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Reading and writing the new South Africa: Literacy and adult basic education and training in South Africa

November 2000

Part 1: Definitions and statistics

What is literacy and what is adult basic education?

In mapping the terrain of literacy and basic education, the search is complicated by the definitional and discourse problems association with the terms "literacy" and "adult basic education". In South Africa today, a discourse about formalised **adult basic education and training** (ABET) has almost completely eliminated other and earlier discourses about **reading** and **literacy** that were dominant prior to the 1990s. Currently ABET has come to be defined as education and training provision for people aged 15 and over who are not engaged in formal schooling or higher education and who have an education level of less than grade 9 (Standard 7). So defined, ABE is essentially an adult equivalent of the basic compulsory schooling that children receive and is to be recognised by the award of a General Certificate in Education (GETC) - the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level 1 qualification.

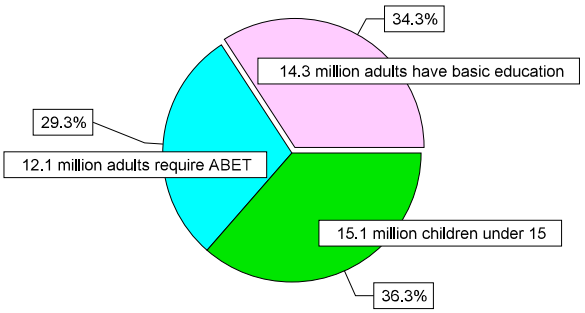
In what senses then, is ABE similar to or different from literacy? If one takes a commonsense view that literacy is about being able to read, write and count, then ABE is clearly a much more formal engagement in classroom curricula in some kind of ABE system, and literacy simply the initial skills upon which that basic education is grounded. But literacy is itself an exceedingly elusive concept and the commonsense view of it is increasingly seen as problematic. Literacy definitions cover a wide continuum ranging from basic alphabetisation through alphabetisation plus varying degrees of proficiency in workplace languages and basic life skills needed for effective functioning in society (so-called functional literacy) to literacy as a complex set of skills and behaviours embedded within the political, economic and social relations of a particular society.

During the 1980s, radical literacy organisations saw literacy work as a political contribution that would enable the disenfranchised to become conscientised and more able to contribute to the various struggles currently being waged against the apartheid regime. This literacy sector, in alliance with trade unions and other actors, showed its initial interest in adult basic education because of a programmatic desire to see that the newly literate and undereducated be exposed to a full basic education that would give them access to the knowledge and skills that an active citizen was considered to need in the modern world. To what extent the current adult basic education and training system in South Africa is a natural outcome of this tradition or rather an alien and technicist replacement and subversion of it will be a matter of future debate.

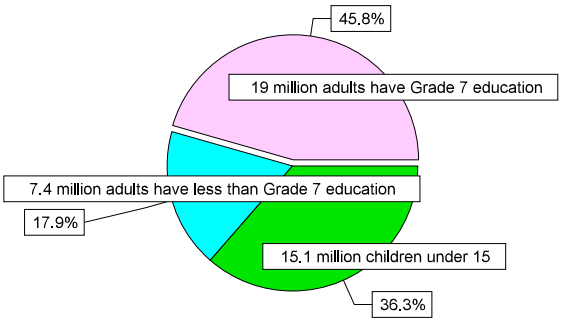
How many adults in South Africa lack a basic education?

South Africa has, according to the 1996 census, a population of 40,583,573 people. How many of the adults in this population are illiterate or lack a basic education?

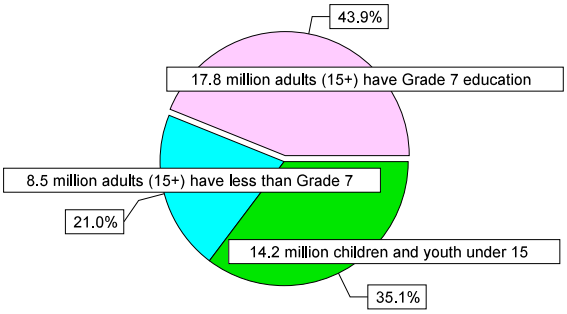
Using less than nine years of schooling and a cut-off age of 15 years of age, it was estimated from the 1995 October Household Survey that there were about 12.1 million adults who have not received a full general education (that is, 45% of adults). Of these, 2.9 million (11% of adults) were estimated to be totally illiterate (they had received no formal schooling at all).



Taking a lower, seven years of schooling, level as a crude indicator of functional literacy, there were about 7.4 million adults (28% of all adults) who are functionally illiterate. Of these, about 2.9 million (11% of all adults) were estimated to be totally illiterate (they have received no formal schooling at all).



The 1996 census found that there were nearly 4.1 million adults aged 20 and over (19% of such adults) with no schooling (Statistics South Africa, 1998a). The graph below shows that there were over 8.5 million adults aged 15 or more (32% of such adults) who have less than seven years of schooling and 13.2 million had not achieved a full nine years of schooling.

