

Fast-tracking ABET delivery in South Africa: Response to the Deputy Minister of Education

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This response was invited by the Deputy Minister of Education, Father Smangaliso Mkhathshwa at a meeting with the Head of Department and staff of the Department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies on 05 November 1998, at UCT.

The Minister invited us to address his concern with fast-tracking ABET delivery in South Africa, so that the envisaged ten-year programme of the Department of Education (as contained in the Final Draft of "A National Multi-Year Implementation Plan for Adult Education and Training: Provision and Accreditation") might be considerably shortened.

1. We argue strongly against the proposal to shorten the time-span of the proposed ABET programme, while we are fully mindful of the government's need to demonstrate success in educational policy within the near future.
2. We believe, on the basis of a decade's work in the literacy field that there are both considerable strengths and serious flaws in the conception of literacy evident in current policy discourse, and in the Multi-Year Plan, and we elaborate on those briefly.
3. We focus on what we perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of the detailed proposals of the Multi-year Plan.

It is clear from the international literature of four or five decades that narrow approaches to literacy provision which try to give only the 'basics' to large numbers of people in 'quick-fix' programmes or with reference to narrow understandings of literacy's functionality are doomed to failure (the best example is the Experimental World Literacy Programme (UNESCO, 1976)). In particular, the limited accomplishments of the Cuban literacy campaign of the 1960s can in no way be replicated in the South African context. The assumption that literacy is a basic skill, relatively easily transmitted by volunteers or quickly trained teachers is a wasteful fallacy, and this is a mistake that a modern

government should not make, given the knowledge and experience that is around elsewhere in the world, to be drawn on. A 'vaccination' approach to adult literacy provision, where a once-off intervention is intended to take care of the problem, does not work. In the contemporary world those countries with success at the level of adult literacy provision have, over time, grown stable, well resourced systems with committed and well-trained teachers, administrators and researchers.

Literacy in modern context

We agree that there are significant groups of people and individuals who are often seriously disadvantaged in their occupational and educational opportunities by their lack of schooling qualifications and competencies and this is sufficient cause to warrant a targeted policy on literacy. However, the dimensions of the target group, what it is they lack and what they already have despite being unschooled, are not as clear as has been commonly assumed, and vital work in this regard has been carried out on an international level in the last decade, to which this Department has contributed:

Literacy: We take literacy to mean the whole range of practices which surround and give effect to written language. As regards the provision of literacy in educational programmes, effective literacy provision develops and draws on a repertoire of resources which allow persons to

- crack the code, including what sounds are represented by what letters or groups of letters, what punctuation marks signify, what the conventional design and format of texts signify, what graphic symbols represent in different technological and social texts;
- participate in the meanings of text, including understanding and composing meaningful texts, using selected forms of written language to understand and build meanings that are appropriate to their context;
- use texts and other forms of literacy functionally and critically, including both understanding the different social functions of different kinds of texts, and how these texts are shaped by particular social interests.

Literacy therefore requires more than the coding and decoding of information in and out of written symbolic form. It also refers to the multiple ways in which meaning is built into text under varying social circumstances. In this sense literacy is a complex communication system that involves changing practices and conventions in which written language

interacts with the spoken, gestural, visual and other forms of social communication. Brief attention to the issue of language in literacy illustrates this:

Language concerns

In an ex-colonial context where literacy is predominantly through the medium of English, in the contemporary context where English is a dominant world language, and where English is not the first language of most South Africans, the development of appropriate and usable literacy skills, that include a grasp of the codes, modes and meanings of literacy in a particular, grounded context is no simple matter.

Both our own experience and international reports make clear how large and serious is this problem. A quick reference to problems within the schooling sector illustrate this: At school level there is international evidence that many students from home backgrounds where languages other than English are spoken need up to seven years of effective tuition to develop the basic skills of academic literacy that their English-speaking peers acquire in the first three of four years of schooling. The fact that literacy is generally not taught beyond the first three of four years of schooling means that the entire educational careers of large numbers of students are dramatically affected by inadequate literacy support. Early literacy education is not at all like a vaccination, providing protection against later problems. The gap between actual language/literacy proficiency and expected proficiency as set by an externally imposed exam system is so large that in many schools students and faculty essentially only go through the motions, indicated by high failure rates, non-attendance and teacher burn-out. A 15% pass-rate in matric in some regions is indicative of the seriousness of the problem and the resources that are being wasted.

