Outcomes for accountability in curriculum planning in Australia

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Abstract
Statements of outcomes have recently become part of the educational agendas in many countries as a means of ensuring greater school accountability. This article accounts for the emergence of outcomes as the predominant statements of educational intent in Australian schools, and synthesises the findings of two studies which investigated the extent to which teachers are incorporating outcomes into their teaching planning and practice in New South Wales. The findings indicate that outcomes are instrumental in teachers' planning; that they are stated differentially according to subject; that they are stated more in relation to skills than knowledge or values; and that they have not significantly changed the nature of classroom pedagogy.

Introduction
The notion of outcomes as statements of educational intent has become increasingly important in several countries in the nineties. Outcomes, as distinct from the more general statements of educational intent like aims and objectives, provide a means of system and organisation accountability because they are overt, observable and therefore assessible indicators of student achievement. Such accountability has become part of an economic agenda which prompted the emergence of the national curricula in both England and Wales, and Australia.

While the nomenclature relating to statements of educational intent is variable across countries, in Australia the sequence of goal, aim and objective has generally constituted an increasing order of specificity. The perennial debate on whether objectives need to be behavioural has never been uniformly resolved, with arguably typical practice being a smattering of behavioural and non-behavioural objectives in system and school curriculum documents.

In 1991, and corresponding with the emergence of the national curriculum in Australia, the Board of Studies in New South Wales published Curriculum Outcomes, defining outcomes as:

- the intended results of teaching and learning expressed as a set of broad, comprehensive, assessible and observable indicators or benchmarks of student achievement at each stage of a course (p.5).

A pyramid diagram preserved the traditional ordering of general to specific, adding outcomes at the base: aims, objectives, syllabus outcomes, and classroom/lesson outcomes. Outcomes, the Board of Studies claimed, clarified and explicated the objectives.

Outcomes were not new in Australia or elsewhere. In Australia the label was sometimes used to signify educational intent, but outcomes were more often embedded in statements of behavioural objectives. However in April 1991 the Australian Education Council identified eight learning areas for a national curriculum (English, maths, science, technology, languages other than English, studies of society and environment, the arts and health including physical education and personal development), and each was to have a “statement” or agreed national position, and a profile or description of progress in terms of learning outcomes. The states were to develop their own statements and profiles consistent with the national position.

Adoption by the states has been slow and inconsistent. A survey of the state departments of education by the Curriculum Corporation in July 1997 indicated that almost all states were using the statements and profiles as a basis for curriculum development though with local variations, and that they perceived the nationally developed documents as providing a common language, a national set of standards, and a framework for planning, assessing and reporting. Conversely, commonly cited difficulties of introducing an outcomes-based approach included the workload generated in record keeping and assessment; the cost to systems of professional development, materials development and time release; and the difficulties facing primary teachers working with all the learning areas.

As a result of a review in 1995, New South Wales is no longer adopting the nationally developed statements and profiles for implementation through syllabuses, yet remains committed to “a manageable number of outcomes”. Similarly, the most common modification made to the national profiles by the other Australian states has been a reduction in the number of outcomes.

This article synthesises the results of two studies which investigated the ways in which teachers are using outcomes in their curriculum planning in primary schools in New South Wales. As all states are committed to a process of gradual implementation, and as New South Wales develops its own syllabuses, many teachers are making their first tentative steps in planning by outcomes.

The literature
The term “outcome-based education” is rarely applied to the national curriculum in England...
and Wales, though it does have currency in the USA and Australia. Its relative recency in Australia, and the consequent dearth of data, explains the predominantly American literature in the field. The literature on outcome-based education may be classified into three broad areas.

First, there is the literature defining outcome-based education in its different forms (Glatthorn, 1993; Hansen, 1989; Spady and Marshall, 1991; Towers, 1994). In relation to the different expressions of outcome-based education, the most frequently cited article is that of Spady and Marshall (1991) who identify three outcome-based designs comprising an evolutionary sequence.