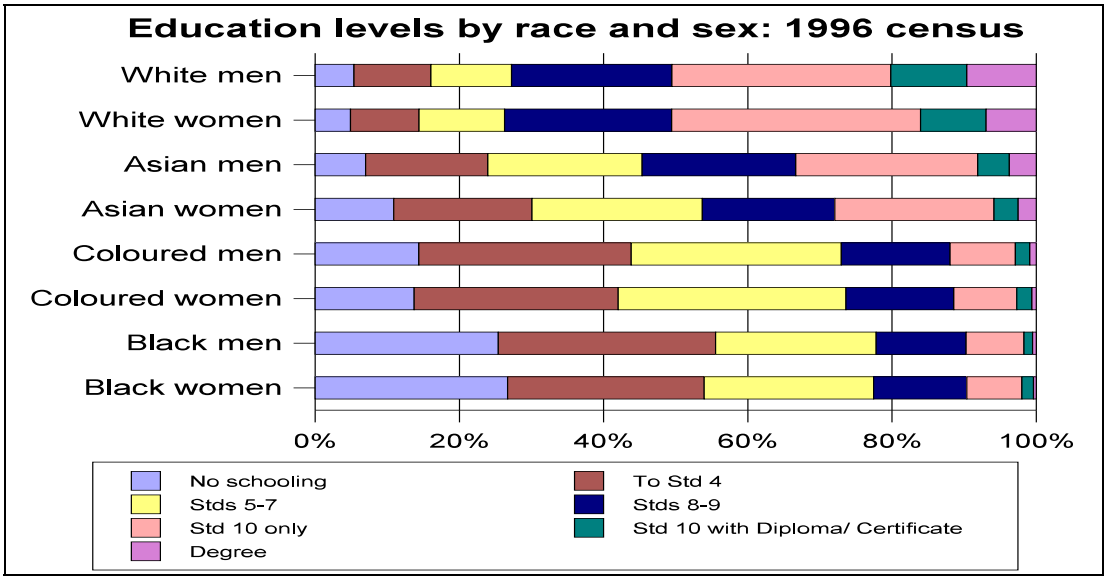


The following table summarises these figures for the basic education levels of adult South Africans aged 15 and over using the 1995 October Household Survey and the 1996 General Population Census:

	1995 October Household Survey	1996 General Population Census
Number of adults (15 and over)	26.4 million (100%)	26.3 million (100%)
Full general education (Grade 9 and more)	14.3 million (54%)	13.1 million (50%)
Less than full general education (Less than Grade 9)	12.2 million (46%)	13.2 million (50%)
Less than Grade 7	7.4 million (28%)	8.5 million (32%)
No schooling	2.9 million (11%)	4.2 million (16%)

Variations in basic education levels exist within the categories of "race", sex, and geographical location. "Race" is still the single most powerful variable determining educational levels in South Africa as can be seen in the table and graph below:

Level of education of the South African population aged 5+: 1996 Census							
	No schooling	**To Std 4**	**Stds 5-7**	**Stds 8-9**	**Std 10 only**	**Std 10 with Diploma/ Certificate**	**Degree**
Black women	26.6%	27.2%	23.4%	12.9%	7.6%	1.6%	0.4%
Black men	25.3%	30.0%	22.2%	12.4%	8.0%	1.2%	0.5%
Coloured women	13.7%	28.2%	31.5%	14.9%	8.7%	2.1%	0.6%
Coloured men	14.3%	29.3%	29.0%	15.0%	9.0%	2.0%	0.9%
Asian women	10.8%	19.0%	23.4%	18.2%	21.9%	3.3%	2.5%
Asian men	6.9%	16.7%	21.1%	21.0%	24.9%	4.3%	3.7%
White women	4.8%	9.3%	11.6%	22.7%	33.8%	8.9%	6.8%
White men	5.2%	10.3%	10.8%	21.5%	29.3%	10.2%	9.3%



