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**CHANGING TIMES IN THE CLASSROOM:  
Teaching as a 'crowded profession'**

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**Abstract**

This paper reports on a study of teachers New South Wales (Australia) and their practices surrounding outcomes assessment and reporting that took place in 2003 and 2004 as a follow up to a major study in 1995. The study explored whether the main focus of a teacher's work involves planning, teaching, assessing, rewarding and sharing in their classroom and with colleagues, and whether this focus suffered many distractions in the flurry of reforms of the past decade. One example of 'changing times' in the classroom is the devolution of school management that provided a number of diversions of energy and time away from teaching and learning. Yet even in the area of curriculum schools were struggling with a range of issues, many brought on by the advent of outcomes-based curricula. In seeking to change what happens in schools, teachers argued that they needed clear and well-argued reasons to change. This article thus provides an update on the relevant research, beginning with national and international experiences, before a discussion of workload, the place of parents and school organizational effects. One finding is that alongside a 'crowded curriculum', teaching has become a 'crowded profession'. The paper concludes with a reflections on how changing times in the classroom means social reform as well as educational reform in which teaching and learning shape effects and consequences from educational events so that knowledge grows through experiences, measuring possibilities not outcomes.

**Introduction**

While it seems trite to state it so bluntly, curriculum is at the heart of what happens every school day. The foundation of teachers' work involves planning, teaching, assessing, rewarding and sharing in their classroom and with colleagues. Yet, in the flurry of reforms over the past decade, this foundation seems to have become undermined as teachers were called upon to undertake a myriad of other tasks that took them out of their classroom and away from a focus on students' learning. Changing times have meant that teachers' work is now identified with management and administration, marketing, fund-raising, community advocacy and policy making.

For Australia, a major review of what was happening with national curriculum 10 years ago (Eltis, 1995) took up as a central theme the view that schooling depends more than ever on the quality and professionalism of teachers. The Review argued that the skills, energy and motivation teachers bring to their work needed to be incorporated into bureaucratic strategic planning for change and educational reform. In re-focusing the work of schools back on to what happens in the classroom, the report hoped to draw attention to the many conflicts teachers have to resolve about the direction of their work.

In essence, the 1995 Report asked ‘Is a teacher’s work teaching, or is it managing?’ While the devolution of school management in the 1990s triggered a number of non-teaching diversions of energy and time away from the classroom, as noted above, even in the area of curriculum many schools in Australasia, Europe and North America were struggling with a range of issues arising from reform at a national level. In this context, the conflict teachers faced over prioritising tasks became one of ‘Is my job teaching or is it assessing and reporting?’ The answer put forward in the 1995 Australian Report was, again, to re-affirm classroom teaching. The Report did this by arguing that the government should simplify the complex and conflicting issues facing teachers by prioritising classroom practice and student activity. This strategy was meant to change the balance of policy work and strategic thinking in education in the teachers’ favour by re-valuing classroom practice and decision-making at the school level.

The research reported on in this article took place in 2003 and 2004 and was, in part, a follow-up study to the 1995 Report. The 2003/04 research conducted site visits and interviews at 17 Australian government primary schools and 7 secondary schools in metropolitan, regional and isolated rural locations in New South Wales [NSW], collecting school documentation and classroom teaching material. NSW is the largest state in Australia with more than 2,200 government schools and more than 60,000 teachers. In addition, an innovative web-based survey was set up and received over 450 replies from teachers and parents. Data collection was supported by an international literature review, consultation with key interest groups in NSW, and consultation with state and national curriculum organisations.

This article provides an update on the relevant research, beginning with national and international experiences, before reviewing practices in NSW schools since 1995, and reflection on the issues that remain. Given the extensive work done in schools between 1995 and 2004 towards the priorities established in the 1995 Report, it was expected that the data from the new study would reveal good and bad practice, as in any reform, but that there should be some examples where schools had managed outcomes assessment and reporting effectively, were solving problems creatively, and were renewing their professional enthusiasm and integrity through engaging with teaching and learning again. However, this may not have been the case. As Carpenter (2000, p. 385) suggests “Many good ideas die for lack of adequate time, effort, and funding. The teacher must respond to every fad of the academic community and, increasingly, to every passing fancy of the legislature”.

