

The Myth of Ownership

by *Bambi Betts*

In recent years, the concept of "ownership" has taken on major significance for just about everything we do in our schools. We now routinely operate from the underlying assumption that to be effective, a process or product must be "owned" by those who use it. "Ownership" is touted as one of the most critical elements leading to a successful school. "If they don't 'own' it, they won't do it." Nowhere is this more apparent than in curriculum development work in the international school. In the name of ownership, countless international schools engage entire faculties year after year in but one aspect of the curriculum: writing down what students will be expected to learn. This process of writing learning outcomes (objectives, standards, aims, etc.) seems to be commonly equated with "ownership." It has apparently become so central to the work of the schools that many rarely produce a document that is actually ever used. Rather it remains in the writing stage, awaiting consensus and ownership.

This practice is rooted in four assumptions that need to be examined:

1. The definition of curriculum. If we think of the curriculum simply as the list of things students will know and be able to do and perhaps some "habits of mind," then spending most of our time writing and rewriting may make sense. If, however, we expand the definition to include descriptions of the "evidence" of student learning (key assessments), as well key teaching methodologies required to successfully implement the curriculum, the landscape changes.
2. Collectively "wordsmithing" statements about student learning expectations, the product will be better than what any other group of teachers, at any other time, at the same school, might have produced.
3. All those who worked on this aspect of curriculum will be better "deliverers" of it because they wrote it. Keeping everyone writing about what's worth learning will somehow ensure that they will respect and use the final product more effectively.

Although the intentions may be pure, because of the particular conditions in international schools, including faculty and administration turnover, the final product this practice is designed to generate rarely materializes. Despite endless hours writing the curriculum, students spend yet another year pursuing a random curriculum. The myth here is that the only way to promote true ownership of the curriculum is through engaging all teachers in the process of developing student learning outcomes. Ironically, conversations with dozens of international school teachers reveal quite the contrary opinion.

Teachers are pleased and relieved to receive a fully developed curriculum that they can actually teach from. At a time when they are dealing with a new country, a new culture, a new language and numerous other "newnesses" that affect daily life, access to a usable tool to do one's job well is sensible and wise. It also creates stability in an often dangerously volatile organization.

The inability of the school to provide such documents, and the assumption that you will write your own, raises questions about the school's professionalism and increases insecurity. It opens the door for numerous inconsistencies, inequities, imbalances and the potential for serious learning gaps.

If constant writing of learning outcomes is not the only way to promote delivery of a good

curriculum, we are faced with two issues: 1. How can we get learning outcomes written efficiently and effectively ?

4. What are other ways to promote commitment to ownership of the curriculum?

There are now many sources for curriculum outside our schools that can improve the writing process dramatically. Many international schools routinely use curriculum from outside sources, most notably the International Baccalaureate curriculum. Several nations now have published "standards," which can be used as a basis for a curriculum.

Other schools will hire a team of teachers to get a curriculum written over the course of the year. Still others assign the task to heads of departments or appointed curriculum leaders and give them a reasonable deadline.

If we accept the expanded definition of curriculum (learning outcomes, key assessment practices and essential teaching strategies), possibilities for promoting ownership are also widely expanded. The curriculum now has three parts and, consequently, two additional vehicles for promoting its ownership.

When key assessment strategies and tasks are described in the curriculum, we see a school with richer opportunities to promote commitment to that curriculum. We see teachers working together to design rich, engaging tasks clearly matched to the desired learning. We see teachers regularly bringing results of those assessments to team meetings and discovering, collaboratively, the extent of student learning. We see teachers and students using assessment results to inform the content of the curriculum.

Similarly, when essential teaching methodologies are described in the curriculum, another cache of opportunities opens up for promoting ownership. Freed from the continuous writing of the learning outcomes, teachers and administrators are able to devote serious time to the teaching-learning process. Shared "model lessons" become a regular feature of curriculum meetings. Staff development activities are regularly about improving those key strategies described in the curriculum. Teacher meeting time is spent in fine-tuning teaching, based on teaching strategies that are directly related to curricular outcomes.

These suggestions don't cut the teacher out of the process; rather, they refocus their work on improving learning. Once there is a user-friendly document in place, teachers become reviewers, revisers, monitors and improvers of the curriculum. Most importantly, they have time to become better deliverers of the curriculum. The key difference is that a curriculum gets written quickly and students can benefit from it right away.

If the real purpose of the curriculum is to help teachers "cause learning" for students, these kinds of strategies strengthen the link between the document and real learning.

Continuous over-attention to defining what should be learned often serves to defocus the equally critical issues of how to get students to learn and what actually IS learned. A deeper attention to these latter two will produce both greater learning and a stronger sense of ownership.