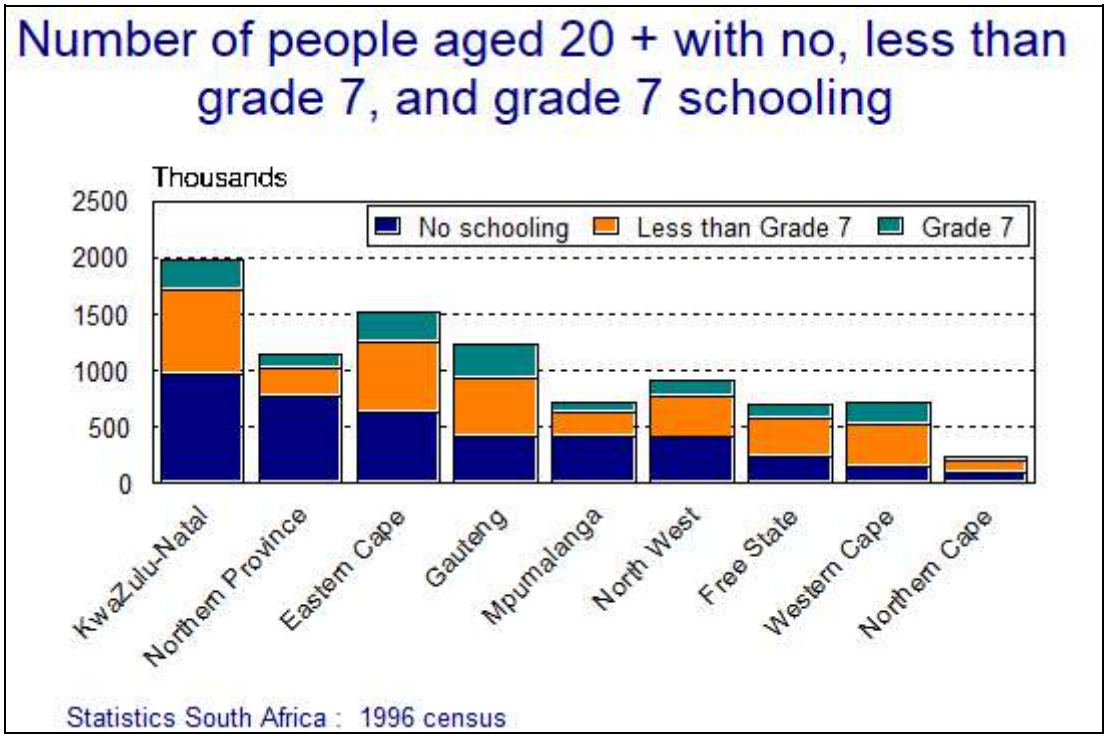
This graph reveals, firstly, the clear and continuing educational disparities between the four racial groups of the apartheid era. Whites are best educated, Asians next, Coloureds third and Blacks last. Secondly, the complete illiteracy figures (No schooling) show that the percentage of Black illiterates remains high and that it is still a problem among Coloureds and Asians (particularly Asian women). Thirdly, women generally have less education than men (perhaps most markedly among Asians). Women generally have less higher education (thought it is of interest that this is not markedly so now with black women).

Taking “no schooling” as an indication of complete illiteracy, some 24% of African adults aged 20 and over are totally illiterate, 10% of Coloureds, 7% of Indians and only 1% of Whites. The difference between men and women total illiterates, though present (men 41%, women 58%), is relatively small (particularly when the figures are adjusted for the smaller number of men in the population) when compared with the differences in many developing countries.

There are considerable variations among the nine provinces in South Africa. Some provinces have high numbers of people in need of ABE though they form a relatively small percentage of the population (as in Gauteng) whilst other provinces may have small numbers but high percentages (as in Mpumalanga). Other provinces have both high numbers and high percentages (as in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal).

Population aged 20 years + by education level, sex and province

		KwaZulu-Natal	Northern Province	Eastern Cape	Gauteng	Mpuma-langa	North West	Free State	Western Cape	Northern Cape	Total
No schooling	Male	370111	252673	244416	215729	173490	196177	111254	77819	47188	1688857
	Female	587106	518914	373380	203428	236846	206966	124895	75290	50503	2377328
	Both	957217	771587	617796	419157	410336	403143	236149	153109	97691	4066185
Less than Std 5	Male	315547	112339	286561	284351	105801	185279	165788	183116	45665	1684447
	Female	432039	139948	348914	232273	105415	179018	162288	179168	48905	1827968
	Both	747586	252287	635475	516624	211216	364297	328076	362284	94570	3512415
Functionally illiterate	Male	685658	365012	530977	500080	279291	381456	277042	260935	92853	3373304
	Female	1019145	658862	722294	435701	342261	385984	287183	254458	99408	4205296
	Both	1704803	1023874	1253271	935781	621552	767440	564225	515393	192261	7578600
Std 5	Male	122329	52475	105042	150150	47018	65707	62452	92159	17679	715011
	Female	156106	71902	159194	145494	48765	73296	67857	112252	21899	856765
	Both	278435	124377	264236	295644	95783	139003	130309	204411	39578	1571776
All adults 20+	Male	1848507	850710	1238574	2248163	663173	864314	715328	1101823	215726	9746318
	Female	2329561	1242021	1713111	2176002	730289	914564	748273	1198751	234766	11287338
	Both	4178068	2092731	2951685	4424165	1393462	1778878	1463601	2300574	450492	21033656



In 1996, Harley *et al* in their ***A survey of adult basic education in South Africa in the 90s*** (pp. 60-62) estimated that adult learners received adult basic education in a number of sectors in the following proportions: State (28.5%), Companies (41.7%), NGOs (18.5%), and other sectors (11.3%). Given the decimation of NGOs in 1997 and 1998 it is probable that the NGO share has declined since then. It is unlikely that the number of adults participating in literacy and adult basic education programmes has exceeded 430 000 people per annum. Harley *et al* (1996, pp. 51-74) estimated that in 1994/95 there were about 335 500 participants. The October Household Survey 1995 revealed a more modest figure of 267 750 participants. There may well have been a significant decline in attendance in 1998 because of closure of many state night schools for several months at the beginning of that year.