### **Changing Teaching and Learning Towards Assessment of Outcomes**

Teachers in this study were unanimous in their view that a renewed focus on teaching and learning embodies the aims of education because, for them, the purposes of education revolve around the best interests of students and their learning. Teachers argued that this is why they are in the classroom in the first place and they needed a clear and well-argued reason to change, especially when it came to curriculum.

One issue addressed early in this research was the pivotal role of ‘outcomes’ assessment and reporting in changing teaching and learning globally over the last decade. This issue is important because ‘outcomes’ arose from work on outcomes-based education [OBE] which involves a broader context than just NSW schools. It can be fairly stated that OBE means different things to different people both within and across systems, not only in Australia. This phenomenon resulted in controversy in the early 1990s surrounding educational frameworks based on teaching and learning outcomes (Brandt, 1994a and O’Neil, 1994). Thus there are different models of outcomes-based learning in, for example, the United States of America [USA] where models range across a spectrum from traditional through transitional to transformative. Other definitions of ‘outcomes’ focus on “a demonstration of learning that occurs at the end of a learning experience. It is a result of learning and a visible, observable demonstration of three things: knowledge, combined with competence, combined with the attitudinal, affective, motivational and relational elements that also

make up the performance” (Haydel, et al. 1995, p. 6). Spady (1994) agreed, insisting that “demonstration is the key word; an outcome is not a score or a grade, but the end product of a clearly defined process that students carry out” (p. 18).

For NSW schools, reflecting the position in Australia, “syllabus outcomes are specific statements of the results intended by the syllabus. These outcomes are achieved as students engage with the content of the syllabus... The outcomes are a statement of the knowledge, skills and understanding to be achieved by most students as a result of effective teaching and learning ... by the end of each stage” (Mathematics, Board of Studies NSW, 2002, p. 18). That is, ‘outcomes’ for NSW are essentially a restatement, through content, of each subject syllabus aims and objectives. However, simply having the word ‘outcomes’ in a school’s curriculum does not make the school’s work ‘outcomes-based’. According to Brandt (1994b), it is unlikely that even the best constructed outcomes approach would provide the intended educational value to students without an appropriate change in the school environment. Brindley (2001) observed how the introduction of outcomes was accompanied by a range of political and technical problems, including the conflict between concurrent summative and formative assessment, and questions about the validity of teacher-constructed assessment.

Some other conflicts surrounding outcomes-based education stem from the jargon used within the various outcomes-based frameworks. Some teachers see little difference in an outcomes-based system except the terminology - now the output rather than the input is mandated (Fritz, 1994). Similarly, Wien and Dudley-Marling (1998, p. 405) saw the curriculum shift rhetorically from “what is taught to what is learnt by each student”, therefore altering little in the school environment. Another area for linguistic contention is the perceived purpose of education in an outcomes-based framework. For example, Schwarz (1994) claims that “advocates of outcomes-based education use mechanistic terminology suggestive of the business world” (p. 87), not of the classroom and staffroom. Many outcomes statements include the phrase ‘students will’ which, Wien and Dudley-Marling (1998) point out, could be taken to mean *all* students are to be assessed on *all* outcomes. They assert “statements like these set out a production schedule, a set time frame that all students must follow” (p. 407). Imperative statements lead to confusion among teachers as to what is

mandatory and what is not, so teachers play safe and try to do it all. Curriculum sociology suggests this is bad policy generating bad practice.

