

## **Mastin Prinsloo**

### **Literacy in South Africa**

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Several writers, internationally, have referred to the unstable and changing conceptions of literacy in modern times (Van Der Kamp (1995), Graff (1987), Barton (1966)). As Barton argued at the recent World Conference on Literacy in Philadelphia, the words you use to talk about literacy are directly productive of your view on illiteracy as a social problem, and what you do about it. Similarly, this brief study on literacy in South Africa is about the facts of literacy, such as they are, but also about the social narratives that sustain and circulate particular understandings of literacy, and produce specific strategies with regard to adult literacy programs in that country. It is an assumption of this review that literacy does not have the uniformity or monolithic quality that is sometimes associated with it. On the most simple level, reading and writing do not automatically go together, and each can be disaggregated into a range of subsidiary skills and activities (Hofmeyr, 1993, p 49). Moreover, in a multi-lingual society where some languages are associated with status and power, literacy issues are always inseparable from language as well as from larger socio-political issues to do with the access to and the policing of social resources.

#### **Colonial literacy - the bible and the gun**

Stephen Reder's point - that the political and economic circumstances under which groups of people first encounter literacy impacts directly on how they take hold of literacy - is a particularly apt one to contextualise this review of the bringing of literacy to South Africa. (Reder, 1996). It is not merely of historical interest that the inception of literacy in South Africa was so closely bound up with the dynamics of colonial conquest and missionary work, from the 17th through to the 20th centuries. Rather, this has bearing on the facts of literacy today. Secondly, the perception of illiteracy as a problem that affects only Black as opposed to White South Africans is tied up with this earlier, colonial history (as well as with the more recent history of institutionalized racism, particularly with regard to job reservation and enforced legal social segregation, that characterised the formation of the modern industrial state). The following section attempts to trace some of the main features in this regard, with an eye to their effects in the present.

The first attempts at religious and literacy instruction were recorded very soon after the first Dutch settlement in 1652 in Cape Town:

Soon after landing at Table Bay, repeated attempts were made by the sick comforter Wiljant and by Van Riebeeck himself to teach some of the Hottentots the art of reading and writing with a view to converting the aborigines to Christianity. Though these early attempts proved unsuccessful, they were persevered with, and in 1659 Van Riebeeck was able to report that Eva, a Hottentot woman in his employ, had learnt to speak the Netherlands tongue fluently, and was being instructed in reading and religion. (Kallaway, 1984)

In the early days of European settlement in the Cape, not even all the children of the White settlers learnt to read and write in school. The first recorded school was, in fact, for imported slaves of the Dutch East India Company. The school was without age restriction and taught the Dutch language and the Christian religion. To increase motivation, the students were given daily a tot of brandy and two inches of chewing tobacco. From there on, where the slaves and the indigenous Khoi people were taught reading and writing it was in the context

of learning the language and religion of their settler masters. (As illustration, at Stellenbosch, where the largest concentration of slaves was to be found - 18,564 in 1824 of whom 2,869 were children - a special school for slaves was opened in 1824, maintained by voluntary contribution from the White inhabitants of the town. Only 73 pupils attended and the curriculum was restricted to reading and the memorizing of text from the Bible, hymns and portions of the Heidelberg catechism.) For the Dutch cattle-farmers or trekboers who were setting up farms further and further from Cape Town, and who were later to trek into the interior to escape the colonial English government, their commitment to having their children read the Bible meant that many of them relied on occasional visits from a traveling *meester* or teacher, often barely schooled himself and frowned upon by the local authorities, who would coach them in the reading of the scriptures. (Molteno, 1984)

In the 18th but particularly in the 19th centuries Christian missionaries came to South Africa from Britain, Germany, France, Norway, Sweden and from North America and included Methodists, Roman Catholics, Congregationalists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians and others. They competed with each other for converts. The missionaries were undoubtedly the the major purveyors of literacy in South Africa. Well before the 1900s they had assembled a grid of orthographies and dictionaries to cover the numerous strands of what linguists determined as the Bantu language group, those language variations spoken by the mass of Black South Africans also collectively known as Nguni- and Sotho-speaking Africans, as distinct from the Khoi and San people, of the Cape. The process of "standardizing" and "codifying" these linguistic forms created bounded languages linked to the missionaries and their converts. The standardizing of, for example, isiXhosa in the Eastern Cape, owed everything to the accident of where the Lovedale mission came to be located. That there are now exactly nine African languages enshrined in South Africa's new constitution, together with English and Afrikaans, has a lot to do with the linguistic and proselytizing efforts of the early missionaries. Their impact in education has been substantial. Until 1953 when the Nationalist government set up the state system of schooling known as Bantu Education the missionaries provided nearly all the schooling that was available to Black South Africans, with limited and fluctuating financial support from successive governments.

