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1984–2004: Twenty Years of Adult Literacy Education in South Africa

A Chronicle of Frustration

by Ruth D. Farrar



KwaZulu-Natal can be a shockingly deceptive place. This small province in eastern South Africa is one of the country's premier vacation areas. It boasts the highest and most beautiful mountains, some of the finest game reserves, a balmy subtropical climate, sweet-smelling sugar plantations, a breath-taking coastline, and beaches that reach out to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. Durban, its capital, is South Africa's third largest city, and home to the busiest port in all of Africa.

During a recent trip to KwaZulu-Natal I drove from Durban inland on Highway N3 toward the Drakensburg mountain range and my eyes feasted on rolling green hills, lush pastures, cottages with thatched roofs, farms with grazing cattle and battle grounds with aging war memorials. As I moved with rush-hour traffic the highway bent and the seductive flow of lazy landscape was suddenly pierced by a strikingly different and unsettling image. On the hillside to my right, a grim collection of mud shacks huddled together. No matter how many times I have traveled this route, I am never prepared for the sight of a squatter camp—hundreds of family-inhabited boxes made of “zincs” (corrugated metal sheets), crammed together in primitive squalor, pressing against the razor-wired walls of a sprawling, white, middle class home and bordering the highway. The car went on, but I strained backward to see more from the rear window. The shacks retreated and faded all together, sucked up by another bend in the road. Yes, there will be many more such scenes, largely unobserved by the visitor—tin-roofed shacks, single-room mud houses—a patchwork quilt of cardboard, tarp, sticks, and tire, with occasional wisps of smoke curling into the sky above.

INTRODUCTION

In a recent State of the Nation address, South African President Thabo Mbeki emphasized the need for a second decade of democracy in which a “people-centered society with peace and democracy for all” was created. He connected these themes to the challenges posed by

the “second economy” which has trapped millions of South Africans in poverty and has resulted in their marginalization and exclusion through problems of poverty, including unemployment, disease, violence, illiteracy and inadequate education.

Under today's post-apartheid economy and free-market policies it is estimated that among the adult population more than 30 per cent has HIV/AIDS (with many more suspected cases), 45 per cent is unemployed, and 50 per cent is illiterate. Black South Africans make up more



than 80 per cent of the provincial population, and for a large majority of them the quality of life has not changed since apartheid or the decades since colonialism. These large groups of historically disadvantaged and marginalized South Africans continue to live in oppression. Their lives in a post-apartheid democracy bear an eerie resemblance to their previous lives under apartheid.

EDUCATION POLICIES DURING APARTHIED

Introduced in 1953, education of black South Africans, commonly called Bantu education, became central to sustaining the apartheid system because it grouped

learners and restricted their educational outcomes to subordination. According to Nelson Mandela, Bantu



education was “intellectual ‘baasskap,’ a way of institutionalizing inferiority.” The Bantu educational system was designed to maintain the separation of ethnic groups and restrict black South Africans to their designated homeland. Here they were trained to be menial workers in perpetual subordination to white people, with no hope of advancing themselves. In 1979 the apartheid government introduced the Education and Training Act as a less-repressive form of adult ‘non-formal’ education that still required all programs to register with the Department of Bantu Education.

The 1980s was a decade of political conflict and, consequently, an era of political activism. The more the oppressive apartheid government tightened its controls, the more political activists resisted oppression. To protest the government’s Bantu education policies, many churches and NGOs closed their schools, thereby releasing thousands of children to attend under-resourced government schools or no school at all. There were no schools for most children on farms or in remote townships.

In a sinister attempt to “modernize” apartheid, the government co-opted two minority groups, Coloureds and Indians, resulting in a total disenfranchisement of black South Africans. The black majority was separated and cut off from society, depriving them of access to health care, schooling, and good jobs. Unfortunately, under a new democratically elected government, little or nothing would change.

1984–1994:

CHANGES IN ADULT EDUCATION POLICIES

Fueled by growing resistance to the government’s oppression, more and more people from the region, the country, and around the world joined the South African anti-apartheid movement. From 1984 to 1994 a sprawling network of groups that was anti-apartheid and politically conscious found its most fertile ground in adult education.

Historically, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) had provided adult literacy education, early childhood education, human rights activities, and radical Christian education. As the government committed more atrocities against its people, the anti-apartheid activists strengthened

their resolve to educate and liberate the victims of this oppression.

Political tensions grew and adult education became a rallying point. Governmental organizations, trade unions, and universities provided adult literacy and basic education to people who, under apartheid government policies and practices, had been denied educational opportunities. Eventually the United Democratic Front emerged as an umbrella for 800 organizations that were mobilizing against apartheid practices and coming together in the politics of resistance.

Within this adult education movement, educators popularized Paulo Freire’s teachings and “liberation” pedagogy as enabling the poor and oppressed to examine and understand the sources of their oppression and develop methods of political resistance. Freire, who had earlier helped mobilize peasants in Brazil’s poorest region, spoke to the transforming power of language and literacy. He called this process conscientization, or consciousness-raising, where learners explored their past experiences and developed a conscious awareness of the need for collective input and active participation for “people’s power.”