Thus, more than a targeted policy on literacy what is required is a comprehensive literacy policy that recognises that access to knowledge across the entire curricula of school and university learning is restricted to the extent that literacy capabilities are inappropriate, restricted or divergent.

Assumptions of social marginality and cultural deficit with regard to unschooled adults

The determining feature of unschooled people in the eyes of literacy providers and policy-makers tends to be one of cultural deficit. However, people without extended schooling

are not, by definition, socially marginal, 'silenced', dependent on others, or cognitively restricted.

Instead of clear distinctions between 'literate' and 'illiterate', research carried out by ourselves and by research elsewhere in the world has found that people without extended schooling are differentially positioned in relation to literacy practices.

Many such people are able to mobilise local forms of knowledge and resources and thereby accomplish the literacy-linked tasks that are part of their lives. They do so through acquiring localised and context-specific capacities themselves, or through making use of the specialist skills of others.

While there are some adults without schooling who both stand to benefit from 'second-chance' learning and are likely to commit themselves, at least initially, to such a process, there are significant numbers and groups of people who are both less likely to benefit and unlikely to present themselves for such learning. Notably, those less able/disposed to attend and able to benefit from literacy provision include groups identified as priority target groupings in the Multi-Year Plan, including some rural women and some women in squatter communities.

A comprehensive policy on literacy will be concerned with addressing the literacy and linked social needs of such people through alternative, additional or compatible strategies to that of formal provision of ABET classes. These can include alternative forms of skill training, but also the de-bureaucratisation, clarification and accessing of communicative forms between such people and local government apparatuses.

These findings have direct bearing on the debate over what the conditions of success and failure are for education and development programmes directed at adults with little formal schooling.

In summary, the following points emerge:

- The understanding of unschooled people as necessarily marginalised and 'silenced' because of their 'illiteracy' is a misconception.
- The assumption that literacy instruction to adults is something of a redemptive activity, described in health, religious or liberatory terms as a 'bringing in to the light' of those trapped in the dark is not an appropriate metaphorical understanding of the process.

- The common understanding of literacy, influenced by school teaching practices and understandings, is that literacy is an individualised capacity and a solitary activity. In practice, particularly amongst people with limited exposure to schooling, literacy is often a collective and shared event, with multiple social actors performing different social roles, depending on their skills and location. Rather than the model of knowledge and skill as residing in individuals the more contemporary metaphor of the 'distributive system' is appropriate, where effective performance does not require the equal skilling of all its parts but the effective performance of the system as a whole. The sharing of literacy capacities across people with different experiences of schooling is the norm in social practice.

Strengths and weaknesses of the ABET Policy and Implementation Plan

The Policy and Plan are the culmination of many years' work on the part of numerous stakeholders in the field. The successive development and refinement of these documents represents substantial advances in delineating and systematising the provision and accreditation of adult basic education, within a policy framework guaranteed by the state.

In our view the strengths of the Policy and Plan include the following:

- ABET is strengthened and highlighted in relation to adult education and training as a whole, and in relation to Further Education and Training and Lifelong Learning. The NQF will start to put in place the necessary structures for these relationships to be clarified and acted on.
- The commitment to the integration of education and training, and the beginnings of an understanding of what this means in terms of curriculum design.
- All essential elements of the system are given consideration and are interrelated.
- The expansion of learner enrolment within the system is pegged at fairly reasonable and realistic levels, and the scenario planning allows for flexibility. We are in firm agreement with Point 7.49 (77) which asserts that "there are strong arguments for avoiding setting targets for learner enrolments which are couched in terms of eradicating the need of millions of illiterate people for education and training and rather for setting targets that involve modest but firm increases in the quantity and quality of provision by the state and other providers." It is a pity, however, that these arguments are not actually made in either of the documents. However, we caution against the

reliability of figures generated by the 1994 October Household Survey (which also forms the basis for the Aitchison figures). We would recommend that detailed financial planning (particularly if it is to proceed on the formula of costs per learner per course) needs wait for figures generated by the 1996 Census. In addition, given our own qualitative research into adult literacy, we caution against a total reliance on any survey figures.

