OUTCOME-BASED EDUCATION: THE PROBLEMS BEHIND THE THEORY

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Over the past ten years, outcome-based education (OBE) has been a major reform issue in America's schools because schools do not appear to be teaching necessary skills and reaching many students. These problems have educators and parents crying for a better system to prepare students for the world after formal schooling. Outcome-based education is being offered as one solution for this disenchantment. The concept is built around a list of outcomes, and students strive toward
achieving these goals, advancing as they demonstrate mastery (complete understanding) of them. The main problem with these outcomes is they are difficult to define and understand, and it is almost impossible to measure mastery of the skills.

The concept of OBE was brought to the forefront under President Bush as a method of judging schools, not by "input," such as the budget or number of library books, but by the quality of students they produce (Manno 19). There is a common belief among Americans that schools have failed to educate children, and what students learn in schools may not benefit them as adults. They graduate after sitting in a classroom for a set amount of time, and lack the "higher-order" skills necessary to become productive workers and citizens. What students should be doing, many say, is learning these skills and demonstrating their mastery of them. For example, driver education students are not just handed a license after taking a written test; they must demonstrate that they are capable of driving a car (O'Neil 8).

What has resulted from this outcry is OBE, a system which inventors claim reaches out to all children, providing them with a well-rounded education. The system encompasses several philosophies which vary from school to school. Generally, however, OBE changes the way a student learns by setting outcomes so the students know exactly what is to be learned, and concentrates on the best methods to produce this learning (O'Neil 6). The student is given the time needed to master the outcome and them must demonstrate his or her knowledge (Boschee and Baron 2).

According to William Spady, the director of the High Success Network and one of the contributors to the theories behind OBE, three goals drive OBE:

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. (qtd. in Closson)

To accomplish these goals, each state develops outcomes and then passes them on to the school districts, who then develop a set of plans to measure how they are accomplished.

These theories are simple and very reasonable, making it difficult to disagree with the concept. Why then, are some calling OBE "educational cancer" (McKenna)? The problem originates in the fact that OBE does not work exactly as it sounds. First of all, educators must face the dilemma of how to implement the OBE system. Who designs the outcomes? One would think that they were designed by qualified educators with years of experience, but actually they are being written, in very professional terms, by businessmen, psychologists, and sociologists. Children become "products" and schools "businesses" (Schwarz 87). Also, it takes lots of money and several years to develop a program of exit outcomes (those outcomes needed by graduation) because it is generally necessary to restructure the entire system of education (Evans and King 15).
According to critic William Bonville, the outcomes the system will be structured around do not focus on skills, but rather on attitudes and values and especially on maintaining a high level of self-esteem. Most criticism comes from fundamental Christians. They claim that the system "waters-down" academics and teaches values instead, values that should be taught by the family (O'Neil 6). They also claim the outcomes are "ambiguous" and will be used to teach children politically correct values. For example, an outcome proposed in Maine is to, "have a basic understanding of the changing roles and rights of women and men." Traditionally, many Christians view the family as a hierarchy, with the father as the head, the mother following, and then the children. What this goal does, then, is teach children concepts that contradict values held by many Americans and takes away from parental influence (Burron 73). And to advance, students must conform to these ideas held by the state (Pliska and McQuaide 66). What is happening as a result is that children are "being conditioned to operate cooperatively in the New World Order" (Bonville). Although most criticism does come from Christians, other groups feel that their freedom will be limited because the values they keep will also have to be compromised.

These issues are demonstrated in Pennsylvania, where in 1992 the state proposed an OBE plan which included fifty-three exit outcomes. Almost immediately parents and Christian groups contested the proposal, arguing against the values it would teach. Whose values would be taught? In addition, the plan includes tests to be administered by the federal government which would record these values, and according to Christians, the government would use this information to determine the best way to change these beliefs. After much debate, the plan, excluding many controversial outcomes, passed in 1993 (Pliska and McQuaide 67-68). It is very difficult to arrive at a compromise when people feel so strongly about an issue. And as in this case, those who wanted to implement change were the ones compromising. People are afraid of change, especially when changing from a system that has been in place for so long.

Once these outcomes are in place, how then will the students demonstrate their knowledge when they feel they have mastered it? This can be done through demonstrations, projects, portfolios, essays, or tests. Teachers will need to change the focus of their teaching so students will be able to master the outcome. According to Closson, rather than teaching students, instructors will perform more as "coaches, guiding students towards outcomes." In order to do this, teachers will require training. In Kentucky, where an OBE system has begun, many teachers did not receive training and felt unqualified (Guskey 53). Many teachers in Kentucky and Pennsylvania also complained that they are not given a clearly defined system of grading, and they worry about the differences between district grading policies (Guskey 51, 53; Pliska and McQuaide 68).

The OBE system has major problems that still need to be worked out, but does include a few good ideas to improve the future of education. The fact that students must demonstrate mastery is a very good concept. If this concept of mastery is combined with the idea that every student can learn, then schools will be producing better students. But if the outcomes continue to consist of attitudes and values rather
than a core curriculum, the system will not work. Parents will never accept a new educational policy that undermines their authority. What they do want is a system that nurtures the student in basic skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, while leaving values to be learned in the home.

Outcome-based Education is "a good idea gone wrong" (Manno 21). The potential is still there, however, for OBE to become a working system. So what will happen in the future? According to John O'Neil, probably a mixture of the OBE system and the traditional system still in place in most areas (10). The future can be very bright if this occurs, and it will allow America to compete with the level of education in other countries.

Works Cited

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