Part 2: A short history of literacy and ABET provision and policies up to April 1994

Literacy under apartheid

Adult literacy work went through a dark age during the apartheid era. For much of this period, teaching literacy to black people was illegal in terms of the Bantu Education Act of 1954 (unless it was in an officially approved registered night school, most of which were deregistered and closed). However, in the late sixties and early seventies the **Bureau for Literacy and Literature** was allowed to do some work in the mines and the more religiously orientated **Operation Upgrade** worked within community groups such as churches and, after 1976, influenced literacy instruction in the reopened state night schools.

In the early seventies, small university groups inspired by their illegal copies of Paulo Freire's ***Pedagogy of the Oppressed*** tried out literacy work on a very small scale, though the Freirian *process* of conscientisation they used began to inform the practice of the internal anti-apartheid movement with enormous consequences, particularly in the Black Consciousness Movement in the Seventies and, in the independent black trade union movement and the United Democratic Front in the Eighties.

After Soweto 1976 and the growth of strong anti-apartheid resistance in the Eighties, a literacy movement revived and the small politically committed non-governmental educational organisation came into its own. **Learn and Teach**, **USWE** and others combined a modified Freirian method with service to trade unions and United Democratic Front groups. Their methods and materials were often of extremely high quality though their organisational structures often limited the scale of operation. The Eighties also showed some ventures in literacy and adult basic education work by the few universities with adult education departments. The university connection played a particularly important role in the reconceptualisation of literacy as adult basic education, particularly as the possibility of a post-apartheid society became realisable. Meanwhile larger literacy and adult basic education providers such as the Pretoria based **ProLit** arose and by the end of the Eighties there were uneasy moves towards cooperation between the politically correct NGOs (networked in the **National Literacy Co-operation** (NLC) formed in 1986) and the others such as Operation Upgrade and ProLit.

During this same general period there had been some parallel attention given to reading and in the provision of reading material. The interest in reading tended to be school and university based but a *Conference on the problems of the adult reader* was held at the University of Natal in July 1979 and a number of short lived reading associations came into being. The Read Educational Trust played a significant role in encouraging library development in black schools and also, later, showed some interest in adult education. Literacy NGOs in some cases produced readers,

magazines or newspaper supplements (notable among the latter being SACHED's various newspaper linked endeavours – the last being ***Learning Nation***), the English Literacy Project's ***Active Voice***, and the University of Natal Centre for Adult Education's ***Learn with Echo*** (Harley *et al*, 1996, pp. 355-381). This latter body also started a New Readers Project to produce easy readers for adults. The ERA Initiative, dedicated to the promotion of accessible reading for adults, was one of the last of the creative responses to emerge in these last days of apartheid.

ABET policy development from 1990 to April 1994

In the first four years of the Nineties there was considerable expansion of cooperation among NGOs - the **National Literacy Co-operation** broadened to include virtually any NGO that wished to join (including a new look **Operation Upgrade** and a **ProLit** which had turned into a delivery agent of some size), though there was a political split with the formation of the **South African Association for Literacy and Adult Education** (SAALAE) in April 1992 which espoused a more Black Consciousness and Africanist line (but which by 1997 was no longer functioning in the literacy field). There was also considerable activity among commercial providers serving industry who had seen the need for a better educated workforce and were also under pressure from the unions to provide ABE. In the period of political transition many people and organisations were waiting for "something" or "the real thing" to happen (which was usually seen as a democratic movement government putting literacy and adult basic education high up on the agenda).

The National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI), set up by the anti-apartheid National Education Co-ordinating Committee (NECC) in 1992, produced two reports that deal directly with literacy and ABE issues (***Adult Education*** and ***Adult Basic Education***) and another which touched on it (***Human Resources Development***). The massive Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was an influential presence within the NEPI and was wedded to the idea of some kind of general education (ABE) being provided to workers parallel to a more rational and generic form of skills training. Both these issues were strongly present in reports from a National Training Board investigation into a new system of industrial training for South Africa. COSATU then set up its own policy research process, the Participatory Research Project (PRP), that argued for a close integration of ABE and skills training in a modularised system backed by new certification authorities and mechanisms for articulation in every conceivable direction. Also in 1992, the **Joint Education Trust** (a large new South African Trust with representatives from the business sector, political movements and unions) commissioned a report on Adult Basic Education which recommended that in the interim the Trust should continue to support NGOs (some of which were experiencing funding difficulties as donors prematurely pulled back from the anti-apartheid education enterprise) and encourage research into ABE and promote the development of regional support agencies for ABE. Arising out of the report's recommendations, two major JET funded research projects were set in motion in 1994. The one, into the social uses of literacy was led by researchers from the Universities of Cape Town and the Western Cape. The other, into ABE capacity

building in the country as a whole, was conducted by researchers at the University of Natal's Centres for Adult Education. The results of both studies were published in 1996 (Prinsloo and Breier, 1996 and Harley *et al*, 1996). At the same time the **Independent Development Trust** (IDT) which had been set up by government, apparently had budgeted about R90 million for literacy and ABE but reneged on this commitment.

