic associates, may be appropriate to enable them to play a more active role in professional development activities as well as researching those activities in partnership with teachers. Our experience through 1994 in developing that partnership provides a sound basis for continuing next year.

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