

A review of youth and adult literacy policies: South Africa

Introduction

South Africa has a large number of illiterate youth and adult people, aside from a problem of poor literacy and numeracy outcomes from formal schooling. Though South Africa engaged in extensive post apartheid adult basic education policy development and implementation planning and has, since 2000, attempted to start literacy campaigns, there has been almost static growth in adult literacy levels and lacklustre formal adult basic education delivery. The projected rise in literacy levels by 2015 is likely to be minimal unless the current *Kha ri gude* literacy campaign reaches its planned for targets. Only recently has attention begun to be directed at illiterate and undereducated youth.

History of the development of youth and adult literacy policies and programmes

Prior to the mid-1990s small NGOs provided literacy instruction (under conditions of semi-illegality). Literacy instruction was about teaching people to read and understand printed text and to communicate through writing and was provided in local vernaculars and in English. During the late 1970s and the 1980s various Freirian approaches to conscientisation were adopted in NGO projects aligned to the democratic struggle (Aitchison, 2003). NGOs, adult education units at universities and the Congress of South African Trade Unions all advocated for a new adult (basic) education to be instituted once *apartheid* ended (Harley *et al*, 2006)

With the new 1994 government's commitment to adult basic education and training (ABET) (the new constitution of 1996 contained the right to a basic education for all, including adults) the direct literacy instruction focus faded as the country embraced an outcomes-based education approach with a heavy apparatus of national standards, examinations and qualifications registered on a comprehensive National Qualifications Framework. (This had some unintended consequences not only for adult literacy but also for literacy in schools – it is striking that the words 'read' or 'reading' did not appear once in the list of 66 outcomes of schooling in the new *Curriculum 2005* launched in 1997 (Department of Education, 1997a, 1997b)). ABET was now defined in formal terms as equivalent to the knowledge, skills and attitudes learned in general schooling (Grades 1 to 9) though there were some genuine efforts to link it with skills training in some industry-based programmes. The

policies written by consultants had to be aligned to these globalising and standardising imperatives. In spite of these systemic changes, implementation was underfunded, lacklustre and the output of certificated students was derisory (Aitchison and Harley, 2006).

Concern at this slow progress led, in 1999, to the new Minister of Education issuing a call to “break the back of illiteracy among adults and youth in five years”. The set up of the campaign orientated South African National Literacy Initiative (SANLI) in 2000 was, for a variety of reasons, not very successful. In 2005 the next Minister of Education conceded that the formal ABET system had not delivered and promised a reconceptualisation. In 2006 the South African cabinet accepted a proposal from a ministerial committee on literacy to embark on a well planned and financed six year literacy campaign to reach 4.7 million people (including disabled people). After set-up complications, a pilot operated successfully in 2008, though considerably reduced in scale, finance and management support compared to the original plan. The output was verified, the achievement owing much to the original planning and the materials development and assessment processes.

Out of school youth education received little attention until now because of the concentration on ABET systematisation. Youth, particularly those who had failed the grade 12 examinations, made limited use of the poorly functioning Public Adult Learning Centres. Most recently, in 2008, a Ministerial Committee report argued for a less cumbersome form of adult basic and secondary education for adults, that would meet youth needs more effectively (Department of Education, 2008). A new adult Grade 12 examination is planned.

Literacy policy, planning and financing in the broader context

Although literacy and adult basic education was part of the post apartheid government’s programme, they were given low priority and chronically underfunded, Growth in adult literacy provision was also inhibited by a negative attitude to literacy NGOs (most of which closed as international funders disengaged post 1994), and by the location of adult education in the Ministry of Education where, given the ongoing educational difficulties, adult education remained the poor cousin and was staffed by bureaucrats generally incapable of working constructively with adult education professionals. Constitutionally, ABET delivery is in the competency of the nine provincial governments (which lacked any significant high level adult education capacity and the national Department of Education failed to provide indirect leadership to fill this gap (it had no little capacity to deliver except for a few donor-funded national projects).

Whilst South African acknowledged its EFA and MDG commitments (Department of Education, 2002) and these were noted in the advocacy for the latest literacy campaign, the required follow through is weak, in spite of efforts by a small independent Adult Learning Network.

The underlying conceptualisation and measurement of youth and adult literacy

Little attention has been given to conceptualising literacy, particularly in the last 15 years during which ABET system issues have been predominant. Generally there has been a fairly commonsense conception of literacy as a fairly universal script-based technology that can be used for reading and writing in a huge variety of contexts (to which contexts it must bear some relation if it is to be meaningful). But now, above all, literacy is seen as the prerequisite for gaining access to formal education and training. Though literacy/ABET is seen as linked to active citizenship, improved health and livelihoods, and gender equality, the stress on formal school-equivalency ABET with its set “learning areas”, weakens emphasis on literacy skills as well as on active citizenship.