In 1993 the **Centre for Education Policy Development** (CEPD) was set up to serve the democratic movement. It had a number of working groups including one on ABE. In 1994 the **CEPD** was commissioned by the **African National Congress** to prepare an **Implementation Plan for Education and Training** (IPET). Another body that had a brief influence on ABE policy was the **South African Committee on Adult Basic Education** (SACABE) which represented a wide field of political, trade union, academic and community based organisation interests but held only one conference in November 1993 and then withered away.

There are a number of key documents produced during this period to consider. These include :

- the **National Education Policy Investigation** (NEPI) report of 1992 on ***Adult Basic Education*** (and also the reports on ***Adult Education*** (1993) and ***Human Resource Development*** (1992).

- the **Joint Education Trust**'s 1992 commissioned report ***Adult Basic Education: focus on a priority field for funding***.

- The **Independent Development Trust**'s 1992 commissioned report, ***Developmental strategy in adult basic education*** (Morphet *et al*, 1992)

- **COSATU**'s Participatory Research Projects's 1993 report, ***Participatory Research Project. Consolidated recommendations adult basic education and training.***

- the **National Training Board**'s National Training Strategy Initiative (NTSI) draft document of 1991 and the preliminary report of February 1994.

- the **South African Committee on Adult Basic Education** (SACABE) report on its November 1993 Conference.

- The **African National Congress**'s ***Implementation Plan for Education and Training*** (IPET) of April 1994 produced by the **Centre for Education Policy Development** (CEPD) as well as its more general policy statements in ***The Reconstruction and development programme*** (1994) and ***A policy framework for education and training*** (1995).

A summary of the policy and implementation recommendations that come through in most of these documents is reproduced on the next page.

Summary of key pre-April 1994 ABET policy and implementation recommendations	
National	• Strong national department of (adult) education • National Qualifications Framework • National certification • National (core) curriculum • National Council/National Stakeholders Forum • Legislation • National programme
Provincial	• Council • Regional support agencies
Planning	• Capacity for systematic planning
Financial	• [Assumption of future state funding] • Interim NGO funding body • Bigger slice of the education budget • Mechanism for getting money from ministries
Human Resource Development	• Guidelines for teacher training • Capacity for training teachers • Training at all levels
Research, development and information	• Capacity for system design • Capacity for curriculum development • Capacity for research in regions • Audit of skills and infrastructure • Comprehensive information base • Identification of priority groupings
Existing infrastructure	• Enhancement of state night schools • Existing facilities
Partnerships	• Partnerships • With Reconstruction and Development Programme
Advocacy	
Materials development	

Part 3: ABET planning and implementation from May 1994 to 1997

The State fails to meet (unrealistic) expectations

Subsequent to the April 1994 election, literacy and ABE activists were soon disappointed by the seemingly slow pace of development in the ABE sector. ABET did not seem to be a major concern of the new Government of National Unity nor of the national Ministry of Education.

The CEPD's proposals for a strong, well resourced adult basic education section within the national department of education were never implemented. Indeed it took until early in 1996 for a Director of ABET to be appointed. A national ABET Task Team appointed by the Minister of Education in September 1994 was destroyed by a virtual *coup de etat* at a consultation it called in January 1995 that saw experienced policy makers and planners kicked out and replaced by provincial education department representatives who knew very little about ABET policy or practice. It was replaced in May 1995 by a National Stakeholder's Forum (NSF) which came to be dominated by formal education system representatives and the business sector. No legislation relating to adult education was tabled.

The new national Department of Education's attempts at initiating nationally co-ordinated programmes or campaigns (sometimes via the NSF) were not very successful. The ABET Directorate tended to repeatedly engage in last minute attempts to start great leaps forward, the dates for which had been decided months before but about which almost nothing had been planned or even budgeted for. Thus the fiasco of the April 1995 "strategic thrusts" (nothing happened), repeated a year later with the Ten Thousand Learner Units (nothing happened, although this non event was obscured by the Department piggy-backing on the National Literacy Co-operation's One Thousand Learner Units campaign (which had actually been planned and which did (sort of) start). However in 1997 this Ithuteng campaign did achieve some modest successes in some provinces (such as KwaZulu-Natal). The ABET Directorate weaknesses were predictable - it was understaffed and had only a small budget (though literacy was proclaimed a Reconstruction and Development Programme Presidential lead project it was the only one that had no money allocated to it at al land was to be totally dependent on foreign donors). Some planning support from ABET came from the National Literacy Co-operation and consultants and was paid for (sometimes) by USAID grants. At the provincial level only a few provinces set up workable provincial ABET councils or stakeholder forums and many of the NGOs which had led the struggle for literacy in the previous decade were sidelined by education department officials. Apart from the JET funded Natal ABE Support Agency, no regional support agencies were set up.