It was largely in the context of effective colonial conquest that the work of missionaries amongst the mass of Black South Africans to the East of Cape Town and in the interior came to take hold. The major wars of conquest which ended in the Nguni- and Sotho-speaking people of Southern Africa being dispossessed of their land and forced into the colonial order, were waged roughly over the century between 1779 and 1879. The first mission schools for Africans was in King William's Town in 1798, in the OFS in 1823, in Natal in 1835, in the Transvaal in 1842. (Dept of Bantu Education, 1969, 1). In the rural areas, the mission station became an important site of social transaction and discourse. The presence of these stations was a controversial one at times and the acquisition of both Christianity and literacy was an uneven and contested one. Opposition to colonial conquest and political administration included rejection of the religion and schooling of the missionaries. In the Eastern Cape, the division between "loyals" (to the colonial power) and "rebels" (those resistant to it) came to be described by the inhabitants themselves as the division between "school" and "red" people", between Christian converts who sent their children to school, on the one hand, and people who rejected the cultural practices and institutions they associated with imperial aggression (and who wore blankets dyed red with ochre). Shaping these divisions was the strength of the colonial power and its ideology of progress, modernisation and Christianity. (Beinaert and Bundy, 1987)

In the Northern Transvaal, as a further example, the Ndebele communities encountered the initial agents of literacy and education in the form of violent confrontations with the Boers, intent on establishing the Boer Republic, followed closely by the arrival of the Berlin missionary society, which conducted its business in the Sotho language, disparaged by the Ndebele chiefs as the language of commoners. "Largely because its first exposure to writing was deeply associated with Boer violence, the chieftom, or at least the royal lineage, resisted the notion of literacy from an early date." (Hofmeyr, 1993, p 42) The fact that missionary education was undertaken in the language of the lowly simply strengthened this feeling against literacy. With the entrenchment of colonial administration and the advent of formal education at the turn of the century, this resistance to literacy kept many people away from schools and the skills for social advancement which they offered. As 'late starters', many Ndebele found themselves marginalised and marooned in paradoxical comparison to the position of relative strength they displayed in resisting the literacy they were offered in the first place.

Under Sir George Grey, governor of the Cape, missionary education and Christian conversion became "a prime factor in the peaceful subjugation of the Bantu" on the Eastern Frontier (Behr and Macmillan, 1971, 378), particularly the breaking down of the resistance of the hostile and militant Xhosa groups in the Eastern Cape, and relatively large sums of money were paid out by the imperial British government to this end. (From 1841 state aid was made available to mission schools. From January 1855 to December 1862, nearly 5 times per annum was spent on Black education as on White education in the Cape, an anomaly given the little state money spent on Black education over the next 100 years.)

More than centers of religious and literacy instruction, the mission stations became sites for the transformation of social identities and practices: A division was created between Christian converts and loyalists to the chiefs, that paralleled processes elsewhere in Africa (Hirji, 1980). The missions' impact was always only partial, though. Most mission schools had poor facilities and poor teachers; there were numerous examples, particularly early on, of missionary failure, of the collapse of mission stations. Where the political and material realities of expanding colonial government made the mission station an important site of social discourse and transaction, however, it drew people into its sphere of influence. "It offered the opportunity for trade and barter, employment, health facilities, carnivalesque spectacle and new fashions" amounting to a type of "sub-cultural style". (Hofmeyr, 1993, p 48) Certain mission schools and centres became the sites where a new African elite developed, committed to literacy and learning in the English language, and to Western concepts of progress and 'civilisation'. From their ranks came progressive farmers, Christian ministers, teachers, a stratum of indigenous officialdom within the colonial and industrial orders, as well as school-educated leaders of African opposition to colonial domination.