Second, there is the literature indicating the benefits of outcome-based education (Fitzpatrick, 1991; Haack, 1994; J. Asa and E. E. Enger, 1994; McGhan, 1994, Mitchell et al., 1994). The merits claimed include the elimination of per manent failure and compromised standards (McGhan, 1994), the emphasis on learning achieved rather than time served (Haas 1992) and the all subsuming benefit of improved test scores.

Third, there is the literature indicating the problems with outcome-based education (Evans and King, 1994; Glatthorn, 1993; McKernan, 1993; Pliska and McQuaide, 1994; Schwartz and Cavener, 1994; Towers, 1994). The main criticisms include the view of outcome-based education as behaviouristic and mechanistic (Glatthorn, 1993; McKernan, 1993; Schwartz and Cavener, 1994; Towers, 1994) as limiting creativity and enquiry (McKernan, 1993; Towers, 1994); as devaluing the affective dimension (Towers, 1994; Zlatos, 1993); and as involving huge demands on teachers to plan remediation and enrichment, keep extensive records and individualise teaching (Schwartz and Cavener, 1994; Towers, 1994).

A full literature review and critique is provided in Brady (1996a, 1996b).

The studies

Two studies were conducted in 1995 and 1996 respectively. The first was a detailed investigation of four primary schools in New South Wales, each from a different administrative district for schooling, and identified by directors of schools as being active in the implementation of the state profiles. This study preceded New South Wales’ abandonment of the national profiles by a couple of months, and involved analysis of interviews and classroom observation using the grounded theory approach of Glasser and Strauss (1967), by which analysis of interview transcriptions and observation generated theories in a continuous process of formulation and verification. The study aimed to investigate teachers’ understandings of outcome-based education; to examine how teachers are incorporating outcomes into both their planning and practice and to determine means of facilitating the implementation of outcome-based education.

The second study involved surveying a “stratified proportional systematic selection” (Fox, 1969) of 48 primary schools from six non-contiguous school districts in New South Wales. As primary schools in New South Wales are classified from P1 to P6 according to size of student enrolment, stratified proportional sampling involved determining the proportions of each strata or type in each school district, and selecting the eight schools from each district according to those strata and proportions. Schools in each district were alphabetically ordered and numbered for school type and every fifth school was systematically selected for each strata or type.

The survey contained 24 items with a Likert scale comprising four response options, and elicited data on the extent to which teachers use outcomes; the subjects in which they are used; the domains in which they are stated; the nature of preferred outcomes (short and long term, general and specific); and the extent to which they are used in assessment and reporting. Data were also obtained on a variety of personal/professional attributes of the respondents, viz age and teaching experience (each providing six categories or year spans); school type (six categories); students (five categories); and gender. Data were analysed using frequency distributions, T tests for significance, and multiple analysis of variance.

The findings

Outcomes guide planning

Teachers in the four schools involved in the 1995 study were obviously committed to planning by outcomes, as the schools were selected for their excellence in profile implementation. A grounded theory approach, involving the ongoing refinement of categories through analysis of extensive interview data, indicated that the teachers linked the statement of outcomes to the provision of assessment and reporting strategies, and regarded the precision of outcomes as clarifying, often pre-empting, and therefore simplifying the assessment and reporting process.

While the 1995 study findings report on exemplars, the 1996 survey indicated
widespread adoption of outcomes as statements of intent. While a prima facie explanation may involve the impact on planning of the national curriculum, and the state’s endorsement of outcomes, a less apparent explanation may involve the shifts in nomenclature relating to educational intent. For instance the 1995 study revealed some confusion among teachers about the distinction between objectives and outcomes, with interpretations including objectives as statements of teacher intent and outcomes as statements of student achievement; objectives as statements of short-term intent and outcomes as statements of long-term intent; and objectives as the specific steps in achieving the long-term outcome. Perhaps the more limited application of other words to signify educational intent may also account for teacher claims relating to the use of outcomes.

