Outcome Based Education

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Times are changing. The pressure on our public schools to improve, and change, has become intense. Since 1960 our population has increased by 41%, spending on education has increased by 225% (in constant 1990 dollars), but SAT scores have fallen by 8% (or 80 points). Although few would argue that the schools are solely to blame for our children's declining academic performance, many are hoping that schools can turn this trend around.

The decade of the 80s brought numerous education reforms, but few of them were a dramatic shift from what has gone on before. Outcome-based education (OBE) is one of those that is new, even revolutionary, and is now being promoted as the panacea for America's educational woes. This reform has been driven by educators in response to demands for greater accountability by taxpayers and as a vehicle for breaking with traditional ideas about how we teach our children. If implemented, this approach to curriculum development could change our schools more than any other reform proposal in the last thirty years.

The focus of past and present curriculum has been on content, on the knowledge to be acquired by each student. Our language, literature, history, customs, traditions, and morals, often called Western civilization, dominated the learning process through secondary school. If students learned the information and performed well on tests and assignments, they received credit for the course and moved on to the next class. The point here is that the curriculum centered on the content to be learned; its purpose was to produce academically competent students. The daily schedule in a school was organized around the content. Each hour was devoted to a given topic; some

students responded well to the instruction, and some did not.

Outcome-based education will change the focus of schools from the content to the student. According to William Spady, a major advocate of this type of reform, three goals drive this new approach to creating school curricula. First, all students can learn and succeed, but not on the same day or in the same way. Second, each success by a student breeds more success. Third, schools control the conditions of success. In other words, students are seen as totally malleable creatures. If we create the right environment, any student can be prepared for any academic or vocational career. The key is to custom fit the schools to each student's learning style and abilities.

The resulting schools will be vastly different from the ones recent generations attended. Yearly and daily schedules will change, teaching responsibilities will change, classroom activities will change, the evaluation of student performance will change, and most importantly, our perception of what it means to be an educated person will change.

What is OBE?

Education is a political and emotional process. Just ask Pennsylvania's legislators. That state, along with Florida, North Carolina, and Kansas, has been rocked by political battles over the implementation of outcome-based educational reforms. The governor, the state board of education, legislators, and parents have been wrestling over how, and if, this reform should reshape the state's schools. Twenty-six other states claim to have generated outcome- based programs, and at least another nine are moving in that direction.

Before considering the details of this controversy, let's review the major differences between the traditional approach to schooling in America and an outcome-based approach.

Whereas previously the school calendar determined what a child

might do at any moment of any school day, now progress toward specific outcomes will control activity. Time, content, and teaching technique will be altered to fit the needs of *each* student. Credit will be given for accomplishing stated outcomes, not for time spent in a given class.

The teacher's role in the classroom will become that of a coach. The instructor's goal is to move each child towards pre-determined outcomes rather than attempting to transmit the content of Western civilization to the next generation in a scholarly fashion. This dramatic change in the role of the teacher will occur because the focus is no longer on content. Feelings, attitudes, and skills such as learning to work together in groups will become just as important as learning information—some reformers would argue more important. Where traditional curricula focused on the past, reformers argue that outcome-based methods prepare students for the future and for the constant change which is inevitable in our society.

Many advocates of outcome-based education feel that evaluation methods must change as well since outcomes are now central to curriculum development. We can no longer rely on simple cognitive tests to determine complex outcomes. Vermont is testing a portfolio approach to evaluation, in which art work, literary works, and the results of group projects are added to traditional tests in order to evaluate a student's progress. Where traditional testing tended to compare the abilities of students with each other, outcome-based reform will be criterion based. This means that all students must master information and skills at a predetermined level in order to move on to the next unit of material.

Implementing OBE Reform

Reformers advocating an outcome-based approach to curriculum development point to the logical simplicity of its technique. First, a list of desired outcomes in the form of student behaviors, skills, attitudes, and abilities is created.

Second, learning experiences are designed that will allow teachers to coach the students to a mastery level in each outcome. Third, students are tested. Those who fail to achieve mastery receive remediation or retraining until mastery is achieved. Fourth, upon completion of learner outcomes a student graduates.