- The move away from summative assessment at the ABET Sub-Levels, and the implementation of this at GETC Level\NQF Level 1. However, this may become a weakness in initial stages of implementing the Plan, since practitioner assessment is notoriously unreliable.
- The structures for implementing the system are on the whole reasonable, workable and coherent.
- The resources necessary to implement the Plan are specified, and seem to imply a financial commitment on the part of the state. However, although scenario planning allows for flexibility, the formula of costs per learner per course is worrying. In addition, there are no proposals for addressing financial issues arising from the Training Levy.

In principle, therefore, we accept and support the Policy and Plan. However, we do not think that putting the system in place in the way suggested by the policy and plan, is a panacea for the legacy of educational disadvantage and denial created through centuries of colonialism and apartheid. We believe that there are contradictions in government policy which need to be ironed out. We also believe that opportunities are being missed to develop an approach which is in line with the latest theoretical and research perspectives developed internationally on literacy (and touched on in Section 2), and furthermore, that policy and planning could be greatly strengthened if the following weaknesses could be given consideration.

Weaknesses in the Policy and Plan

- The assumptions of the deficit model permeate the Policy and Plan. The assumption is that individuals have a deficit which can be remedied by getting them into classes and moving them through the system. We have indicated in Section 2 our reasons for rejecting a deficit model.
- As other countries develop and extend conceptions of literacy, the term itself seems to have almost disappeared in South Africa. We do not have a problem with absorbing

literacy into Adult Basic Education and Training for the purposes of setting up an accreditation system, but we do believe that literacy is an increasingly powerful phenomenon in societies, and that it deserves consideration outside of adult basic education classes. Point 1.2 in the Plan states that the task is to "address the complex variety of literacy needs evident in contemporary society, as well as to develop a framework where adult literacy and basic education are at the beginning of substantial learning careers". The Plan completely ignores the first part of this point - by no means does it address the complex variety of literacy needs evident in contemporary society, and in fact the word literacy hardly appears in either document beyond this point.

- The dominance of the deficit model determines the focus on the second part of the above point - the development of a framework where "adult literacy and basic education are at the beginning of substantial learning careers". The "complex variety of literacy needs" is therefore collapsed into a narrow version of formalised provision, in which it may appear that the only way of addressing the "complex variety" is by getting learners into classes. At the same time and with the corresponding move towards outcomes-based education, a contradiction emerges in that:
- The centrality of learning and the key role of the educator become easily lost; being replaced with outcomes and learning materials which are linked through an uncertain emphasis on "facilitation". The principles (Policy; Point 6.1) of learner-centredness and relevance (which are not given consideration in the Plan) became too easily a rationalisation for lack of content in literacy work in the past. In line with general education policies, the Plan stresses the shift from content to outcomes. However, it may be argued that a central weakness in the field in the past was a lack of content, and that the key priority would be to get content into the system, in particular through teacher-training.
- It is surprising that nowhere in the Policy or Plan is our new language policy raised. A sophisticated and equitable language policy could be a dynamic resource in addressing educational disadvantage, and at the same time, the Plan for Adult Education and Training could start to give real impetus to implementing the language policy on the ground. The vast resources of multilingualism amongst "illiterate" South Africans have not been seen as any kind of base for strengthening literacy work. Nor has the crucial need to stimulate the production of general, cheap reading material in indigenous languages been considered.