### **International Experience**

In many countries outcomes-based education claims to have the “capacity to meet the needs of all students regardless of their environment, focus, economic status, or disabling condition...it enables teachers and educators to have a clearer curricular focus, develop better instructional methods, and assess learners’ achievement with precise clarity and validity” (Soudien and Baxen, 1997, p. 452). Outcomes-based education was developed with the intent that the curriculum could be relevant to all students. However, in some states of America “... very little progress has been made overall in addressing the many equity issues that emerge from efforts to raise the educational standards for all students” (Massell, Kirst and Hoppe, 1997, p. 11). In the case of South Africa, according to Soudien and Baxen (1997, p. 459), “there is undoubtedly merit in outcomes-based education as it seeks to make young people literate in the ways and habits of modernity. At the same time South Africa’s youth need to be able to recognize that proposed educational reform script for what it is: a text for a very particular understanding of the world”.

Although equity is often used as a reason for the implementation of outcomes, syllabus documents tend to be written for mainstream students and assume that all students come to school with the same cultural capital (Wien and Dudley-Marling, 1998). Yet the state has a responsibility to ensure that schools share a common curriculum if equity and other objectives are to be met. This leaves the task of adapting an outcomes curriculum to schools, to suit the ability and equity needs of their own students. Teachers in some states of America reported in a survey conducted by Massell, Kirst and Hoppe (1997) that they “regard the state’s standards as only one of many resources they used to generate their own, more detailed, curricular guidance policies and programs” (p. 9). Though not all teachers feel that they have this freedom, the freedom to adapt syllabuses has the potential to become a workload issue if other aspects of the teachers’ job are not adjusted at the same time. For this reason, Massell, Kirst and Hoppe argue it is “not desirable for either teachers or administrators to completely reinvent curricula or assessment school by school” (1997, p. 12) as high workload and inconsistency across schools is the result. Too

often “change means adding new things, not eliminating old ones. The state must determine how the new and existing fit together, or tell teachers what they must abandon” (Goldman and Conley, 1997, p. 19).

In New Zealand, value was placed on internal assessment as a means of determining student achievement (Philips, 2000) when outcomes were introduced, and more time for adoption was allowed for by staggering the introduction of syllabuses. Even so, “Schools felt that the pace of introduction was too swift, particularly as each curriculum statement also set out levels against which students should be assessed” (Wylie, 1999, p.127). Similarly, the funding provided for professional development in New Zealand was short term (Wylie, 1999). It is difficult for any system to maintain the momentum on one initiative, when there are many initiatives happening at once.

In the United Kingdom, the *Education Reform Act 1989* ushered in a National Curriculum as part of a re-centralisation of curriculum despite other policies aimed at making schools self-governing and locally responsive. There was some early optimism about a national approach to curriculum, and even some support for a new assessment system that would bring greater national accountability and serve the purposes of the marketisation of education. Grace (1995, p. 99) noted, “From an historical perspective, the fact that any primary school head teacher should celebrate the arrival of a government imposed national curriculum seems remarkable”.

However, because the National Curriculum did not emerge from professional concerns but from bureaucratic and political directives, support evaporated as “hastily considered and ineffectively carried out” implementation problems (too many subjects in the 14-16 timetable, not enough teachers for technology and languages) exposed “ideological contradictions (and) operational problems” (Marsh, 1994, p.1). In relation to the new regime of testing and assessment, Grace (1995, p.104) noted, ‘Here, there was a much stronger sense that inappropriate and unworkable models of assessment had been imposed upon primary education...’. There was great consternation at having to work in 5,000 ‘statements of attainment’ to classroom teaching, marking and reporting. Hargreaves and Evans (1997, p.3) concluded that the outcomes of the 1989 Education Act in the UK “pandered to high profile parents, diverted teachers’ energies to public relations and paperwork, weighed teachers down

with interminable testing requirements and overloads of content, and caused a rush for early retirement”.

