

The Curriculum Conundrum, part 2

By Evette Erasmus

The choice of curriculum, when breaking away from mainstream schooling, plays an important part in achieving the academic goals you as parent/guardian have decided upon for your child. Formal learning has been criticised for being too prescriptive, restrictive and that it doesn't teach children enough of the practicalities of living and thriving in the human world. Informal learning, which for the purposes of this discussion will include accidental learning and experiential learning, has been lauded as the viable alternative to formal, institutionalised learning in that it creates more opportunities for children's personal growth and development.

What if the solution lay in combining both forms of learning to contribute to the holistic development of the child? Formal curriculum based learning has the potential to develop a myriad of cognitive skills as well as provide information about the world we live in. I often get the question from my learners on why they should be learning algebra or trigonometry if they are never going to use it in their every day lives, ever again. The answer to the question is that a subject like core mathematics contributes to developing the ability to critically evaluate information, sequence information, build a logical argument, formulate a strategy, problem solve. The list really does go on and on. In our everyday lives we should at the very least be able to solve problems and formulate strategies to do so.

Thus, each subject in a structured curriculum is designed to develop specific skills that stimulate and enhance brain activity and development. However, the delivery of the lesson content, the learning environment, the subject knowledge of the tutor, the attitude towards learning and baseline ability of the learner are all variables that can play a part in restricting or enabling learning. Therefore, the formal learning that is introduced through following a well constructed curriculum is not necessarily the problem with learning, it is the informal, intangible variables around the way it is delivered and received that can determine the child's success in attaining the long term academic goals. Formal and informal learning should go hand and hand. The one form of learning supporting or augmenting the learning obtained in the other.

Keeping this in mind, when choosing a suitable homeschooling curriculum, will assist in determining whether you are applying adequate preparation so that your child can eventually graduate from his/her education with a grade 12 school leaving certificate as well as the practical skills to navigate their way through life.

In South Africa, national school leaving qualifications (for grades 10 – 12) are monitored by Umalusi (www.umalusi.org.za). Umalusi is the government tasked organisation responsible for ensuring benchmarked national grade 12 qualifications as well as the annual implementation of national grade 12 exams. Umalusi has to accredit an FET (Further Education and Training, grade 10 – 12) examination board in order for the latter to offer the FET learners of registered schools and curriculum providers that have signed up with that specific examination board, the opportunity to write a national grade 12 exam (IEB or NSC).

The following examination boards have been accredited by Umalusi:

- The IEB (Independent Examination Board)
- The Department of Basic Education
- SACAI (South African Comprehensive Assessment Institute)

This means that your curriculum provider must be registered with one of the above examination boards if you intend for your child to write a national matric exam. Some homeschooling/distance learning curriculum providers only offer a curriculum package up to grade 9 and you will then have to choose another curriculum to follow to obtain a national school leaving certificate.

Grades 1 – 9 exams and tests are usually monitored by the curriculum provider and it is generally trusted that the cottage school/learning centre or homeschooling parent is following the test and exam regulations as set out by the curriculum provider. Marks are submitted to the curriculum provider who would then issue a report for the learner. In many instances the parent/guardian can have the curriculum provider mark the assignments, tests and exams and wouldn't have to do the marking themselves. The regulations around education provision for grades 1 – 9 are more relaxed and informal than it is for the FET phase, grades 10 – 12. A curriculum provider does not have to be registered with an examination board in order to assess or provide curriculum content to a grade 1 – 9 learner. However, a parent/guardian is lawfully obliged to register a learner that has left mainstream schooling with the Provincial Department of Education, whether the learner is being homeschooled or has been enrolled in a cottage school/learning centre. This applies to learners between the ages of 7 and 15 or in grade 1 – 9.

Other options for school leaving certificates are available with the Cambridge International Examination Board which would constitute completing O-levels (ordinary levels). O-levels are considered the equivalent of the GCSE (General Certificate in Secondary Education) as presented in UK schools. The international version is known as the IGCSE (International General Certificate in Secondary Education). Upon completion of O-levels (for learners 14 - 16 years of age) learners may choose to complete their A-levels (Advanced levels) for learners 16 – 19 years of age. The Cambridge A-levels are the equivalent of the NSC or IEB gr 12 qualification. Completing the Cambridge A-levels allows a learner to apply to international universities, however any school leaving qualification outside of the Umalusi stable would necessitate an application to the Universities of South Africa Matriculation Board for exemption (mb.usaf.ac.za).

The GED (General Education Development) is a high school equivalency qualification that is based on the American schooling system. It can be completed in less than a year and is considered acceptable for application for overseas universities, especially in the USA. It can be completed online. Once again, South African universities would require an exemption certificate before evaluating a GED school leaving qualification. However, South African colleges do accept a GED qualification upon application.

It needs to be said that if tertiary studies are to be pursued, the qualifications offered at universities and colleges would have set criteria that must be met before the applications are processed. Thus certain percentages or symbols must be achieved in certain subjects in order to qualify for the wide range of graduate/diploma/certificate studies available locally or internationally.

The academic end-goal is essential to the choice of curriculum. Furthermore, it should fit with your child's ability, the learning environment available, the skills you wish your child to acquire through the completion of a formal, structured subject package and your pocket.

Feel free to contact Opti-Learn at any time for any questions you might have. We will be more than happy to point you in the right direction.