The existence of a relatively recent trend towards the statement of outcomes is further supported by the finding that the least experienced teachers were significantly more likely to be guided by outcomes in planning (0.01). Teachers with under two years’ teaching experience were followed by teachers with two to five years teaching experience as the categories most likely to state outcomes. Many of the teachers in these categories would have begun or resumed their teaching careers after the introduction of the national curriculum in 1991 with its emphasis on profiles expressed in outcomes. They may therefore have adopted contemporary policy in relation to the use of outcomes, or have been taught to plan by outcomes in teacher education programmes.

Data also suggested that while teachers are planning by outcomes, this does not indicate the use of an objectives or outcomes model of curriculum planning by which the developer begins with outcomes and moves in a linear manner through the curriculum elements (viz. outcomes, content, method and assessment). The mean for the item relating to the extent to which teachers are guided by content in planning was fractionally higher than that for outcomes, though there was no significant difference between them. The fact that outcomes and content were both seen to be highly and comparably important in planning may suggest that teachers use both concurrently in planning what to teach.

Outcomes are stated differentially by subject
Rather than state outcomes uniformly in all primary school subjects, there were significant differences in the extent of use of outcomes. The sequence indicating most to least use of outcomes in the six primary learning areas was English, maths, science and technology, human society and its environment, personal development, health and physical education and creative arts. There were highly significant differences (all 0.00) between each subject and those below it in the hierarchy, except between English and maths, and between science and technology and HSIE. These significant differences between key learning areas, according to the extent that outcomes are used, are displayed in Table I.

A number of explanations are possible. The first relates to the perception of a traditional hierarchy of importance in school subjects. The core subjects have traditionally been regarded as English, maths and science. English and maths incorporate the time-cherished basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, and the importance of these subjects is reflected by the larger time allocations given to them in both primary and secondary schools.

The other three learning areas of HSIE, PD/H/PE and the creative arts have either experienced relatively recent changes of name and content (HSIE), or are amalgamations of subjects to form “key learning areas” designated by the national curriculum (for example, the creative arts comprises art, craft, music and dance).

A second explanation relates to the difficulty of stating outcomes in certain subjects. Eisner’s (1979) distinction between instructional (behavioural) and expressive objectives was one resolution in the perennial debate on whether some subjects like English and maths enable the specification of precise objectives whereas others like the arts do not. It is generally argued that areas involving attitudes and values, and areas that require high subjectivity in assessment, are not well suited to the specification of outcomes as basic skills.

The survey further indicated that the largest schools in terms of student enrolment (P1 schools) were significantly more likely to state outcomes in the various subjects than the other school types (English 0.00, maths 0.05, science and technology 0.03, HSIE 0.05, and creative arts 0.01). A possible explanation is the potentially greater degree of school-based committee involvement in planning for the respective subjects.

Outcomes are stated differentially by area
When statistically significant differences were computed between the stating of outcomes for knowledge, skills, and attitudes/values, the survey indicated that teachers were significantly more likely to state
outcomes for skills than either knowledge or attitudes/values (0.00), and significantly more likely to state outcomes for knowledge than attitudes/values (0.00). It is not unusual to state outcomes for each of these areas in programmes and curricula throughout Australia.

The finding that skills were significantly more likely to involve outcomes than knowledge, raises interesting epistemological questions about the relationship between the two, and implicitly about the relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge. As definitions of knowledge and skills were not provided in the survey, one explanation is that teachers regarded a skill as demonstrated knowledge; that is, knowledge became a skill when it was demonstrated in an observable and assessible way like listing, labelling or identifying.

The fact that teachers were significantly less likely to state outcomes in relation to attitudes/values is not surprising. One problem with outcomes-based approaches to schooling is the relatively greater difficulty of stating outcomes in the affective domain.

Outcomes are short term
The survey indicated that teachers were significantly more likely to state short-term outcomes than long-term outcomes (0.00), when the difference was computed between the respective items. While teachers were left to interpret the time duration involved in “long term” and “short term”, it was assumed that teachers in NSW would interpret “long term” as the duration of a level or stage of schooling (20 months to two years), and “short term” as that achievable through a series of lessons or unit of work.