In January 1994, the *Final Report: The National Curriculum and Its Assessment*, known as the Dearing Report, was released. The Dearing Report recommended the National Curriculum be slimmed down, giving time back to teachers during the week to teach their own curriculum. Hargreaves and Evans (1997, p.3) reported “The investigation into and final report on National Curriculum implementation coordinated by Sir Ron Dearing eventually pulled the government back from the abyss and started to restore some respect for the teaching profession.” *The Observer*, 15<sup>th</sup> November 1994, reported:

Sir Ron Dearing finally buried the Baker legislation and unveiled a national curriculum remarkably similar to that which existed before Baker began to meddle.... The whole sorry exercise has wasted in the region of £750 million, driven thousands of teachers into early retirement and brought unhappiness and disruption to home and school (cited in Hargreaves and Evans, 1997, p. 37).

In 1994 in the UK, media commentators began to ask why the government refused to consult the body of educational research and ignored historical and theoretical studies in driving through the National Curriculum. *The Times* reported:

The key message Sir Ron delivered...was that professional responsibility be handed back to teachers within a broad framework...This is common sense; it is what we train them, and pay them to do. Good teachers are driven by their imagination, their knowledge, their love of the subject. (Cited in Hargreaves and Evans, 1997, p. 38).

The National Curriculum came to be recognised as an overly complex and highly expensive exercise that consumed teachers’ work and had to be trimmed. Did something similar happen in Australia, more narrowly around outcomes-based assessment and reporting?

### **Changing Curricular Practices in Australia**

Many topics that have been the subject of research in the sociology of education in the past decade were of interest to this study (see, for example, Mahoney and Hextall, 2000). At the national level, work on curriculum had been productive in drawing attention to the lack of consistency and efficiency in delivering schooling across

Australia, but did it go too far in prescribing a complicated mixture of subject statements and profiling student outcomes? Three issues were central to this question:

- teacher workload,
- the place of parents in policy reforms, and
- organizational effects.

Concern about teacher workload was a major part of the *raison d'être* for the new study, so was the natural starting point. One of the first things teachers reported was how the attention they can give to learning and teaching had increasingly been diverted to other school matters. School leaders reported how they spend much of their time solving administration, management and welfare matters so that curriculum does not receive as much attention as they believe it deserved. One principal wrote on the web-based survey:

I remain your confused administrator, whose main aim in life is to have the 'reports' ready for distribution to parents on the specified date.

Teachers told us how they now feel "assessment-driven" to the detriment of other aspects of the curriculum and school work:

Although I fully support the assessment-based outcomes reporting system, the time for successful implementation of this is a real burden on my actual teaching and administration time.

Parents told us they feel overwhelmed by the language and size of reports and find it hard to work out what it is their child has learnt. One of the parents in this study summed up widely held views:

I know what my children are doing, but I don't know how well they are doing.

These perceptions have played out in real ways in the organizational effects identified in the research as well as those planned for NSW schools from 2005 as a result of recommendations to the NSW Government and Board of Studies NSW. As one teacher observed:

When an organisation is changed, performance drops. Constant change means constantly dropping performance.

These key issues will be explored below before a discussion of what this means for the future of a 'crowded profession', and changing times in the classroom.



### *Teacher Workload*

As suggested earlier in this article, the foundation of the work of schools has always been teaching, however the nature of this work has changed significantly over recent decades. The key element in all of this is time. As in the Dearing Report, the central finding from our study was that teachers feel that current reforms are robbing them, and their students, of time to teach and time to learn. One teacher told us:

If teachers get bogged down in paperwork they become stressed and ineffectual in the classroom and neglect the very essence of their job, that is, presenting interesting and well-prepared lessons in which children learn to the best of their ability. We don't want to spend so much of our time assessing the children and reporting to parents that we do not have enough time to actually teach them anything!

This finding is echoed in, for example, the USA where “teachers are asked to accomplish more in less time (and) the amount of content is much more extensive” (Clarke, 1994. pp 2). Recent research shows that in some American schools, overcrowding of the curriculum became such a problem that “instructional decisions are rarely data-driven and often focus on covering curriculum, rather than meeting student learning goals” (Whittaker and Young, 2002. p. 43). One teacher explained:

Changes distract teachers from their primary purpose – student learning. If we must have change, let us have it in the quality of the learning experiences that students receive.

