

A curriculum for the 21st century

South Africa is at a crossroads: To bridge this, we need a school curriculum that addresses the inequalities of the past and at the same time equips our children with values, knowledge and skills for the 21st century. Michael le Cordeur explains.*

Nelson Mandela once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon to change the world". On Madiba's birthday (July 18), one wonders what he would have said about the state of our education and its impact on our children's future.

According to the Constitution, a new South Africa was born with the aim of healing the divisions of the past and creating a society based on democratic values with the aim of giving all citizens a better life. One of the things that was needed for this was a school curriculum that could unlock everyone's potential so that everyone could contribute to the country. The Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) was consequently adopted in January 2012.

Principles

Most educators agree that the curriculum is a process that systematically directs the goals, content, learning activities and assessment procedures of the learning process in order to guide the child to adulthood. As early as 1918, Franklin Bobbit spoke of a *course of experiences* that included academia, culture, and sports. For William Pinar (2019), the curriculum is a strategy for self-development so that you can respond appropriately to the challenges in your life.

I cannot find fault with the principles of the CAPS. The aim is to address the inequalities of the past through social transformation, human rights, knowledge and skills, progress, recognition of our heritage, inclusivity and diversity as well as an environmentally friendly society.

The educational environment

Unfortunately, the inequalities in education have never really been addressed to realize the noble goals. This is especially evident from the overcrowded schools and the lack of resources needed for a modern education system. One can rightly ask how successful has the CAPS been over the past 10 years? Did it equip students with the skills and knowledge needed for the 21st century? Has the majority of young people's quality of life improved? Did all pupils have equal access to the country's resources? Think of the students who could not access online education during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The human rights organisation Amnesty International's report *Broken and Unequal: The State of Education in South Africa*, confirms that our education is still very unequal and divided. In 75% of schools, the quality of education does not prepare our children for the 21st century even though education receives the lion's share of the budget. Poorer countries achieve more success with less money.

To conclude ...

A bridge to a new curriculum

I recently visited a factory in Ashton that is in danger of closing. On the way there I had to cross the new ultra-modern bridge. The bridge, which consists of 8 000 tons of steel and concrete erected along the road, was then moved to its rightful place in just six hours using technology. In this way, safe and effective access across the Kogmanskloof River to this picturesque Boland town was established. Truly an engineering miracle that fills me with hope for the future. It shows that if we know what the problem is, the appropriate steps can be taken to solve it. When the right people are hired with the right skills, success is guaranteed. The same goes for our education and school curriculum.

I think it would be a valuable birthday present for Madiba.

****Prof Michael le Cordeur is Vice-Dean for Learning and Teaching in the Faculty of Education at Stellenbosch University. This is an abridged version of his recent Stellenbosch Forum lecture: "Bridging the gap from an unequal past to a future of equal opportunities: in search of an effective curriculum for South Africa".***