

OBE INFO

FREE STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION CURRICULUM SERVICES FEBRUARY 2004

OBE in Foundation Phase

At this level, teachers are generally positive about the RNCS and the approach they have used for decades mirrors what happens in Grade R and is mostly based on a sound OBE approach.

The exceptions are the schools where exams are set for Foundation Phase and learners sit in rows so that they can be properly 'disciplined'. Nothing is more calculated to destroy the love of learning so prevalent at this age.

Assessment is not really a problem yet as teachers have the same learners all day and know them extremely well. Assessment is mostly based on observation and is ongoing and continuous. The teacher has development of the learner uppermost in her mind. The rest of

LESSONS TO BE LEARNT FROM GRADE R

Recently a number of Community Based ECD sites in the Xhariep District that offer Grade R tuition were visited. Generally so much is observed and studied of what is happening in our system at the top end of the scale – grade 12 – but little attention is paid to the other end of the scale. The national curriculum policy documents start with Grade R - this is an integral part of the system and perhaps in many ways the most important part.

A number of important insights in terms of OBE emerged during the course of these visits. It is very clear what is happening in the lives of these learners and how the learning process is taking place as they are mostly happily uninhibited.

Methodologies

The approach in grade R is for the learners to learn through play. And do they love it and enjoy themselves! The Conditional Grant has made a difference to these sites serving the poorest of the poor and they have reasonable resources at their disposal. When a quick EMS class was attempted at the one site, the learners were very quickly displaying their prior knowledge of buying and selling without inhibitions.

The development of emergent literacy is also clear – they can recognize words and pictures without being able to read yet.

Different learning styles

A variety of learners were shown pictures of animals in books and asked to say what they were looking at. Most of them did it well in the conventional way, using verbal descriptions. One little boy, instead of saying 'dog', barked, instead of saying 'frog', hopped around the room etc. The experts say this is an earlier stage of development than for those learners who use words, but when encouraged this little boy also used words. It was clear that he enjoyed acting out the animals – perhaps the first signs of a tactile-kinesthetic learner – an important aspect to be aware of as he develops.

What was clear from dealing with most of these learners is that they all learn by 'doing'. The fact that all people learn by doing is often forgotten later in the system.

Group and individual learning

One of the practitioners was doing a group rhyme accompanied by the appropriate actions. The class was loving it, but there were two exceptions. One little boy was dancing to the singing pantsula style, while another little boy had got himself a plastic guitar and was supplying the 'music' for the singing of the rest of the group. The wonderful thing was the practitioner did not try to force these two into the mould of the rest but let them do their own individual thing in the context of the group. This too we should remember later in the developmental process.

Teacher responsibility

The frightening part of observing Grade R classes in action is to realize how enormous the influence of any teacher is on the lives of the learners. There was one obviously ineffective site where it was learnt that the practitioner was often absent and had many social problems. This class was completely joyless. They were colouring carefully within the lines of a butterfly. None of them knew what they were colouring in. All of them were using the same prescribed colour. Not a single one of them wanted to show the visitors their pictures. All the pictures on the wall were of carefully coloured in creatures in uniform colours. The atmosphere was subdued and sombre – very ‘disciplined’. Next door at the same site, the practitioner and the learners too young for grade R were learning a lot and having fun.

At the other sites the visitors were mobbed by kids wanting to show off purple trees and yellow skies all coloured very much outside the lines. The lessons from this are clear – the first lesson is that the influence of a teacher on young minds is immense while the second lesson is that if a learner is creative and feels that the work is his or hers, he/she is proud of it and will want to do more. These lessons are often forgotten later on in the development of the learner.

Barriers to learning

At this age and at this level, it is very clear which children have barriers, be these barriers social (e.g. abuse, poverty, malnourishment) or educational (e.g. dyslexia, different learning style, language). Thus it is essential that the system recognizes this and that a great deal of work is done in this sector in terms of identifying and overcoming these barriers and also working with and training practitioners to help them identify barriers.