Amongst commoners, within the systems of chiefly authority, the mission and its schools were often a source of attraction as a context where chiefly authority over them was weaker. Hofmeyr notes the interest in learning that was shown at the mission she studied in the Northern Transvaal: "... there was one thing which almost everyone who came to the mission station professed a desire for and that was 'to learn'" (Hofmeyr, 1993, p 49), but interprets it differently to the missionaries. Not surprisingly, as literate Christians the missionaries inevitably deciphered this phrase as a wish to become fully literate and possibly to become converted. However, as residents of the chieftom had little place for literacy in their everyday lives, they lacked the motivation and context for such an engagement. She found that people 'customised' their literacy. Some just wanted to learn new oral forms of hymns and prayers, others to read catechism or Bible, or Sesotho primers For a long time the

missionaries were simply unable to implement their understanding of literacy as congregants and visitors to the mission continued their selective appropriation of the written word. As regards church services, these were appropriated by popular taste which helped to dictate the form and style of holy worship and other mission activities. (Hofmeyr, 1993, p50). The content of written documents often became irrelevant. Instead what mattered was the Bible as a concrete but symbolic object. This analysis of literacy being deployed for alternative social purposes, for social gatekeeping purposes and for symbolic display purposes has been reported on in detail in modern contexts by recent research in South Africa. (McEwan and Malan, 1996) For example, the massive spread of the Africanist churches in South Africa has seen the phenomenon of unschooled churchleaders who make free use of the Bible, both as a resource for oral narrative and as an object of veneration and display. The larger process, in conclusion, was not one of cultural assimilation or imposition, as much as one of translation.

Mission schools did not always do well. In 1848 a missionary wrote in a letter to the High Commissioner of the Cape, 'it is not so difficult to get the church filled with people, as it is to get the children to school, who are always by cattle-herding prevented from it'. (Molteno, 1984, 52) At the turn of the century, attendance at mission schools was generally very irregular, and the average standard on leaving school "painfully low" many schools owing their origin more to ecclesiastical rivalry than to educational zeal. (Behr and Macmillan, 1971, 380) In Natal, for example, in 1910, when the Union of South Africa came into being there were only 13, 452 African pupils attending 175 missionary schools (ibid, 382).

Even so, the impact of school literacy on a subject people alarmed some colonial administrators: In 1892, GM Theal, wrote, : "there is a very large number of natives on the frontier who attend the mission schools and are taught to read and write, and they become really unfit for other work, and that class of person is increasing, and they are doing... no good to the country (Molteno, 1984, 55) This continued prevarication, on the part of officials and educationists over whether literacy and schooling had a pacifying or subversive impact on the subject people of South Africa continued into the 20th century, and produced plans for segregated education long before the advent of apartheid government in the 1950s. Particularly, in the period following the World War of 1939-45, a polemic developed among White leaders and educationists as to whether Black people were to become part of a common integrated Western society or were to be segregated. Surprisingly, apparently liberal educators of note, such as Charles T Loram, a member of the influential Phelps Stokes Commission on African Education, and greatly influenced by the model of Black education in the American South at the turn of the century, proposed a separate "industrial" as opposed to academic education for Blacks. Similarly, Henri Junod, Superintendent of the Lemana Institute of the Swiss missionaries wrote that "the head of the native is not able to sustain the strain of mental study so well as the heads of whites" and advocated 'industrial education' and 'manual training'. Student writings in the Lemana Teacher Training College magazine of the 1930s reveal the extent to which some trainee teachers were absorbing the missionaries' beliefs in the European civilising mission:

I live in the extreme east of the Transvaal where civilisation has not yet come in touch with my people.... Considering the ignorance which still keeps my people in the great vale of darkness, my heart gets sore and my thinking powers weaken..... I shall go home and lead my people to light by sharing with them the knowledge I have got from the school I went to." (Quoted in Nwandula, 1988)

The persistent cultural imperialism that was commonplace in the literate products of the time is captured in this observation in 1938, by one G P Lestrade, who noted of the Swiss

Mission's school books that "Everything Thonga, except the language, seems to have been carefully barred from these books."

Ironically, the Lemana mission can claim among its former students, Dr Eduardo Mondlane, former President and founder member of FRELIMO in Mocambique, just as other mission stations can claim celebrated Black Nationalist leaders in southern Africa as former students, evidence of individuals' capacity to appropriate and translate the literacies they are in receipt of.

Segregated and differentiated schooling, in conclusion to this section, was already established during the first half of the 20th century, while South Africa was part of the British Commonwealth.