Wien and Dudley-Marling (1998) describe the crowded curriculum as “the train curriculum, each content topic like a separate boxcar: children either catch it or miss it, depending on the time when it is offered. If the child doesn't get it when it is slotted into the production schedule of fixed times, too bad, because the curriculum moves on to something else” (p. 412). As a consequence one teacher remarked:

I am not doing as good a job as a teacher as I used to.

This suggests that attacking the issue of the crowded curriculum is the key to attacking the problem of teaching as a crowded profession. Class sizes might be lower, and teachers are generally better qualified as professionals, but teachers' work appears to be more complex and demanding leaving teachers 'time poor'. One senior teacher in this research described it this way:

Teacher workload - including paperwork, preparation and selection of assessment tasks, rewriting report formats – has increased enormously since 1995. Not only are we still coming to terms with all the new syllabuses and

associated documents, but also there are too many other added pressures on teachers which are expected to be included in an already overfull teaching load.

A study by Wylie (1999) found teachers in New Zealand are spending more time on preparation, marking and report writing than they did in the past, which has affected the amount of time they have available to spend with individual students, parents or on other projects. Although teachers are doing more assessment work, some feel they are not getting a better picture of individual students' needs, with the result teachers view increased assessment as wasting valuable class time. Although Wylie's study involved teachers in New Zealand, solutions identified in that project has a familiar Australian ring. One teacher in our study commented that:

The end product is very worthwhile for demonstrating the progression students have made over time. However, it is an extremely intensive process. At times, getting the work samples finished grinds our learning programs to a halt. However, changing times hold contradictions. Without sufficient external input, some schools convince themselves that what they are already doing is sufficient and little is modified to include the latest change (Goldman and Conley, 1997). Some schools are also hesitant to change curriculum as the final exams in most education systems still issue students with a mark or a rank, often the entry ticket into tertiary study. Exams thus retain their value in the community despite general acceptance of formative assessment (O'Neil, 1994). This acts to increase a teacher's workload as it doubles systemic or statutory requirements for assessment and reporting. One teacher stated:

We are not lazy by any standards, but resist strongly the push from above to make assessment and reporting take [a new] form. Parents do not want to know specific outcomes related to their child's progress. Parents want to know whether their child is using their ability or wasting time at school each day, as well as how they rate in comparison to the rest of the group.

Although support and professional development are perceived essential to the successful implementation of change "increases in resources, while often cited as the prerequisite to reform, may never be adequate to bring about change in schools" (Goldman and Conley, 1997, p. 23). This is because "values and beliefs are important components of motivation and performance at work" (Goldman and Conley, 1997, p. 14). If teachers do not believe in the process in which they are engaged, is the best to be hoped for mere compliance? Compliance might mean those teachers' behaviour changes, but their attitude remains the same (Goldman and Conley, 1997).

Teachers in NSW schools have a clear record of compliance, especially with new syllabuses as they contain minimum requirements essential for school registration. The problem NSW teachers then face is trying to balance class time between all mandatory outcomes in the six Key Learning Areas [KLA] in primary schools. In addition, teachers need to strike a balance between professional privilege and public accountability; “As the demands for accountability to prove that schools are delivering instruction that produces desired student outcomes increase, teachers and administrators will need to assure that the performance assessments being used in their classrooms and schools are professionally credible, publicly acceptable, and legally defensible” (Haydel, et al. 1995, p. 6). A respondent to the web survey wrote:

My anger at my own inability to embed the DET’s syllabi in a truly effective manner in my school is evident in my replies. I can’t be the only person who has struggled, made wins, only to see them brought undone. Five years ago I was filled with optimism. Today I sought this [the Department’s website] to research leave options and manage the years before I retire. I detoured into this [research] webpage. How many older, experienced and highly competent teachers are going about their professional life as disillusioned as I have become?