In September 1995 some money (R5.4 million per province) was made available for ABET and made a short, if temporary improvement in provincial capacity (though it took most provinces a long time to actually get the money). Provincial budgets for education (basic education provision being a provincial competency) were also erratic. An analysis of the provincial education department budgets for 1995/6 and 1996/97 shows that while schooling budgets rose on average by 18.6% (ranging from 11.2% to 25.8% per province) thus keeping slightly ahead of inflation, those for "non-formal education" (the category which includes adult education provision and early childhood education) rose on average by only 0.1% (ranging from -0.5% to 0.9%) thus in real terms a significant decline (Aitchison, 1998, p. 18). In KwaZulu-Natal the budget for ABET dropped to below that of the apartheid era.

The downsizing of NGO capacity

Meanwhile, there was a growing sense of crisis in the NGO field which saw much reduced funding as foreign donors now preferred to work directly though bilateral agreements with government and these agreements were slow to be agreed upon and implemented. Older NGOs began to downsize and retrench staff (such as USWE) or even close (such as Learn and Teach), although, ironically, through the National Literacy Co-operation, the field was now better represented nationally than ever before and there was an influx of small new NGOs and CBOs (many of these aspiring to make use of the expected RDP money that never arrived). Through the failure of the state to rapidly reallocate resources NGOs were thus unable to benefit from new openings in a democratising society - the real beneficiaries tended to be well capitalised commercial providers contracted by industry and commerce.

The reorganised National Literacy Co-operation was now less of a network of affiliates than a national organisation to which affiliates belonged. The positive side of this was that the NGO sector had a more coherent national voice. The downside of this was that as a national organisation it now was in certain respects a competitor with its affiliates and some of the drive towards it becoming a national body came from foreign funders (notably USAID and the European Union) who insisted (largely for their own convenience) on having a single national body to deal with. It was a policy which had already had truly disastrous results in the Early Childhood Education and Career Information fields.

During 1996 and 1997 the National Literacy Co-operation engaged in a complicated tango in the dark with the national Department of Education with perplexing results, at the same time as the international donors tried to develop mechanisms for dispensing their money via a department that did not appear to have the capacity or at times the will to do so. All this was within the broader complexities of a lacklustre national Department of Education that appeared incapable of tackling the admittedly awesome task of rationalising education provision, resources and teacher deployment. When it came to resources, the voice of ABET learners was drowned out by higher education students and school teachers demanding the continuation of the lifestyle to which they had become accustomed.

The formalising of ABET and the assessment of ABET

The problems in the NGO field occurred in a context of the ongoing formalisation of adult basic education with a heavy stress on assessment issues that, in the field of practice, was increasingly dominated by the Independent Examinations Board (French, 1997). Grasping the T in ABET proved more difficult, though moves towards special curriculums and examinations in industry sectors indicated one way in which this issue might be eventually resolved.

The formalisation process is clearly seen in the key documents produced from 1995 to date include the following:

- The **Education White Paper** of March (Department of Education, 1995)
- The National Department of Education's ***A national adult basic education and training framework: Interim guidelines*** of September 1995
- The research project report of 1996 on ***Adult Basic Education and Development*** compiled by a group comprising the Department of Education, Congress of South African Trade Unions, Development Bank of Southern Africa, Centre for Education Policy Development, and National Literacy Co-operation. This document is interesting in that it attempts to reassert the role of literacy and ABET in development rather than in formal education provision. It had little impact however.
- The Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology's Language Plan Task Group's final report of 1996, ***Towards a national language plan for South Africa***.
- The Department of Education's October 1997 ***Policy Document on Adult Basic Education and Training*** and its ***A National Multi-year implementation plan for Adult Education and Training: Provision and Accreditation***.

A summary of the key post-April 1994 policy and implementation recommendations that come through in most of these documents is summarised on the next page. They are not remarkably different from the pre-April 1994 positions. Many of the recommendations are now solidly enshrined in the detailed ***A National Multi-year implementation plan for Adult Education and Training: Provision and Accreditation***.

