

High time for re-think about OBE

ANY discussion about outcomes based education (OBE) is sure to produce a wide range of views. It is therefore important in this discussion to identify what it is we want our education system to do.

Perhaps it is helpful to identify who or what we are really concerned about when we discuss, debate or write about OBE, in particular, or education in general.

The first point to be made is that apartheid education had to go. The liberation struggle in the 1980s virtually centred on the crisis in education, with schools and universities as major sites of opposition to the apartheid regime.

In the Western Cape, for example, mass protests at schools on the Cape Flats were met with ferocious police and army reaction.

It was during this period that the Trojan Horse massacre occurred in Thornton Road, Athlone.

To jog the memory, it was on October 15, 1985, that a railway truck drove up Thornton Road and security and railway police emerged from crates on the back of the truck.

Three young South Africans were slaughtered that day. Fifteen others were wounded in that assault.

The Trojan Horse incident is referred to so that we remember what it was that pro-liberation South Africans faced in the struggle to achieve a just future for all our people.

The apartheid state used education as a leading weapon through which to subdue the minds and aspirations of oppressed South Africans.

Systematic under-training of teachers, low-quality textbooks and insufficient resources meant that the education of the oppressed was condemned by students as "gutter education".

The importance of all of this is that any attempt to change the education system (after the end of formal apartheid) had to take a number of things into account.

The inaugural annual Imam Haron Memorial Lecture, "OBE – success or failure?" will be held at the University of Cape Town on October 7, 2008. YUNUS OMAR provides a backdrop to this important debate.



In no particular order, these could be identified as:

- the existing education bureaucracy was largely made up of people who had actively supported the Nationalist dream of preparing the oppressed to become "hewers of wood and drawers of water", as Verwoerd had infamously put it;
- sunset clauses ensured that this bureaucracy stayed largely in place for many years into the post-apartheid era;
- township schooling, with a few exceptions, was virtually on its knees;
- the new state chose a conservative economic policy (GEAR), which immediately shut down any hopes of the state embracing public education as a financial priority (we, of course, acknowledge that the state has moved to increase public spending in many spheres but it is hardly enough to undo the massive damage done by apartheid);
- the processes of thinking through the form and details of the new education system has been identified as unsatisfactory (various publications point to the dissatisfaction of stake-

holders who felt that OBE as the driver of the new curriculum had already been decided on by the time other stakeholders were brought on board).

In other words, the introduction of OBE was controversial. But it is in the very fact of this controversy that possible solutions must be found.

Again, it is useful to ask ourselves what it is we want our education system to do.

We also have to be sure that we understand that OBE exists within a framework called the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) that wants to "enhance access to, and mobility and quality within, education and training (DoE, 1997). OBE is the 'engine' of the NQF.

If the aim of OBE is to improve the learning achievements of all South Africans, it has been a distinct failure.

The devastating facts are to be seen in the pathetic literacy and numeracy results of Grade 3 and Grade 6 learners, who are systematically tested in the Western Cape.

At the other end of the school spectrum, the matric examination, the results are equally dis-

mal. In international mathematics and literacy tests, South African students fare badly compared to other participating countries.

We have to inject some common-sense into this debate and take the advice of educationists who care about what is being dished out to our children in the name of education.

Thinking outside OBE

Alexa Todd and Mark Mason (2005) suggest that educational factors outside of the current OBE framework could better improve the learning chances of our kids.

They point out that "there is no necessary or even empirically established link (that we have been able to find) between an outcomes-based education and school effectiveness".

They argue that the historical legacy of apartheid still exists in the majority of our schools. Among these factors are:

- lack of sufficient, high-quality resources;
- management capabilities of staff and school leaders;
- whether schools are publicly or privately funded.

They go on to state that "the

outcomes-based education policy... has in many respects widened the divide between well-resourced and poor schools".

In this sense, we are reminded of Professor Jonathan Jansen's warning, in 1998, that OBE would undermine the already "fragile" learning environments in schools and classrooms. Jansen warned at that time that attention had to be paid to the classroom level.

Any attempt to re-fashion our education system must work from the classroom level up.

Education policy that is not driven by the daily experiences of teachers, students, principals, parents and governing bodies, will be experienced exactly as apartheid education was experienced by the oppressed.

For many years leading into the 1980s, the experience was one of despair. But, as Paul Willis (1997) and others have shown, despair does not mean that we do not understand what is happening and that we are helpless victims who cannot come up with alternatives.

Once we move beyond despair, South Africans need to begin serious conversations about the details of how we must undo the enduring legacy of apartheid education.

The inaugural annual Imam Haron Memorial Lecture is a historic and notable contribution to this important conversation.

The inaugural annual Imam Haron Memorial Lecture, which will take the form of a debate, will be convened at 7.30 pm, on October 7, 2008, at the Kramer Building (Middle Campus), University of Cape Town.

Confirmed participants include Mr Brian Isaacs (Principal of South Peninsula High School), Dr Ivan November (CPUT), Prof Yusef Waghid (Stellenbosch University) and a representative of the Western Cape Education Department. The Imam Abdullah Haron Educational Trust invites the public to attend this historic occasion. For further details contact Junaid Daries on 021 637 6900 (office hours).

New computer lab brings joy to Lawrenzia

"IT was really a moving experience to see the joy on the faces of the children when they were able to touch a computer for the first time."

Those words, spoken by Mustaq Brey, chairperson of the Imam Abdullah Haron Education Trust (IAHET) at the launch of the computer laboratory at Lawrenzia Primary School in Kraaifontein, aptly sum up the significance of the brand new facility to the learners whose parents are poor and mostly illiterate farm workers.

"I was glad that the IAHET could work with Dell computers and Islamic Relief to assist the pupils and staff at Lawrenzia Primary in a small but significant way.

"These are the kinds of projects we as a Trust would continue to be involved in to give expression to the ideals and vision of the late Imam Haron.

Hopefully, we will be able to extend our involvement to other schools in similar situations.

"I would encourage individuals to assist the Trust with their time, money and ability so that we may grow the legacy of the Imam.

"I would also encourage other NGOs to work with us where we have common goals," Brey added.

While Islamic Relief was able to secure 25 brand new computers worth over R100 000 from Dell Computers, the IAHET was able to provide the R53 000 required for the installation of electrical points, workstations, chairs and an air conditioner.

"A project of this magnitude and nature is here to stay, to liberate and uplift a marginalised community.

"We regard ourselves as fortunate to be involved in a partnership with Islamic Relief and the IAHET, which honours a great man like Imam Haron.

"We applaud both organisations for their initiative which will go a long way towards fulfilling our children's educational needs," said Achmat Peters, principal of Lawrenzia Primary.

Cassiem Khan, country director of Islamic Relief Worldwide said his organisation was proud to partner the IAHET in attempting to meet the educational needs of children in an impoverished rural area.

"The children will benefit from



Heshmat Khalifa (left), Islamic Relief Worldwide's fundraising director and IAHET's Zubeida Brey interact with some of the Lawrenzia Primary School learners at the opening of the computer lab. Photo FATIMA HARON-MASOET

a computer training centre providing access to information and computer technology that will

directly enhance their potential. It will also expose them to a brighter world outside of their

misery which is characterised by substance abuse, unemployment and poverty."