Guskey (1994) contends that it is unreasonable to ask teachers to produce assessment tasks that can encompass all of the above without adequate training and development. In New Zealand, curriculum changes have been characterised “by much tighter specification of what students are expected to learn, an extension of assessment programs and related initiatives aimed at monitoring students’ learning, and closer control by the state of teachers’ performance”. In addition, “professional development funding has been increasingly contracted out and tied to specific priorities, rather than being provided and managed by the central agency for all teachers on the same basis” (Philips, 2000, p. 144). Goldman and Conley (1997) recognise that the successful implementation of any new educational concept relies on teachers’ ability and/or willingness to translate the concept into classroom practice. Carpenter (2000, p. 387) acknowledges that a “frequent feature of good ideas is that they place the burden of educational reform squarely on the shoulders of teachers”. As one teacher in our research exclaimed:

What do I need? Time, time and more time!

The main source of teacher stress and school inefficiency appeared to be the diverse school-level implementation in changes to teaching and learning. One teacher told us earnestly what Wien and Dudley-Morley (1998) feared:

We should be testing every outcome, that's what they're there for.

However, the great majority of informants also told us it is simply not possible for primary school teachers to teach all the outcomes expected for each of the six KLA – and that the potential is there for a similar scenario for the junior secondary curriculum (years 7-10). While each of the new syllabus documents is of high quality and is internally consistent, they are unteachable as a group. Teachers wonder whether anyone stopped to check if there was enough time in the week to teach, learn, assess and report on the total content. This led teachers to feel pressure themselves:...

Outcomes assessment is what we're doing all day.

...and to reflect that pressure onto their students, telling them:

I have to get this done because I have to assess you on it.

Some schools have attempted to find time by reducing or eliminating other aspects of school life such as assemblies and extra-curricular activities. This is of deep concern as it reduces the expectation that schools develop the whole child. Teaching and learning around OBE was not intended to focus on individual outcomes or that outcomes need to be assessed singly. Rather, under OBE it was expected that teaching and assessment strategies would allow students to demonstrate outcomes in integrated ways. This expectation was seen as impossible by many of our respondents, despite guidelines offered in newer syllabus and support documents:

Outcomes reporting is a waste of time. Though I can, as a teacher, see the advantages, it is not popular with students or parents, or with future employers. It would be better in these 'hard times' to make cuts to teachers' workloads rather than piling on more!

Of greater concern was the perceived expectation that all English and Mathematics outcomes be taught, assessed and reported on. This meant that essential learning in other Key Learning Areas was allocated time only if, and when, teachers felt it possible. In many of our research sites, teachers openly acknowledged that Science, History, the Creative Arts, Health and Physical Education fell by the wayside in a

crowded curriculum run by a crowded profession. Something is not right when a school system has employees feeling like these teachers:

I'm never achieving anything. I work as hard as I can but I never get there.

There has been a massive increase in workload. I have little time to even talk to colleagues.

In some cases, this was recognised by schools that put their energy into working out student needs:

The purpose of using outcomes is knowing what the kids can do (and it should inform your programming).

In reviewing all the schools, we concluded that difficulties arise when teachers only begin to work on assessment at reporting time - because they see it as divorced from teaching, when teachers work to checklists, and teachers attempt to report on every outcome. In these cases, teachers confuse the assessment with reporting and thus further confuse parents.

### *Parents*

The importance of parental involvement in education is becoming more widely recognised to the point that educational bodies include parents in their descriptions of best practice (Crump, 1996). The California Assessment Collaborative, in explaining the role of assessment, stated that "for assessment to have instructional value, the content that they assess should be aligned with the main learning goals of the curriculum; the assessment task should represent the types of skills and knowledge the students are expected to attain; teachers should be able to interpret the results and see clear connections between student work, assessment results, and their teaching decisions; *and students, their parents, and community should understand clearly what kinds and level of performance students are expected to achieve*" (Whittaker and Young, 2002, p. 44, my emphasis). As one teacher in the research admitted:

Parents only know what we choose to tell them.