### **Adult literacy classes: Migrants and missionaries on the mines**

With the development of diamond and gold mining in Kimberley and Johannesburg during the second half of the 19th century the endeavors of missionaries increased, amongst children and adults. "It seems to be generally recognized ...that the secular education of the native races must depend upon the initiative of the different religious agencies, whose main purpose is to characterize them and to elevate their moral condition " Rev. WEC Clarke, Superintendent of Native Education in the Transvaal colony, in December, 1903. (Behr and Macmillan, 1971, 386)

First Kimberley, where diamond mining began with a rush, and later Johannesburg, when gold mining commenced there, were regarded as the most important mission centres in the country. Black migrant workers from all over Southern Africa converged on these industrial sites. Separated from the tight controls of their home communities, they were seen by the missionaries to be more susceptible to conversion. They then carried home with them the influence of the religious teachings, however limited, and "laid the seeds of belief in rural areas where missionaries intended to raise the fruits of Christianity." (Harries, 1994, p63). Harries suggests that in the new urban industrial settings literacy had greater purpose for the mine workers:

Literacy allowed the worker to fit more easily into the expanded and complex society on the Witwatersrand, and it provided him with a new sense of power. The ability to read enabled him to comprehend the printed words that made up his work ticket, the various passes controlling his movements, and the sign-posted instructions that regulated his life. Letter-writing enabled the migrant to respond swiftly to appeals for help from home, and it provided a conduit for the information and knowledge that brought home and work into a single geographic space. On the Witwatersrand the imagined community created by a standard vernacular literacy was made tangible as, confronted by competing ethnic groups, membership of a bonded linguistic group became a cornerstone of the workers' sense of security and belonging. Blacks who acquired a basic literacy and a rudimentary knowledge of arithmetic could occupy leadership positions in the local church and find relatively well-paid jobs as clerks, translators or letter-writers. An ability to read in the vernacular, and particularly in English, gave the miner access to worlds that were both spiritual and secular, while a familiarity with the symbols and codes of whites allowed him a certain upward mobility. The literate worker could become a dormitory scribe, writing dictated letters for one shilling or move into domestic service, clerical posts, or other forms of service beyond the mine. (Harries, 1994, p 215)

Significantly, though, these literacy skills had value in a context where the large mass of migrant workers did not pursue the acquisition of these skills.

Small literacy groups proliferated in the worker compounds and nearby mission halls of the Kimberley diamond fields and on the Witwatersrand gold mines. Most worked under the guidance of church elders, but many were run by the migrant workers. The mining houses often aided the missionaries in their efforts, providing venues for classes and purchasing books: In 1908 some thirty two thousand Bibles, almost three quarters of which were in vernacular languages, were sold to Blacks by the Christian Literature Depot in President street, Johannesburg. (Harries, 1994, 76). Cities like Johannesburg became centres of literacy, where migrants from the rural areas were able to join church libraries and buy spelling books, primers and a variety of religious magazines and prayer books. While the books and teaching were often in the vernacular, the content reflected little else from the migrant miners' own world. (Harries, 1994, p 216)

Many migrants returned home with an element of literacy and a familiarity with European concepts of ethnicity, race and religion, some with a proselytizing zeal, who formed night schools for adults, and day schools for children, the popularity of European education paralleled by a growth in the popularity of Christianity. Literacy was not to take hold back home, however, to the extent that Christianity did, in rural areas cut off from the daily social practices of the colonisers.

### **Literacy, industrialisation and the segregated labour market**

The first half of the 20th century saw a slow increase in Black school enrollment, but not for skill training. A color bar operated in mining and industry, limiting Black workers to unskilled categories of labor. One of the pivots of the industrial system in South Africa, as it developed in the first 60 years of the 20th century was its use of cheap Black labor, which became increasingly available as the rural base of people declined, under the pressure of new taxation, in particular. Mission schools continued to be the major site of schooling for Black South Africans, but their impact was restricted to a minority of children. Of those who went to school, the bulk left after only a few years of irregular schooling, interspersed with cattle herding duties. The majority of young boys left for jobs as unskilled migrant workers, on the mines in particular, as soon as they were old enough (Kallaway, 1984). Young girls would often terminate their schooling on entry into early, arranged marriages. However, some of the children of both the traditional and emerging Black elite received substantial secondary and post-secondary schooling at institutions such as Lovedale in the Eastern Cape, and it was from their ranks that the leaders of the modern Black anti-apartheid movement came.