The analysis of data from the 90-minute interview with each teacher in the 1995 study indicated that teachers perceived the outcomes in the profiles as too broad and long term. The levels at which the outcomes are stated in the national curriculum span approximately 20 months (eight levels from K-12), so it is not surprising that some outcomes were seen in this light. Several teachers cited that the outcome “recognises the effects created by different patterns in spoken texts” as not being sufficiently explicit for student demonstration, and argued the need for further short-term outcomes to indicate teaching towards such broader outcomes.

The survey results suggest that teachers are now stating short-term outcomes, and that, whatever the degree of prescription from governments and systems, they will continue to develop an operational curriculum that best suits the immediate needs of their classrooms.

Outcomes have not changed teaching methods
In the 1995 study, both analysis of interviews and observation of lessons using a grounded theory framework indicated that there had been little change in the way teachers taught. Observations over a period of time did not reveal any significant changes in methods that could be specifically related to outcomes (though one teacher did suggest that her teaching strategies may have changed slightly to accommodate assessment needs). The interviews indicated that while outcomes created a fundamental reorientation to teaching in terms of planning and organisation, there was little actual change in pedagogy.

One fear expressed by many teachers in Australia in the early nineties in relation to the national curriculum, involved the likelihood of the adoption of a mastery learning model of outcome-based education with an emphasis on outcomes-driven teaching, repetitive testing, and the constant provision of remediation and enrichment. It was felt that such an interpretation of outcome-based education would have implications for changing the nature of teaching towards more behavioural (and some argued mechanistic and dehumanising) models of teaching.
Outcomes are the basis of assessment and reporting

As the schools in the 1995 study were specially selected, it is not surprising that programmes were driven more by outcomes and less by content. One teacher captures this notion as follows: "Before you did things without thinking why you did it. Now planning relates to outcomes. I'm constantly thinking 'Why am I doing this!'". An analysis of teacher interviews and examination of their programmes (interview, documents and observation are Merriam's (1988) three essential forms of data collection for a case study) revealed methods of assessment and reporting by outcomes that were reasonably sophisticated. In two schools, each student had a large work folder which contained the state profiles in all subjects, and students did their best work, demonstrating the outcomes, in the folder. Teachers annotated the folders by writing personalised letters to the students. Thus the folder was the vehicle for assessment and outcomes. As the outcomes were demonstrated, the date of achievement was entered, and the book was handed on to successive teachers.

The survey results confirmed the importance of outcomes as the basis of both assessment and reporting. It further indicated that the largest schools in terms of student enrolment (P1 schools), were significantly more likely to report student progress to parents in terms of outcomes (0.00) than any other school type. One explanation of such a finding is that in larger schools the principal may feel accountability issues more keenly, and therefore perceive the need to achieve greater uniformity in assessment and reporting.

Conclusion

Outcomes have replaced objectives as the major label expressing educational intent in Australia. The practice of overt, assessible indicators of student achievement is not new, as it was embedded in behaviourally stated objectives, but one legacy of the national curriculum has been the more frequent and uniform use of outcomes in planning by teachers. This use of outcomes in schooling, burgeoning from the mid-1990s, is consistent with a government platform of economic reform which is also expressed in the development of professional work-related competencies. Such benchmarks of achievement in schooling and the world of work are the means of ensuring accountability.

Outcomes are guiding planning for teaching, though outcomes-driven planning seems to be supplementing rather than replacing content-driven programming. Outcomes statements tend to apply to short-term learning, and are stated differentially both by subject and by the type of learning intended.

Adherents of outcome-based education like Spady and Marshall (1991) argue that it represents new ways of thinking about schooling. While teachers in Australia are increasingly crystallising their real intentions by making learning explicit in statements of outcomes, there seems to have been negligible change in classroom pedagogy.

References

Board of Studies (1991), Curriculum Outcomes, Board of Studies, North Sydney.