Surveys done in the USA not only reveal the belief that parent involvement, emphasised in outcomes based education, will have a lasting effect on education, but also that teachers believe this involvement is important to the success of a schools

program (Clarke, 1994). However, the high level of jargon contained within standards frameworks that systems present to their parents in a variety of ways often leads to confusion rather than understanding. One parent wrote to a web survey:

Outcomes-based reports are easy to read, but I am not sure that they are actually saying anything.

Schwarz (1994) asks “how can a teacher or student make sense of such statements as ‘outcomes are high quality culminating demonstrations of significant learning in context?’” (p. 87). If neither teachers nor students make sense of the jargon used by a process that they are engaged in, how will parents gain an informed understanding? Language is a difficult factor in areas where people cross professional, cultural and social boundaries.

Parents are often cautious in changing times as much is at stake for their child. Parents hate the thought that their child is being used in a curriculum experiment, though they can be less cautious if brought into the discussion and different views are treated respectfully. American research shows that “reforms receive the strongest criticisms when they focus on new goals to the seeming exclusion of basic skills or traditional teaching methods” (Massell, Kirst and Hoppe, 1997, p. 8). As parents can be an integral part of schooling, contributing to the creation of positive and successful learning experiences for their children, the importance of parental understanding of outcomes frameworks needs to be a part of strategic thinking in policy development. After all, parents are often advocates for teachers and their profession, one stating:

I am in awe of the work and skills being taught to young children these days. I question the pressure that must come to bear on teachers and students to cover and digest this vast amount of content.

Parents need a certain level of knowledge concerning the aims of the educational system in which their child is enrolled to properly understand their child’s progress and to assist in their child’s progression through schooling.

### *School Organisational Effects*

Assessment and reporting practices can be approached as the outward sign of a held value; the external expression of each teacher’s educational philosophy, style and purpose. These signs are the easiest to observe and evaluate, and are clearly enunciated in most schools’ documentation. The hardest indicator to measure a

school's approach to OBE is the underlying assumption about its students, families and community and, therefore, the assumptions underlying each school's strategies for teaching and learning. However, these assumptions tend to be a more accurate account because they bring into sharp relief any differences between the rhetoric and reality of each school. Given the emphasis on standards and accountability in new OBE policy, these issues are important. One secondary principal saw the relationship this way:

It's the principal's responsibility to create conditions for teacher learning in the same way that it is the teacher's responsibility to create conditions for the learning of their pupils.

Outcomes appear to have focused teaching and learning on including students in their own learning by recognising the skills students already possess through prior learning or a vast range of informal education contexts. OBE can contribute to raising motivation by viewing students as active constructors of, or contributors to, their learning experiences. Assessment, as many of our respondents argued, is the forgotten element of teaching; now seen predominantly as something teachers do to students in a rather crude and elementary fashion. One teacher welcomed the change, but with a qualification:

Outcomes are the best thing for me, for my teaching, as I can see where my children are going, but it is too hard to report on all that to parents.

General advantages were described as occurring in what teachers actually do with outcomes, especially as a way of validating their work and informing the learning cycle. While there have been concerns that outcomes can dominate rather than drive teaching, outcomes were reported to be valuable for explicitly articulating the aims and objectives of all aspects of class work. However, a number of concerns remain, including the narrowing of the curriculum and over-emphasis on assessment as testing compared to an emphasis on creative, engaging and classroom work:

We need time to consolidate the child's learning, rather than rush on to the next outcome.

A focus on teaching and learning, with assessment a seamless part of programming and classroom activity, could be another way of ensuring that the curriculum is geared to, and relevant to, the needs of the students, rather than to some artificially constructed timetable for conducting assessment tasks. This should allow schools, as

organisations, to communicate better with parents and their broader community, as information about student achievement would be available year-round, rather than at pre-determined phases of the year which do not necessarily serve educational ends. One teacher stated:

It is high time that we realised that administrative structures make little difference to student learning of a positive kind.