On the surface, this seems to be a reasonable approach to learning. In fact, the business world has made extensive use of this method for years, specifically for skills that were easily broken down into distinct units of information or specific behaviors. But as a comprehensive system for educating young minds, a few important questions have been raised. The most obvious question is who will determine the specific outcomes or learner objectives? This is also the area creating the most controversy across the country.

Transitional vs. Transformational OBE

According to William Spady, a reform advocate, outcomes can be written with traditional, transitional, or transformational goals in mind. Spady advocates transformation goals.

Traditional outcome-based programs would use the new methodology to teach traditional content areas like math, history, and science. The state of Illinois is an example of this approach. Although outcomes drive the schooling of these children, the outcomes themselves reflect the traditional content of public schools in the past.

Many teachers find this a positive option for challenging the minimal achiever. For example, a considerable number of students currently find their way through our schools, accumulating enough credits to graduate, while picking up little in the way of content knowledge or skills. Their knowledge base reflects little actual learning, but they have become skilled in working the system. An outcome-based program would prevent such students from graduating or passing to the

next grade without reaching a pre-set mastery level of competency.

The idea of transformational reform is causing much turmoil. Transformational OBE subordinates course content to key issues, concepts, and processes. Indeed, Spady calls this the "highest evolution of the OBE concept." Central to the idea of transformational reform is the notion of outcomes of significance. Examples of such outcomes from Colorado and Wyoming school systems refer to collaborative workers, quality producers, involved citizens, self-directed achievers, and adaptable problem solvers. Spady supports transformational outcomes because they are future oriented, based on descriptions of future conditions that he feels should serve as starting points for OBE designs.

True to the spirit of the reform philosophy, little mention is made about specific things that students should know as a result of being in school. The focus is on attitudes and feelings, personal goals, initiative, and vision—in their words, the whole student.

It is in devising learner outcomes that one's worldview comes into play. Those who see the world in terms of constant change, politically and morally, find a transformation model useful. They view human nature as evolving, changing rather than fixed.

Christians see human nature as fixed and unchanging. We were created in God's image yet are now fallen and sinful. We also hold to moral absolutes based on the character of God. The learner outcomes that have been proposed are controversial because they often accept a transformational, changing view of human nature. Advocates of outcome-based education point with pride to its focus on the student rather than course content. They feel that the key to educational reform is to be found in having students master stated learner outcomes. Critics fear that this is exactly what will happen. Their fear is based on

the desire of reformers to educate the whole child. What will happen, they ask, when stated learner outcomes violate the moral or religious views of parents?

For example, most sex-education courses used in our schools claim to take a value-neutral approach to human sexuality. Following the example of the Kinsey studies and materials from the Sex Education and Information Council of the United States, most curricula make few distinctions between various sex acts. Sex within marriage between those of the opposite sex is not morally different from sex outside of marriage between those of the same sex. The goal of such programs is self-actualization and making people comfortable with their sexual preferences.

Under the traditional system of course credits a student could take a sex-ed course, totally disagree with the instruction and yet pass the course by doing acceptable work on the tests presented. Occasion-ally, an instructor might make life difficult for a student who fails to conform, but if the student learns the material that would qualify him or her for a passing grade and credit towards graduation.

If transformational outcome-based reformers have their way, this student would not get credit for the course until his or her attitudes, feelings, and behaviors matched the desired goals of the learner outcomes. For instance, in Pennsylvania the state board had recommended learner outcomes that would evaluate a student based on his or her ability to demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of families. Many feel that this is part of the effort to widen the definition of families to include homosexual couples. Another goal requires students to know about and *use* community health resources. Notice that just knowing that Planned Parenthood has an office in town isn’t enough, one must use it.