In 1989 the Read Educational Trust promoted and sponsored adult education and the development of libraries in black schools. With increasing funding and support from anti-apartheid donors, NGOs and universities delivered more services and produced a variety of reading materials, including readers, magazines, and newspaper supplements. Schools and adult education programs were a focal point of the resistance to the apartheid system. The adult literacy education movement had come into its own.



Predictably, political tensions gave rise to the idea of general education for workers through a close integration of adult basic education and workplace skills training. Efforts to educate black South Africans became more polarized by political and economic forces, and commercial providers began to appear. The withdrawal of international support through economic sanctions coincided with the government's new emphasis on accountability in adult education for learning outcomes.



Escalating ideological tensions contributed to the growing gap between those who viewed adult education as economic and those who viewed adult education as political. These opposing views saw workers and union members on one side and intellectuals and political activists on the other. Despite the hardships, the tensions and ideological struggles, in the final decade of apartheid rule the number of adults receiving adult basic education increased steadily.



1994–2004:
ADULT EDUCATION
POLICIES IN THE
POST-APARTHEID
PERIOD

Ironically, adult education services did not expand in the period after apartheid was eliminated. Despite the government's promises in 1994 and every year since then, the first decade of the post-apartheid democracy

has seen a decrease in the number of adults receiving literacy and basic education.

In 1994 the newly elected African National Congress promised to "break the reproduction of illiteracy amongst the black population and to incorporate the marginalised into mainstream society." President Nelson Mandela declared adult basic education a human right and promised projects in the social uses of adult literacy and basic education for capacity building in the country as a whole. He immediately set to work with a plan for the implementation of new programs to "change the marginal status" of adult education. The administration's White Paper called for human resource development that would integrate education, housing, health

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care, and job creation. Adult Basic Education and Training was identified as a ‘presidential project’ involving a wide range of government, university, private sector, and union representatives in the establishment of adult education programs in every region of the country.

As the government designed new education policies, programs, and campaigns, many NGOs, citing lack of funding, disappeared. Trade unions were weakened and dropped their adult literacy programs. Sponsors of many post-apartheid literacy initiatives, spearheaded by the Department of Education, placed their energy in political symbolism rather than raising adult literacy.

In 1995 only 0.8% of provincial budgets were allocated for adult education. A government-sponsored qualifications framework was established to integrate education and training at all levels. The National Literacy Co-operation was restructured to make it easier for foreign sponsors. With the government now acting as a gatekeeper, federal agreements were slow and unpredictable; older NGOs began to downsize and retrench; new NGOs did not receive funding as promised and commercial providers took up a bigger piece of the pie. These actions were followed by several years of failed national literacy campaigns and initiatives.

Time after time, as the new and developing country struggled to heal the wounds of apartheid, noble ideas



and good intentions were met with inadequate resources, increased governmental oversight, and bad planning. Promising to address the appalling need for adult basic literacy education, the government sponsored a succession of initiatives. The 1997 Reconstruction and Development Programme, the Ready to Learn Campaign, the Multi-year Implementation Plan, the Ithuteng Campaign (in KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape provinces), and the Inkwelo Project (in Limpopo and Eastern Cape provinces) symbolized the government’s promise to “break the back of illiteracy.” Due to lack of infrastructure and support these promises failed. Policies were not funded, education laws were not enforced, and the number of internationally-sponsored NGOs fell to 150 (from 700 in 1984), as many continued to fold, move away, and withdraw their support from South Africa.

By 1999 the number of Public Adult Learning Centers had fallen to 998, (down from 1440 in 1996). The government did not adequately plan for or support its South African National Literacy Initiative, a program dependent on volunteers. The Adult Basic Education and Training Act (ABET), established in 2000, required employers to provide workplace literacy, but policies

were not enforced and other ABET programs were not adequately funded. The few workplace literacy programs that did comply were not sustainable and often did not reach employees with the greatest needs.

In 2004, as the first decade in post-apartheid South Africa came to an end, adult education was simultaneously ignoring poor people and failing black South Africans. Many former adult educators had been re-deployed to mainstream (K-12) education; enrollment in university-based programs and adult education programs declined, and frustration was on the rise.

CONCLUSION

In 1984 the total federal budget for education programs for black South Africans was less than 1%. Twenty years and a political revolution later, the 2004 total federal budget for adult education for all learners was less still than 1%. In the ten years leading to the defeat of a ruling apartheid system, adult education fueled resistance and revolution against oppression and marginalization. In the ten years since apartheid, adult literacy and basic education is woefully neglected, even ignored, and black South Africans continue to be separated by race and class.



Prior to 1994 black South African children growing up in an apartheid system were the primary victims of Bantu education and its political fallout. Today those children are adults, victims of apartheid, and now considered a lost generation. Almost 10 million mostly black South African adults remain poorly educated, lacking the basic knowledge and skills necessary for active participation in their society. Adult literacy and basic education has been marginalized; non-governmental organizations are struggling to survive, and post-apartheid government officials have not found the political will to follow through on policies or provisions for adult education.

The 20-year chronicle of adult literacy education is indeed baffling because it lays bare the 1984-1994 rise and the 1994-2004 fall of hope for education and literacy as a basic human right for all South Africans. For many of the historically disadvantaged, educational opportunities have diminished; inequality has deepened, and hope has faded.

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