- We welcome the emphasis on the use of broadcast media for adult education. However, we feel that the effectiveness of programmes will be hampered by the overall deficit perspective, and the narrow vision of ABET belonging in a classroom.
- The Policy and the Plan make a number of moves to strengthen inter-departmental links. The cross-referencing of unit standards suggested in Point 8.20 (Plan;88) provides one such point of engagement. However, the lack of inter-departmental connections around the implementation of language policy is problematic. And again, it seems that the vision of inter-departmental links is simply to add more unit standards to the "bank", and set up more ABET classes. We believe there may be far more innovative and effective ways of addressing the complex variety of literacy needs than these possibilities.
- The integration of Education and Training has not yet been treated innovatively, at ABET sub-levels, and the Plan does not give clarity about how it could be. The metaphor of "literacy second" is one that may be useful here (and has been raised in a number of contexts internationally). The idea is that "other" skills are the focus of learning (like income-generation skills) but that literacy is introduced in a secondary but integrated way to the "other" skills. This is suggested in the introduction of elective or specialised learning areas, however, the conception of literacy and numeracy as fundamental means that it is most likely that these will continue to be treated as discrete learning areas. The implications of the literacy second approach are substantial in terms of materials development and teacher-training.
- The Policy does indicate that that Department of Education "is committed to moving away from conventional approaches to literacy...and proposes that literacy and numeracy form an integral part of all twelve organising fields". The Plan does not pick up on this new commitment at all.
- The use of technology could offer many possibilities for accelerating the acquisition of literacy skills. However, there is no indication that this has been considered.
- The conception of ABET as the foundation for further learning means that, in fact, access to further learning may be blocked for "illiterate" (yet, in many cases, multilingual adults). Schooled literacy skills (as indicated in the unit standards) may become fetishised in the operationalising of the NQF, and other modes and channels of communication neglected, thus impoverishing the system overall. International research has indicated that educational reform through qualifications reform continues

to exclude the lowest achievers, and that existing qualifications structures in Europe are exclusive to the extent that they continue to privilege preparatory rather than lifelong learning. The current Policy and Plan have not addressed this possibility. In general terms, literacy has been socially constructed as that line which splits knowledge and power, the codification of knowledge in standardised literacy without which the knowledge of ordinary people is made not to count. Schooled literacy has become the marker of the fault line of social power. Those who do not "have it" are marked in deficit.

The "literacy line" shifts to follow the distribution of power. In apartheid South Africa, the Nationalist government tried to draw that line to exclude the vast majority of black South Africans, but in the national elections of 1994 the literacy line was (temporarily) abolished. Major institutions of the state were effectively organised on the basis that text literacy would not operate as an inclusion/exclusion mechanism. The National Qualifications Framework is a bold attempt to make the line permeable, accessible and three-dimensional. But it still constructs a line, and the standardising procedures of certification and accreditation will work against permeability.

- There are many dangers in putting all the eggs into the basket of provision through formal classes. Neither the Policy nor the Plan consider the supports and scaffolding necessary in the general environment if literacy learning is to be sustained. There is ample evidence from literacy campaigns internationally that skills learnt during a one-off campaign quickly wither away and die if they are not practised. Research done by us has indicated that there are many situations in which literacy learners never find the opportunity to practise the skills they have learnt, or to even interact with text at all.

Proposals emerging from the argument

The arguments outlined above lead to a number of overlapping proposals at varying levels of specificity. All of these proposals are highly compatible with the need to build a culture of teaching, learning and services in education in South Africa.

The proposals fall under the following categories and are aimed at :

- ·Reducing the effects of "the literacy line";
- ·Diversifying strategies for informal promotion and for supporting and sustaining the system;

- ·Bringing alternative perspectives into the proposed system; language, cross-cultural perspectives;
- ·specifying key inputs in order to bring quality into the proposed system.

Reducing the effects of the "literacy line"

The key policy issue here is that of advocacy, but of a different kind from that envisaged currently in the Policy and Plan. At the moment, advocacy and mobilisation are geared towards the establishment of the formal system. The arguments above have indicated that the formal system will only accommodate a small proportion of those classified "illiterate", despite substantial expansion. ABET policy and plans cannot afford to ignore those who will not take advantage of the formal system.

It must develop a focus on the communicative practices of state institutions and economic enterprises. Within the institutions of the state, there is a commitment to developing forms of communicative mediation, like translation services and the recognition of a number of official languages. These understandings of communicative mediation need to be extended to include the expansion of forms of symbolic communication which do not rely heavily on the written text, and on the preparation of texts which are accessible and culturally sensitive. A commitment has also been made here in the attempts to write the new constitution of South Africa in "plain English". However, much research and evaluation is needed on whether and how such texts are received.

Allied to this is the need for those in power to understand literacy as a two-way process; just as literacy learners need access to the discourses of those in power, so do those in power need to learn to 'read' with understanding the discourses of those who have been marginalised.

The existing work of those who may be called "literacy mediators" across a range of state structures and services needs to be acknowledged and consolidated.

Diversifying strategies for informal promotion and for supporting, scaffolding and sustaining literacy learning within existing contexts of use

The key policy issue here is the recognition that the informal acquisition of literacy goes on outside of formal provision, and that there are ways in which state policy can recognise and facilitate such acquisition.