The most complex barrier of all in this part of the province (other than poverty) is the question of language. Learners at this level need to be taught in their home language. However, the difficulty here is ascertaining what exactly that is. Most learners in South Western Xhariep speak Afrikaans, whether they are supposedly Setswana or Sesotho speaking or not. The matter is further complicated by the practitioners having mostly English support material at their disposal and the parents wanting English as a medium of instruction.

An immediate solution is not clear – but we must all be honest in recognizing what the home language is of the learners and that they must be supported and taught in this language to maximize the proper development of the learning processes. The child who is well-supported at home in the second or third language used as the language of learning and teaching can overcome this barrier (the average to above-average learner in the ex-model C context) – this is not the case in a print-poor, semi-illiterate context.

Conclusions

An OBE approach is natural and common sense in this environment. Even though these are usually un- or under-qualified teachers, they know what works so they apply it. OBE principles are alive and well.

Furthermore, these practitioners are unsung heroes of the system – for very little pay, they spend almost the whole day with their very tiring charges, mothering, feeding, teaching and nurturing them. The department should salute them and pledge to spend even more time and energy supporting them as is appropriate in a year in which ECD has been designated as a focus area.

INTERMEDIATE PHASE AND OBE

Real problems start to surface at this level. The main ones are the following:

Language of learning and teaching

It is very important to note – as a school, do not change from the mother tongue in Foundation Phase to English in Grade 4 overnight. Keep the mother tongue in some learning programmes for longer so that the mother tongue is supported. Where the medium of instruction has been English for Sesotho speakers from Grade 1, support the mother tongue in as many different and innovative ways as possible.

Combination of learning areas into learning programmes

The province has recommended EIGHT learning programmes (one for each learning area) from next year – some schools may find that difficult. If that is the case, a school is entitled to adjust the number of learning programmes according to context, needs and restraints. The proviso is that in the reduced number of learning programmes all learning outcomes of all learning areas must be covered.

INTERMEDIATE PHASE continued

Development of learning programmes

When Learning Programmes are being developed, as many Learning Outcomes as possible should be covered in one activity. It is thus essential that the teachers plan together and use team teaching.

If a school purchases a set-up which gives pre-packaged learning programmes, make sure that these programmes are adapted to suit particular circumstances and add enrichment and remedial activities that are suitable for the barriers experienced in your classrooms.

Assessment

The biggest bugbear with assessment is recording. It is essential that teachers should be selective in their recording. **Continuous assessment does not mean continuous recording.** Most of assessment (75%) is for developmental purposes – for this part, only highlights and lowlights need recording. The summative section (which is NOT just exams and tests) is the 25% which really needs to be recorded.

Remember also that one is recording progress towards competence in an outcome. Concentrate on the main issues, not on every subdivision of every assessment standard. Constantly be aware of the big picture.

Basics

For some reason, basics are being neglected in the Intermediate Phase. Concentrate on READING, WRITING and the BASIC SKILLS needed in each learning area. Also there will be times that drill and repetition are required – an OBE approach does not exclude these, but there should always be a balance and an understanding of why the drill or repetition may be necessary.

Group and individual work

Under no circumstances should the learner be lost in a group context and all work done in groups. Again, balance is essential. Group skills (very important for later life) were neglected in the past and this needs to be redressed, but not by totally ignoring individual efforts. Co-operative Learning as a methodology provides for much individual and assessable work within the group. It would be useful for schools to study this approach and apply it where possible. Examples and approaches have been discussed in various OBE INFO newsletters.

SENIOR PHASE AND OBE

Most of what has been written above is applicable to the Senior Phase except that in the Senior Phase 8 learning programmes based on the 8 learning areas must be offered. Schools may not steal time from supposedly less important LAs and give more time to others that are supposedly more important. The national requirements for time allocation must be adhered to. These national time allocations do allocate more time to certain Learning Programmes, not because of 'importance', but as a result of differing needs.