Alternative conceptions of literacy instruction currently inform very few programmes in South Africa. There are a few projects that use the REFLECT (Regenerated Freirian Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques) method. Projects influenced by the “New Literacy Studies” were insignificant and most failed. Family literacy programmes that focus on mother-child or intergenerational literacy instruction are small but growing (Centre for Adult Education, 2006).

Support for investment in creating a more literate environment is poor and there is diminishing funding for innovative publishers of materials for new readers, though there remains a significant materials development unit at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Adult literacy statistics

The South African statistics use the proxy measure of years of schooling as recorded in the national census. The recent Ministerial Committee on Literacy report (Ministerial Committee on Literacy, 2006) categorised adults aged 15 or older who had no schooling as illiterate and those who had less than seven years of schooling as functionally illiterate. At the 2001 census there were 9.6 million adults who had less than Grade 7 (some 32% of the adult population). Of these some 4.7 million had never been to school (16%). The number had not dropped since the previous census and may have actually increased in spite of the new ABET system and provision by industry and NGOs. (In 2007 a national community survey reported a dramatic decline in the number of totally unschooled adults (down 39% by 1.8 million to 2.9 million). Unfortunately it is likely that the 2007 survey is in error and the reduction, if real, considerably more modest.)

The sex differentiation in illiteracy is skewed in South Africa, though not as badly as in many developing countries. In the 2001 census men represented 40% of unschooled adults, women 60%. The Department of Education (2002) considers that the goal of gender parity in literacy has already been achieved.

Curriculum and pedagogy, literacy instructors and quality,

During the period of system construction little attention was given to curriculum (except insofar as standardised outcomes were prescribed) or to pedagogic approaches or to the actual content of learning. This is now recognised as problematic and tentative reforms are in process.

Though some good course materials were produced in the 1990s by NGOs and some commercial publishers, they were not used to any significant extent and most educational publishers have now abandoned the literacy and ABET field. It was only with the *Kha ri gude* literacy campaign that substantial attention was given to good materials by the state.

ABET and literacy educators are amongst the most poorly trained and paid educational personnel. The one interesting development here was that the ABET Institute at South Africa's distance education university, the University of South Africa, ran a Certificate in ABET course that has graduated some 80 thousand graduates. Though they have limited training they form the backbone of the *Kha ri gude* literacy campaign personnel. Unfortunately this training base, as are other university based centres, is under threat from managerialist changes in the universities and the Institute was dissolved in May 2009.

Monitoring, evaluation and effectiveness

Generally there has been no effective monitoring and evaluation of literacy or ABET provision and outputs except for *ad hoc* evaluations where literacy or ABET projects were funded by local or international donors (for example see Lyster, 2006). There have been surveys of the ABET system (by the then University of Natal in the mid and late 1990s) but they have been at a macro-level (Harley *et al*, 1996; Aitchison *et al*, 2000). The *Kha ri gude* literacy campaign's assessment process has been evaluated.

Evidence of progress

Output of the ABET system has been rather dismal. Only a minute fraction of the students in the Public Adult Learning Centres have graduated with a full ABET qualification since 2001 when the Grade 9 equivalent examinations started, though about 250 000 learners attend class each year. Industry provides various ABET courses but few of these address the literacy and numeracy fundamentals.

In 2008 the new *Kha ri gude* (Let us learn) literacy campaign reached some 357,195 adult learners in all eleven official languages at a cost of R1 200 (\$130) per learner. The campaign undertook to assess all learners and this was done using a structured Learner Assessment Portfolio (LAP). By the end of March 2009 some 250,000 portfolios from the pilot had been assessed with more awaited. Each of the portfolios was returned to the National office for moderation and verification by the South

African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) (who gave a positive verdict). All successful learners (87%) will have gained the lowest ABET (Grade 3 equivalent) credit registered on the National Learners' Record Database and all results will be matched against the UNESCO's Literacy Assessment Measure Profile (LAMP).

The challenge

At Dakar in 2000, the Education for All commitment was to “achieving a 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.” South Africa's EFA literacy target requires, using current estimates, alphabetising about 4.8 million adults (Department of Education, 2002). Though the combined efforts of state ABET, business sector, NGOs and the *Kha ri gude* literacy campaign could indeed reach this goal, the challenge is for effectively managed and funded programmes. The *Kha ri gude* campaign has shown that a well researched plan (in which academic and other expertise is constructively used), allied to good implementation management, can indeed deliver – when it is not hampered by bureaucratic obstruction and failed promises of full funding. Unfortunately the latter has already happened with the latest literacy campaign. So meeting this challenge is still in doubt.

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