At the simplest, policy and planning for literacy have to put in place some support and scaffolding for sustaining literacy skills which are acquired either formally or informally. Here, the need is for encouragement, and if possible, incentives to the private sector (in particular, publishing houses) to promote reading. This means the production of accessible, cheap texts in indigenous languages, and the introduction of accessible text into existing practices. The funding and expansion of libraries in particular, and resource centres and advice offices should be considered a priority. (The fact that the state currently considers that it cannot ensure that every school has a library is an indictment of the system.)

Further strategies could for example, address the training of development workers to incorporate their role as literacy mediators. Many development activists already play this role for their constituencies - interpreting texts, writing petitions and filling in forms. These functions could be greatly extended and could include rudimentary literacy training by development activists of their less literate clients. Another possibility would be to embed literacy training for "illiterate" people within development work itself, rather than in an ABET classroom. In this way the literacy training becomes secondary to the training in other functional skills like building, health care, income-generation and so on. Literacy skills acquired in this way could be demonstrated as competencies for the purposes of initial certification, and if appropriate, used for access into the formal education system.

The use of the broadcast media could play a very important role, provided that the emphasis is not simply on "getting learners into classes". Current programmes are patronising, increase the stigma of illiteracy and sometimes insulting to the dignity of adults. A serious overhaul of media programmes is needed in order to bring them in line with up-to-date thinking about how literacy functions in society.

Debates around the possibility of linking with developments around family literacy and literacy development within the field of Early Childhood Development (ECD) (both of which were touched on in previous drafts of the Policy and Plan) should be re-opened.

Bringing alternative perspectives into the system

An awareness of the problems of the deficit model as suggested in points one and two above could have positive effects within the system as it is currently conceptualised. In this regard, the following points could be considered:

- Teachers need input around alternative conceptions of literacy, the notion of "literacies" and the concept of the "literacy line".
- At present, literacy outcomes are introduced as if they are neutral competencies. Some preliminary research indicates that they are fraught with problems in the area of cross-cultural communication, which could be damaging and undermining of existing modes of communication within particular language groups. A vigorous debate is needed before new modes of communication are introduced and naturalised.
- The dominance of English: The complexities associated with successful performance in English literacy require far more attention.

Specifying key inputs in order to bring quality into the proposed system

1. Of the inputs which are necessary to get quality into the system, none are more key than high quality teacher-training (the concept of "practitioner development" again seems to lose the centrality of learning). The lack of basic content in teachers' academic backgrounds should not be underestimated. No amount of "facilitation skills", "learner-centredness" or "unit standards" can replace this. Furthermore, there are no substitutes for Higher Education, in getting high quality teachers into the system.
2. In our view, the next key input into the system at this stage is the development of the link between education and training at both a structural level and at a curriculum level. Learners at Levels 1 and 2 will come into the system if they get income-generation or employment skills. But they will not come in if they are only getting offerings in the current eight learning areas as these will not offer them immediate benefits.
3. The third key input involves the diffusion of understandings of the implications of our language policy into the system as a whole. This means that teachers need to have a full understanding of the policy, that any further development of the system needs to take it into account, and that the production of texts in line with language policy, i.e. taking into account the need for the development of the corpus and status of indigenous languages (not necessarily for use only in classes) needs to have a high priority.
4. The fourth key input involves the limited and carefully targeted introduction of computers for the purposes of adult basic education. Pilots need to be set up, and following rigorous evaluation, expanded if appropriate.

Conclusion

We offer this critique and these proposals not to replace the thoughtful and systematic development of the Plan, but to offer a different conceptualisation of the Plan and a different prioritisation of elements of the Plan which is consistent with our perspective on the role that literacy plays in society, in conjunction with the crucial need for reconstruction and development in our country.

As indicated above, we cannot support the idea of a "quick-fix" literacy campaign. However, we are mindful of the need for action and therefore suggest the possibility that, while putting the system in place in the way proposed by the Implementation Plan, a limited "literacy awareness" campaign could be launched which takes into account the perspectives offered above. There are numerous creative and exciting ways in which such a campaign could be undertaken, which will not require a major financial commitment, nor will they detract from the sensible and modest multi-year proposals already put forward in the Policy and Plan.