Specialist subjects

High schools in particular have a worry that learners are not prepared enough for the specialist subjects in grade 10 and consequently still teach subjects in grades 8 and 9 although their timetable indicates that they have learning areas.

If they really understood the outcomes, they would see that these cover the aspects required for specialist subjects in grade 10 – however, they insist that particular content should be covered and is not set out in the policy documents. They are fully entitled to include this content they feel is necessary, provided that it takes the learner to a prescribed outcome. Therefore it is not necessary to have special periods, for Accounting for example, when it can be covered under EMS during grades 8 and 9.

NOTES ON FET

Progression:

It is still disturbing to note that certain schools ignore the whole new Outcomes Based approach to assessment. The provision that a learner should by and large **progress with age cohort** may no longer be ignored. It is disturbing to see a school deciding that a 21 year old should repeat grade 8 for the second time. Such a learner should be given the opportunity to attempt grade 9 where the principles of promotion are applied.

Promotion:

From Grades 9 to 12, the principles of promotion are applied. Grade 9 is governed by the requirements for the GETC - *achieved* in Languages and Mathematics and at least *partially achieved* in four other learning areas. Grades 10, 11 and 12 are governed by Report 550, which requires a pass in 5 subjects and an aggregate of at least 720 marks (detail on this has been given in various circulars).

However, it is important to note that the provincial pass rate in Grade 10 has been in the low fifty percents for the last few years, with no noticeable effect being shown as a result of the transition to OBE in Grade 10. These percentages are far too low - a reasonable percentage for the provincial pass rate in Grade 10 for the province should be at least 65%, if one considers the Grade 12 pass rate of 80%.

The question is, what is the cause of this? Are we expecting too much from our Grade tens? Are we culling them to produce better Grade 12 results? Are the learners poorly prepared in Grade 9? (If this is the case, surely the school at which the learners are at can see it coming?). Should we blame everything on OBE? (difficult when the grade 10s of 2000 and 1999, with no OBE exposure, had a poor pass rate).

It is important that we ask these questions of ourselves and give honest answers. If there is something wrong in the system we must attempt to set it right.

Gate-keeping

We surely all agree that it is not acceptable to keep learners back for the sole purpose of improving the Grade 12 pass-rate at our school. This is gate-keeping. It is quite easily recognised - it is when the pass rate of any grade from 8 to 11 is way below the average pass rate at grade 12 level of a particular school. 'Way below' can probably be expressed as 20 - 30% below the normal grade 12 level.

Let us all work to eliminate this from our system.

By the way, the new FET National Curriculum Statement is at the press and hopefully all schools will receive it soon. All the relevant documents may also be accessed from the Internet at website www.education.gov.za. Follow the sequence: doe activities; Further Education and Training; FET in schools, with Related Documents at the bottom of the window (NOTE: Documents are rather bulky for downloading or printing).

DON'T HESITATE TO PHONE 0832981119 OR 051- 4054852 FOR ANSWERS TO ANY CURRICULUM-RELATED QUESTIONS, PARTICULARLY IN CONNECTION WITH OBE. REGARD THESE AS TROUBLE-SHOOTING NUMBERS AND USE THEM ACCORDINGLY

MEDIA FURORE continued

Standardisation of marks

After the marks have been entered and the results produced, UMALUSI sits with each province (represented by the Head of Education of each province with an appropriate team) to examine the marks for each subject and decide whether they should be accepted as written (the raw mark), or whether adjustments are needed as a result of a paper detrimental to the learners or on the other hand a paper that favoured candidates to the detriment of proper standards. The teacher unions are also invited to these deliberations.

UMALUSI is represented by academics who are experts in the analysis of statistics. Many of these statisticians, just like the external moderators, have performed this function since before 1994 and being academics, have the same vested interests in protecting standards.

This process is very clear-cut and it is important to note that marks are adjusted downwards as well as upwards, depending on the raw mark. It should be noted that this process **has always taken place**.