Summary of key post-April 1994 ABET policy and implementation recommendations	
National	• Strong national department of education • National Qualifications Framework • National certification • National (core) curriculum • National Council/National Stakeholders Forum • Legislation • National programme • Professional directorate for ABET in the Department of Education to undertake or sponsor research on structure and methods, develop norms and standards, and to liaise with the RDP office, the Department of Labour, and provincial departments of education
Provincial	• Council • Primary responsibility for provision lies with the state
Planning	• Capacity for systematic planning (via national ABET task team (1994/95) or multi-year implementation plans at national and provincial levels (1997/98) • Well-planned literacy campaigns
Financial	• General silence about finance
Human Resource Development	• Guidelines for teacher training • Capacity for training teachers • Training at all levels (particularly in outcomes-based education)
Research, development and information	• Capacity for system design • Capacity for curriculum development • Capacity for research in regions • Audit of skills and infrastructure • Comprehensive information base • Identification of priority groupings
Existing infrastructure	• Enhancement of state night schools into community learning centres • Existing facilities
Partnerships	• Partnerships between government and organised labour and business, women's and youth organisations, civics, churches, specialist NGOs, learner associations, all levels of government, media and other stakeholders
Advocacy	• General silence about community empowerment • Greater stress on the African languages and South African Second Languages.
Materials development	• Possible state involvement in materials development • Audit of materials

Other players

Alongside the policy and planning work largely centred around the national Department of Education and the modest attempts to increase provision by state and NGOs, there were other roleplayers who also exhibited some enthusiasm about ABET:

Firstly, the South African Broadcasting Company, manifested a commitment to publicising and working in the field of ABET that was commendable. This may be a reflection of the extent to which the SABC is still an adherent of edifying **public** broadcasting (however narrow and perverted this adherence was during the apartheid era). It proved to be a force for the good in respect of literacy. A number of advocacy programmes were shown on television from 1994 to date such as **Literacy Alive**, **The struggle for literacy**, and **Adult Basic Education in the workplace**, **Basic skills in English**, and **Mchochonono** and also duplicated in the various languages on radio. At an important conference on educational broadcasting held in February 1998 it was reaffirmed that adult education would remain an important priority for educational broadcasting and that substantial resources would be devoted to ABE programmes. It is likely that new SABC initiatives will look at literacy within a wider, more holistic setting than before and integrate programming within a multi-media support environment.

Secondly, libraries and particularly the provincial library services were generally supportive of literacy and the provision of easy reading material. Harley et al Protest 1996

A third grouping, the community college sector, is still trying hard to reach take off point. The success or failure of this attempt will undoubtedly have significant consequences for literacy and adult basic education. A ***Green paper on Further Education and Training*** (Department of Education, 1998a), which addresses many of the community college sector issues, was released in April 1998 and followed in August 1998 by a white paper (Department of Education, 1998b) and in October by a Further Education and Training Act (Department of Education, 1998c).

Part 4: Things fall apart

The decimation of the NGO sector

By mid 1997 there was a feeling that the national Department of Education's renamed Directorate for Adult Education and Training, now under the leadership of Gugu Nxumalo, was now working more effectively and realistically and that, though not without continuing difficulties, partnerships between state and NGOs and even university academics had had some modest successes. The Multi-year implementation plan had affirmed that NGO delivery would supplement state and industry delivery programmes. This, coupled with fiscal constraints on the expansion of delivery by the state, indicated that NGO programmes would continue to be an important component of ABET delivery for some time.

However, at the end of 1997, the future of the NGO literacy and ABE providers remained uncertain, largely because of funding uncertainties, the loss of experienced staff, and poor administration. In spite of better national and provincial co-ordination through the National Literacy Co-operation, the NGO literacy field was in some disarray. Their hopes of a rapid change in provision of literacy and ABET had been severely disappointed. Then, in January 1998 came the total collapse of the National Literacy Co-operation. This dismal event had a forerunner in the acts of fraud and theft that effectively disabled and led to the eventual closure of the World University Service South Africa. In October 1997 the European Union, dissatisfied for some time with the National Literacy Co-operation's reporting, commissioned a rapid appraisal of the Thousand Learner Unit Pilot Programme which they had funded. The review found that the NLC had not fulfilled its obligations and further payments by the European Union were withheld. In January the organisation ceased operating and by the end of February all staff were retrenched and the organisation closed.

The attrition of NGOs continued and by the end of 1998 USWE in Cape Town and the English Literacy Project in Johannesburg had in effect closed, retaining a tenuous existence through some ongoing contracts with publishers. In January 1999 two major ABET NGOs in KwaZulu-Natal, the English Resource Unit and Operation Upgrade were in dire financial straits and retrenchments started. The ending of any regular funding for ABET NGOs from the Joint Education Trust was in many cases their death knell. The decline of the many did however lead to advantage for Project Literacy which, by the latter part of 1999, was increasingly being seen as **the** national literacy NGO.

An initiative, supported by the Institute of International Co-operation of the German Adult Education Association (DVV-IIC), to set up a new NGO funding conduit, now, in 2000 formally established as a Trust, raised some hopes but it is too early to evaluate its possibilities of success.

