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1984-2004: Twenty Years of Adult Literacy Education in South Africa: A Chronicle of Frustration

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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 isolated, thereby releasing thousands of children to attend under-resourced government schools or no school at all. 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.

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.

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.

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 activism, 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.”

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The 20-year chronicle of adult literacy education is indeed baffling because it lays bare the 1994–1994 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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1984–2004: TWENTY YEARS OF ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

RUTH D. FARRAR

According to the 1984-2004: TWENTY YEARS OF ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA, the creation of South Africa was marked by the 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. The government's failure to adequately fund its education initiatives and the political fallout from apartheid have contributed to this situation. The fall of apartheid in 1994 also marked the beginning of a new era, but the challenges of implementing effective education policies in a post-apartheid society are still significant.
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By 1999 the number of Public Adult Learning Centers had fallen to 998, down from 1440 in 1994. 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.

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 Campaigns, the Multi-year Implementation Plan, the Ithuteng Campaign (in KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape provinces), and the Inkosela 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), many of which continued to fold, move away, and withdraw their support from South Africa.