Parents vs. the State

The point of all this is to say that transformational outcome-based reform would be a much more efficient mechanism for changing our children's values and attitudes about issues facing our society. Unfortunately, the direction these changes often take is in conflict with our Christian faith. At the core of this debate is this question, "Who has authority over our children?" Public officials assume they do. Governor Casey of Pennsylvania, calling for reform, told his legislature, "We must never forget that you and I—the elected representatives of the people—and not anyone else—have the ultimate responsibility to assure the future of our children." I hope this is merely political hyperbole. I would argue that parents of children in the state of Pennsylvania are ultimately responsible for their children's future. The state has rarely proved itself a trustworthy parent.

Outcome-based education is an ideologically neutral tool for curricular construction; whether it is more effective than traditional approaches remains to be seen. Unfortunately, because of its student-centered approach, its ability to influence individuals with a politically correct set of doctrines seems to be great. Parents (and all other taxpayers) need to weigh the possible benefits of outcome-based reform with the potential negatives.

Other Concerns About OBE

Many parents are concerned about who will determine the learner outcomes for their schools. One criticism already being heard is that many states have adopted very similar outcomes regardless of the process put in place to get community input. Many wonder if there will be real consideration of what learner outcomes the public wants rather than assuming that educators know what's best for our children. Who will decide what it means to be an educated

person, the taxpaying consumer or the providers of education?

If students are going to be allowed to proceed through the material at their own rate, what happens to the brighter children? Eventually students will be at many levels, what then? Will added teachers be necessary? Will computer-assisted instruction allow for individual learning speeds? Either option will cost more money. Some reformers offer a scenario where brighter students help tutor slower ones thereby encouraging group responsibility rather than promoting an elite group of learners. Critics feel that a mastery- learning approach will inevitably hold back brighter students.

With outcome-based reform, many educators are calling for a broader set of evaluation techniques. But early attempts at grading students based on portfolios of various kinds of works has proved difficult. The Rand Corporation studied Vermont's attempt and found that "rater reliability—the extent to which raters agreed on the quality of a student's work—was low." There is a general dislike of standardized tests among the reformers because it focuses on what the child knows rather than the whole child, but is there a viable substitute? Will students find that it is more important to be politically correct than to know specific facts?

Another question to be answered by reformers is whether or not school bureaucracies will allow for such dramatic change? How will the unions respond? Will legislative mandates that are already on the books be removed, or will this new approach simply be laid over the rest, creating a jungle of regulations and red tape? Reformers supporting outcome-based education claim that local schools will actually have more control over their programs. Once learner outcomes are established, schools will be given the freedom to create programs that accomplish these goals. But critics respond by noting that although districts may be given input as to how these outcomes are achieved, local control of the outcomes themselves may be lost.

Finally, there are many who feel that focusing on transformational learner outcomes will allow for hidden agendas to be promoted in the schools. Many parents feel that there is already too much emphasis on global citizenship, radical environmentalism, humanistic views of self-esteem, and human sexuality at the expense of reading, writing, math, and science. They feel that education may become more propagandistic rather than academic in nature. Parents need to find out where their state is in regards to this movement. If an outcome-based program is being pursued, will it focus on traditional or transformational outcomes? If the outcomes are already written and adopted, can a copy be acquired? If they are not written yet, how can parents get involved?

If the state is considering a transformational OBE program, parental concerns should be brought before the legislature. If the reform is local, parents should contact their school board. Parents have an obligation to know what is being taught to their children and if it works. Recently, parental resistance halted the OBE movement in Pennsylvania when it was pointed out to the legislature that there is no solid evidence that the radical changes pro-posed will actually cause kids to learn more. While we still can, let’s make our voices heard on this issue.

Notes

1. “Beyond Traditional Outcome-Based Education,” *Educational Leadership* (October 1991), p. 67.
2. “Taking Account,” *Education Week* (17 March 1993), p. 10.
3. “Beyond Traditional,” p. 70.
4. “Amid Controversy, Pa. Board Adopts ‘Learner Outcomes,'” *Education Week* (20 January 1993), p. 14.
5. “Casey Seeks Legislative Changes in Pa. Learning Goals,” *Education Week* (3 February 1993), p. 19.
6. “Taking Account,” p. 12.

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