### **The Communist Party Night Schools**

An alternative, secular tradition of adult literacy teaching, though smaller in scale, was started by members of the communist party in the early 1920s. The White communists, Sidney Bunting, David Jones and later Edward Roux, were ahead of the rest of their Party in their commitment to working with black workers when the Party was still committed to organising only white workers. The following quotation is the first reference to a secular tradition of adult night schools, and captures their drama and the fragility:

Bunting and Jones continued to have difficulties, not only with the police, but also with their fellow members of the International Socialist League, many of whom doubted the wisdom of this direct approach to the black workers. But the two transients were not discouraged... Jones started night classes for Africans, teaching them to read and write. He got them to write on their slates: "Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains and a world to win." But few natives actually joined the League, they felt uncomfortable and shy at white meetings. (E Roux, 1948, p131-2)

They persevered, however, and in the late 1920s, Roux reports, the Party school in Johannesburg boasted 80 regulars, some of whom became leaders and organisers in the CP and the Industrial and Commercial Union. Among people who attended the night school was Moses Kotane, later to become general secretary of the CP and an executive member of the African National Congress. The CP night schools faded away during the 1930s, as a result of upheavals in the Party and the decline of its mass support. While the Party night schools might not have had much to show in terms of developing literacy skills, they apparently contributed to the commitment of some emerging Party activists. (Bird, 1984)

### **The Mayibuye Night Schools**

The African College, started by a group of students from the University of the Witwatersrand in the late 1940s, grew into the Mayibuye Night Schools. The night schools were started on a wave of anti-fascism produced by South African soldiers connection with the Allied war effort. The schools were modelled on conventional schooling, teaching literacy in a manner closer to school teaching, and received the support, first of the Transvaal Teachers Association, then municipal subsidy and were on the brink of further state subsidy when the Nationalist Party came to power and proceeded to take total control of all Black education. The night school movement all but disappeared soon thereafter. In 1955, at its peak, the movement had centres in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Pretoria, Port Elizabeth and East London, with an estimated 10 000 people attending night school. By 1962 it was reported that there were only 2 218 students left in night schools and continuation classes.

In Wilson's account of the night schools around Cape Town from 1945 to 1947 it is the teachers and administrators who are the heroes of her narrative and the people attending classes remain remarkably insubstantial. Hers is the story of a literacy volunteer movement that echoes similar efforts elsewhere in the world, of a small band of dedicated teachers working tirelessly in the face of the indifference of the larger society. It is the story of the teachers rather than the learners. In summing up the effects of the night schools, which had over 500 students in regular attendance at their peak, she sketches the adult learners as follows:

Illiterate, poverty-stricken migrants, cut off from family life and confused in a new urban worker society found a warm, responsive environment in the night schools. Here they learnt to read and write their own language and write letters home, to speak, read and write the new language used in their daily working lives and to develop greater fluency in language skills. As they progressed, they learnt to comprehend an ever-widening range of written and spoken thought, to read newspapers and to take part in a range of community activities that could also extend to church, trade unions and politics. Sometimes, if lucky, through their new learning, they earned slightly better wages and found slightly better jobs. (Wilson, 1991, 33)

Encapsulated here is the standard cultural stereotype of the adult literacy learner that has characterised much of the adult literacy work in South Africa that has followed. The stereotype is that of a culturally void dependent, slowly emerging from helplessness. In fact, the processes of cultural assimilation, hybridisation and relocation have always been more complex, as recent research has shown (Kell, 1966; Malan, 1966) and as Harries and Hofmeyr, referred to above, showed in their detailed and nuanced accounts.

### **Literacy statistics and the expansion of basic schooling under Bantu Education (1953 to 1990)**

Estimates of illiteracy in South Africa have always worked from data on school exits, assuming four of five years of schooling approximating a level that correlates with 'functional literacy'. In fact, there is nothing functional in this measure at all, as it does not reflect the social practices which shape literacy use. This is most obvious in a society where formal education has been unevenly spread, and the social uses of literacy are so wide, from religious practices, to letter-writing practices of migrant workers, to the literacies of population administration and local government to which people are constantly exposed. However, such statistics do give an overview into the rate of expansion of formal schooling, and are reviewed with this in mind.