## **Reflections**

Any intervention in teaching and learning that aims to result in school improvement is difficult to accomplish. An 'outcomes' focus in teaching and learning occurred in a context of systemic restructuring and devolution in Australia, both of which also aimed to make education more school-centred, more accountable to the community, and more closely aligned to the policy and strategic objectives of the state. Learning organisations are ones where members identify what they want to achieve and set strategies that will help achieve these goals.

In 2005, teachers in NSW schools are once again caught up in 'changing times'. Following a period of consultation in the second half of 2004, schools are responding to some of the dilemmas of reform noted above by working on 'user-friendly' report cards, a modified set of syllabus documents which now set clearer expectations about which outcomes are core or non-core, and clear advice about how much time to spend on Key Learning Areas for different age groups and stages of learning. The latter changes are intended to help teachers and schools construct teaching and learning plans that will work within the limited time and competing demands of a school day and calendar. Like the experience in the UK with the National Curriculum, these changes are also intended to allow schools to build some scope and flexibility into their programs so that local interests, individual student abilities and teacher expertise can be better utilised, and make the school day more interesting and more challenging.

In the 1990s, it was believed that schools should focus on student performance to improve the educational output and value of their work. Curriculum was one aspect of this focus, but one that was not devolved but rather recentralised (Crump, 1993). This reform paradox set the scene for a complex and demanding period for teachers engaged in problem-solving over a range of cherished practices and strongly held



beliefs. However, there is an element of myth in the view that teachers do not cope well with educational change that this article does not wish to support. Schools are 'contexts of action' for reforms of the magnitude of OBE, but teachers are the key 'agents of action' and there lies teachers' power as a profession and individually. If teaching has become a crowded profession, teachers are the ones who will need to 'uncrowd' it, just as they challenged and reduced the crowded curriculum.

If teaching and learning are to be effective in schools, policy should be the product of experience, equate to good practice, be defined by practitioners and participants, deal with risk taking, be accepting of unpredictability, and allow for implementation to lead to change and growth (Crump and Ryan, 2001, p. 12; see also Whitty, 2002). Without a general understanding of the policy processes, policy decision-makers are unlikely to have access to useful information, especially about classroom practices. Perhaps surprisingly, they also are unlikely to be aware of contradictory or conflicting expectations for schools imposed by problematic and piecemeal reforms. It is these tensions that have come and gone around teaching and learning that shaped the themes derived from this study as identified above. They are well summarised by the observation made by a young teacher during our very first site visit:

We teach kids to assess, rather than teach kids to learn.

The practical implications of teaching and learning mean that OBE is part of a broader political and national agenda relating to testing and accountability. This obscures the social context of changing times in the twenty-first century. The primary importance of knowledge is that it is a guide to action, to more experience of learning, not to more testing. These experiences call for teaching and learning that is guided by reflection, choices, interests and values. Thus classroom relationships come together to mean more than classroom management. This is a social as well as an educational goal.

Changing times in the classroom means social reform as well as educational reform. Teaching and learning need to shape effects and consequences from educational events so that knowledge grows through experience. Schools in this research that were comfortable with changing times in the classroom had a focus on the needs of students and parents, used teaching and learning as the basis for assessment, minimized formal documentation, worked collegially, used information technology

effectively, developed commitment through staff development, and found time to create a well-informed school and local community. Is it that productive and authentic change comes not merely from measuring and reporting curriculum outcomes, but by pursuing professional and democratic possibilities within a broader milieu of education and society?

Schools remain one of the better arenas for changing the world, not by observing it, but by being a dynamic and crucial part of young people's lives, community hopes, and meaningful social production. For teachers to be a positive force in 'changing times', teaching needs to be an uncrowded profession and for this to happen we need to start in the classroom and make better sense of teaching and learning in relation to curriculum and strategic policy in education.

**Note:**

This research was undertaken in 2003 with Ken Eltis, University of Sydney, with follow up in 2004 and 2005. The views expressed in this article are my own. The official research report, 'Time to Teach, Time to Learn, can be viewed/downloaded from <http://www.det.nsw.edu.au/reviews/schoolaandr.htm>

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