As a body UMALUSI thus have two important functions – to protect the integrity and credibility of the examination by ensuring the maintenance of standards as well as protecting the learners against poorly set or unfair papers. That adjustment is an unusual occurrence can be seen from the fact that of the 240+ matric papers, adjustments were made in only 30 – for the rest, the raw marks were accepted.

To claim that either 'standards have dropped' or 'marks were manipulated' is an insult to the integrity of UMALUSI. Under no stretch of the imagination can this independent and basically conservative body (conservative in the best possible sense) be seen as a tool of the government of the day.

Future prospects of matriculants

The media and their pet 'experts' have belaboured the point that the Grade 12 examination does not prepare matriculants adequately for either the workplace or Higher Education as if this is a revelation they have just recently discovered. This is a world-wide problem and has been recognised as such for at least the last two decades in South Africa. Consequently South Africa, with the full participation of all teacher unions and the blessing and participation of Higher Education has introduced Outcomes Based Education to infuse skills, knowledge and values into the present content-based approach. This is seen as the solution to the problems presently experienced both by employers and by Higher Education. The Grade 12 learner of the future will be research-oriented, problem solving and be a creative innovative thinker, without losing the basics which are essential to any good education.

Strangely enough, these same so-called educational experts are also quick to criticise OBE without offering a viable alternative.

Higher Education

The comment that the standard of first year students is declining is a truly unenlightened and blinkered view that needs to be looked at in some detail.

Since 1994, the number of learners from previously disadvantaged communities who obtain University endorsement has increased enormously. It should be remembered that these learners overcome the huge disadvantage of completing matric in a language unfamiliar to them (would 10 distinctions have been possible for an Afrikaans speaking learner writing matric in English or perhaps even in Sesotho?). Furthermore these learners have only taken English second language, the purpose of which is to improve communication in a second language, not to prepare learners to learn in a language as if it were their first language.

Many universities have recognised this problem and introduced bridging courses in English for such learners because at Higher Education level they are expected to work from academic tomes written at the highest and most academic level English can be found – a daunting task for an English speaker, never mind for someone for whom English may be a third language. If one considers the issue with sensitivity, one realises that the problems a student has at first year level may largely be as a result of language, not as a result of a lowered matric standard.

MEDIA FURORE continued

Overall improvement

Before 1994, the white departments regularly achieved a pass rate of 97 – 99%. The white media were profuse in their congratulations and praised the high standards achieved.

What has changed? The ex-white schools (their composition has also changed with the passing of time) still achieve an average pass rate close to 100% as a result of the continued benefits of good resources, excellent teaching and a work-conducive environment. Here nothing has changed. In the Free State 64 of these schools achieved a pass rate above 90% in 2002 and 62 were above 90% in 2003.

What has changed is that the formerly neglected majority is no longer as neglected as in the past. Resourcing has improved (although not yet anywhere near where it should be). Teachers are much better supported (as shown earlier). A culture of learning and teaching is growing in schools where it did not exist before. Pride is developing in ever improving results. Success is breeding success, as common sense and the OBE approach teach us. At the end of 2003, 54 township schools achieved a pass rate above 90% in contrast with only 8 in 2002.

Conclusion

It is clear that the whole examination system now in operation has more than enough checks and balances to ensure a sound, reliable and credible result. Furthermore, literally thousands of people, not least the teachers and learners, have worked extremely hard for many years to achieve these outstanding results. Uninformed and irresponsible comments as we have seen since December 30 are mischief making and political game playing at its worst, from which the only outcome will be disillusionment on the part of matrics who deserve better. It is indeed the role of the media to be critical, but only on the basis of established facts.

PLEASE CONTACT 0832981119 OR 4054852 (051) IF YOU HAVE ANY QUERIES RELATING TO CURRICULUM ISSUES.

WELL DONE TO ALL EDUCATORS WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THE IMPROVED GRADE 12 RESULTS AND EVERYTHING OF THE BEST TO ALL SCHOOLS FOR 2004.

us can learn from the Foundation Phase educator.