Education provision in SA was on a small scale for everyone, including Whites, well into the 2nd half of the 19th century. The Eybers Committee on Adult Education of 1945 estimated that about 80% of the adult Bantu population and about 70 to 75% of the combined Indian and Coloured population were illiterate (Behr and Macmillan, 346). The expansion of Black schooling was substantial in the following decade, but under such tight authoritarian constraints and budgetary limits that standards were severely compromised. The drop-out rates in the lower levels of primary schooling were huge.

In 1969 there were reportedly 2,500 000 African pupils in schools in SA, of whom approximately 70% were below Std III, and only 4,2% were in Secondary schooling (Table, Bantu Education Journal, Vol. XVI, No 3, 1970.)

However, the expansion of schooling for Blacks had been substantial since 1953. In 1953 there were 852,000 pupils in Black Primary schools; by 1970 this figure had risen to 2,615,400 and to 5,365,600 by 1988. In 1953, primary school enrolments were 37,5% of the total population of children in that age band, and 76,3% of the total in 1985, despite population growth (E Unterhalter, 1991, p37). Secondary school enrolments rose from 3,1% in 1953 to 47,1% of all children between the ages of 15-19. (Ibid, p39) The schooling was segregated and tightly controlled within a Christian National ideological framework. Tensions over inadequate, under-resourced and inferior education reached a head over enforced Afrikaans as a medium of instruction and precipitated by the school rebellions of 1976 and 1980 which signalled the beginning of the end of apartheid.

### **Adult literacy night schools in the 1970s and 1980s**

Despite being illegal in terms of the law that outlawed any educational efforts for Blacks outside of state control, a number of literacy endeavours re-established themselves after the 1960s. The Institute of Race Relations (IRR) and the Methodist church-backed Operation Upgrade ran classes in literacy for adults, most noticeably on the gold mines, using the methods developed by Frank Laubach in the Philippines in the 1930s. With the development of 'functional literacy' approaches internationally, connected to UNESCO's Experimental World Literacy Programme, the IRR redesigned its approach and set up an independent project called the Bureau of Literacy and Literature (BLL). In the middle 1970s, as opposition to the apartheid state grew more visible, independent literacy projects inspired by readings of Paulo Freire emerged, initially led by Learn and Teach, a Johannesburg project funded by European anti-apartheid donors. All this work continued through the 1980s. In the 1980s big corporations made several moves into setting up night classes for workers, but most of these failed first time around. Towards the end of the 1980s several big projects, particularly on the gold mines, were visible again, and under development. (Vinjevold 1989)

### **Policy development in the 1990s**

The years from 1990 to 1994 were characterised by intense policy debate in anticipation of the work facing the new government and adult literacy was one of many busy sites of such

debate. (Cosatu, 1992; NEPI, 1993). The key terms that came to characterise the wider debate around social redress of the imbalances of apartheid, on the one hand, and routes to prosperity, on the other, and which became incorporated into new policy, were those of **reconstruction** and **development**. The changing political circumstances, associated with the shift from minority rule to an internationally recognised non-racial democracy, have led to a refiguring of conceptions of illiteracy as a social problem. Whereas it was located as an issue within oppositional political discourse before 1990, as evidence of the state's repression of the rights of Black people, it is now an issue within a state sponsored discourse of social development, with significant implications for policy, provision and research.

In 1991 a task team of the the National Education Policy Investigation, with the backing of the African National Congress, undertook the most substantial review of adult literacy work up to that time. On available data from the development bank of South Africa and from the 1985 census, the report estimated that around 15 million people out of a total adult population of 23 million people had less than five years of schooling. The report cautioned that these figures were not fully reliable, nor were they indication of a clearly defined target group for adult education efforts. Nonetheless, the figure of 15 million illiterates has received considerable attention in policy and newspaper reports and has been used to motivate for resources for adult literacy work. More recent estimates (U. of Natal, forthcoming) put the figure at less than half the original estimate.

The NEPI research found that in the early 1990s there were less than 100 000 people attending any form of adult literacy instruction, which took place across three distinct sites, that of state provision, provision within the commercial, industrial and mining sectors, and non-government organisation (ngo) provision by independently funded literacy projects. All sectors were characterised by conditions of low attendance, high drop-out rates, poorly kept records of completion and evidence of low achievement. The state and business provided about 45% each, and the ngos the remaining 10%.

State provision was very small in proportion to what could be expected, and badly resourced. Provision was decentralised into eight regions, with programmes being either state-run or state-aided. Courses paralleled formal school provision. Teachers were mostly primary school teachers who had received five days special training. The curriculum was formal and non-interactive. The system was a routinised one which displayed ineffectiveness and lack of innovative capacity.