The state plans to implement adult basic education

Meanwhile in late 1997 and early 1998 the attempts by the national Directorate for Adult Education to get provincial education departments to develop provincial variants of the national multi-year implementation plan (and which was indeed part of the national plan) were moderately successful and some financial support from the foreign funders, including the German Adult Education Association, was obtained for this process (particularly for the Eastern Cape and the Northern Province). A number of plan documents were produced of varying practicality. Simultaneously, some attempts at building capacity in areas such as training in outcomes-based education were attempted via a "cascade" model in which each province sent a number of recruits to be trained as trainers in Gauteng with the plan being that they would then replicate the training back home in an ever widening cascade. Whilst an attractive model in theory, in practice it has not worked well because of inflexible timetabling and a lack of support (particularly managerial, logistical and financial) at each level of the cascade in the various provinces.

By the end of May 1998, the hope of any serious implementation of the multi-year plan seemed to be in serious doubt as, one after another, the education departments in the provinces began to run out of money (largely due to mismanagement and an inability to take firm and decisive action to forestall totally predictable human resource and financial crises). Adult education, marginal to the schooling system, was one of the first casualties, with some provinces simply delaying the opening of all the public adult centres (as in KwaZulu-Natal) or closing them after a few months (as in the Eastern Cape). In a situation of the whole school system in a state of incipient financial and psychological collapse, adult education was likely to get little sympathy.

In November 1998 the University of Natal released a series of draft research reports on ABET in each province and, though there were many positive findings, generally the reports are critical of the lack of progress in implementation and transformation (as seen in the final report on South Africa published in early 2000 (Aitchison *et al*, 2000).

After the June 1999 general election a new Minister of Education, Kader Asmall, was appointed. On 27th July he issued a call to action (Asmall, 1999) which recognised that the public believed that there was an education crisis and that the state was not upholding their rights to education. It was indeed "a national emergency" and people would have to work together to end it. He set nine priorities, one of which was to "break the back of illiteracy among adults and youth in five years". He reaffirmed the role of NGOs in eradicating illiteracy and argued the need for mobilising a social movement to bring reading, writing and numeracy to those who do not have it. However he also reasserted the, by now thoroughly unrealistic, projections that the Multi-Year Implementation Plan for ABET would enable close to a million new learners to achieve the equivalent of Grade 9 by 2003, provided the funds could be found and ABET practitioners trained. The Minister did finally acknowledge that several provincial education departments had been cutting back or closing ABET programmes when they should have been expanding. Though this trend should be

reversed he saw it as improbable that the government will find sufficient additional funds in the near future to eliminate illiteracy through formal ABET programmes run by provincial education departments. The alternative strategy he envisaged was to encourage employers (be they government departments or the business sector) to run ABET programmes (possibly partly funded through the new skills levy on all employers) and to stimulate voluntary service in the literacy field. However, funds to support such voluntary initiatives would not come from government but be appealed for from national and international grant-making agencies.

Some NGO such as the Easy Reading for Adults Initiative (ERA), took advantage of the Minister's call to lobby effectively for support for reading (particularly for adults and ERA published a well researched report on the need for easy reading material (ERA Initiative, 1999).

However, it was only in mid-June 2000 that the first serious planning for what was now called the South African National Literacy Initiative began and a national advisory Board was set up. An imaginative plan to harness the resources of civil society and the state to reach out to some 500 000 people with no or very schooling was designed and tenders issued for the development of primers and instructors manuals in all South African languages. Then things stalled, apparently because of the insistence of the national Department of Education that it be the controlling influence in such a campaign and that the programme prepare learners for ABET examinations.

So in spite of Asmall's call to action made a few months away from the 21st century, the prospects for the delivery of appropriate and high quality literacy instruction and adult basic education and training remain uncertain. Possible scenarios include the eventually successful construction of a state driven ABET system or the collapse or abandonment of such an enterprise. In the event of this latter conclusion, the extent to which the decimated NGO sector could be revitalised seems dubious. The future role of the business sector in ABET, though probably still the major provider, is also unclear, but current trends suggest that the business community will rapidly phase out ABET and concentrate on the Further Education and Training needed to keep the workforce competitive in the global economy.

Part 5: In conclusion : some lessons learned and some never learned

In evaluating the past decades of literacy and adult basic education work it is clear that significant lessons have been learned by the protagonists of the field. There has been enormous intellectual and other effort devoted to getting policy and, to some extent, methodology and materials right. In this, South Africa has developed substantial expertise. Advocates for literacy have learned a keen appreciation of the need to gain the support of the real powers in society if their often ambitious plans are to come to fruition.

The lessons that have not been learned are that superficial knowledge and enthusiasm are not enough. Experience and track records of competent delivery have been ignored. The literacy educators have been curiously inept and naive in their attempts to gain footholds in the corridors of power. They seem always to have underestimated the fragility of their organisations and support bases and financial support. These lessons will have to be learned very soon for a viable ABET enterprise to continue with any strength in a rapidly changing society.

The literacy and then the ABET field have been very closely associated with the political transformation of South Africa. It is likely, dependent as any enhancement of ABET provision is on political will, that its successes and sometimes dreadful defeats will continue to reflect the South African struggle to be a more democratic, enlightened and industrious society.

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