Industrial provision was seen to be uncoordinated and predicated on a history of company literacy projects that had failed in preceding decades. There were at least twelve independent human resources development agencies selling pre-packaged programmes directly chiefly at the primary labour market. Lack of consultation with workers and their organisations weakened the credibility of many of these schemes. However, amongst the larger corporations, such as General Mining and Eskom, investment of resources and research and development led to substantial curriculum development.

The research estimated that there were approximately 70 non-profit ngos engage in literacy work across the country, varying in size, resources, methods, scope. There were, in addition, an estimated twelve commercial agencies providing of literacy teachers, mostly for the industrial sector.

A survey run by NEPI developed data on 42, 430 of the estimated adult learners, received from the literacy programmes. Data indicated that there were more women than men learners (55,8%), however industry-based programmes run predominantly for men were underrepresented in the survey; 71% of learners were under the age of 40 and only 4% over

the age of 50%. Most interestingly, class size averaged between 11 and 14 students per teachers, across the three major sites of provision, reflecting the common problems experienced with recruiting and retaining students.

The NEPI research reviewed the competing policy options for developing literacy and Adult Basic Education in South Africa on the eve of the formation of Government of National Unity, and found strong support for the development of a state-led Adult Basic Education and Training system that foregrounded Human Resources Development (HRD) concerns. This support came, in particular from the Congress of South Africa (COSATU) ( the leading trade union group in the country), the African National Congress (ANC) which was to become the leader of the Government of National Unity and from within organised business,

### **The new framework for Adult Basic Education and Training**

The Government of National Unity came to power in 1994 and committed itself to a revision of the education and training systems, to align them closer with the skills-development concerns of industry and labour and to open out access to education and training. A new National Qualifications Framework is being developed, which aims to provide the certificate and assessment mechanisms whereby the national provision of education and training of both children and adults can be comprehensively integrated into one system, with commensurate qualifications across different sectors of the system.

Literacy is recontextualised as **basic skill acquisition** within the parameters of the National Qualifications Framework, and comes to occupy Levels 1, 2 and 3 within a system of Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) that is presently under construction. Through the provision of a framework of recognised modules having equivalence and value across the education and training system, and through the construction of a national outcomes-based assessment system it is intended that access to educational opportunities will be available to all in a way that both promotes social equity as well as skill development for purposes of enhancing economic productivity. Literacy instruction for adults is being developed in these terms as an alternative entry point to basic schooling into the wider system of education and training:

The provision of adult basic education and training is linked to the development of human resources within national developments, aimed at restructuring the economy, addressing past inequalities, and the building of a democratic society. (African National Congress, A National Adult Basic Education Framework - Interim Guidelines, 1965)

Adult literacy has been named as a Presidential Lead Project within the Reconstruction and Development Programme of the new government. A Department of Adult Education has been created within the Ministry of Education and R50 million has been allocated to set up regional infrastructures. In addition, donor funding, particularly from the European Union has been received for a non-government donor programme concerned with putting 1 000 learners into literacy classes in each of the nine provinces.

The research of the Social uses of Literacy programme of the Universities of Cape Town and Western Cape has produced a study which argues against the NQF conceptualisation of literacy acquisition in terms of a homogenous set of technical skills whose acquisition is primarily for purposes of further formal learning and training. (Prinsloo and Breier, 1966) The researchers argue, on the evidence of 12 intensive studies of literacy in social practice in South Africa, that the attempt to enculturate an underclass of adults into standardised literacy is unlikely to deliver on the expectations that the 'basic skills' paradigm assumes. They emphasise the informal processes of literacy use and acquisition in non-school contexts and

foreground the processes of ‘apprenticeship learning’ in lived situations which characterise much of the acquisition of literacy skills where levels of attainment of formal schooling are low, together with processes of mediation of literacy practices by skilled persons on behalf of less skilled persons. The research has argued for a reconceptualisation of the processes of literacy teaching that characterise the first levels of the NQF system, and called for greater attention in curricula and assessment mechanisms to the lived realities of literacy use in social context. This research, commissioned by the major non-government funder of adult literacy work in South Africa, the Joint Education Trust is hopefully set to contribute to greater realism, depth and relevance in the planning of adult literacy provision that is underway in South Africa