15 Adult basic education and social change in South Africa, 1994 to 2003

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Introduction

The role of adult education as an agent for social change has been prominent for several decades and has informed the activities of civil society and government campaigns in various countries such as Cuba, Brazil, Nicaragua, Guinea Bissau, Tanzania and many others. The radical tradition, in particular, views civil society as a privileged domain of radical learning, political struggle, social movements and social change. This tradition also has a notable history and presence in South Africa. Much provision of non-formal adult basic education (ABE)[1] in South Africa by non-government organisations (NGOs) – especially in the 1970s and 1980s – was influenced by it. The basic tenet of this tradition is that the socio-economic and political system that produces and perpetuates conditions of inequality is unjust and must be changed. The victims of oppression, inequality and injustice are called upon to unite, to challenge the system and to recreate the social world in which they live. Within this tradition, non-formal ABE instruction, for instance, is not just the imparting and acquiring of knowledge by teachers and learners respectively, but is a political process of raising critical awareness of injustice, and a joint investigation and creation of measures to change oppressive and undemocratic systems. In the South African context, illiteracy amongst adults is viewed by this tradition as not only a deeply-rooted social problem, but a result of a determinate structure and dynamic of classes and a consequence of the apartheid capitalist organisation of production. Non-formal ABE is viewed as authentic, revolutionary and inclusive and a vehicle that incorporates the illiterate and under-educated into a new form of democratic citizenship that opposes the perpetuation of asymmetrical power relations.

We write this chapter from the premise that the radical tradition of adult education has great relevance to the education of under-educated and illiterate adults in South Africa – a tradition that is re-emerging as we continue to grapple with the social, economic, political and moral issues facing us in a

complex, violent, unequal and rapidly-changing society. We believe in its potential to identify and use spaces where forms of counter-hegemonic learning can take place, whether these be spaces of critical awareness, the formation of social movements, spaces in which learning is free from power and domination or spaces for democratic practices that are free from the state and the economy (Murphy 2001). We focus our discussion here on the role of ABE and argue that ABE, as a vehicle of social change, has failed largely because of its perceived worthlessness to economic growth and that, as a result of this perception, the vision of ABE as a tool that can enhance active involvement in the social and political life of the nation has been lost. Our argument is supported by a discussion and reflection on a range of developments that have taken place in the ABE field between 1994 and 2003. A key focus of our discussion is the tensions between the two well-known ethics of adult education – emancipatory ABE and instrumentalist ABE. We recognise the significance of instrumentalism, which is an integral aspect of any human resource development strategy of governments, but will argue that the application of this ethic, which has emerged as the dominant ethic driving ABE provision and delivery, is failing as a vehicle of social change while the other has been effectively weakened and undermined by it.

We start with a description of instrumentalist and emancipatory ethics, highlighting their differences and implications. We argue that ABE as an emancipatory project holds greater promise and can contribute to social change. Following an overview and description of key developments we conclude that the result of ABE policy and practice over the last decade, undergirded as it has been by neo-liberalism, instrumentalism, technocratic rationality and the 'cult of efficiency', has prohibited the promise of ABE as an agent for social change, precipitated the marginalisation of ABE, and reinforced its status as the stepsister of mainstream education. ABE policy in its current form is not addressing social exclusion and fails to incorporate large numbers of adults into democratic forms of citizenship. The emancipatory project, although inherently counter-hegemonic, holds better promise in building democratic forms of citizenship and advancing the themes of justice, freedom, participation, equality, care, stability and development (Baatjes 2003a). The emancipatory tradition requires further exploration and should be reinvented to exist and flourish alongside instrumentalism in South Africa. We conclude that emancipatory ABE would be most successful if located

within a social movement able to fight for ABE as an integral part of the struggle for a just society.

The two ethics

Instrumentalist ABE

One of the most striking features in the economic debate in South Africa has been the importance attached to human capital as a determining factor of economic success. Globalisation has made the issue of how nations organise their skill formations in the context of the new competition an urgent research question (Murphy 2001; Brown 1999; Burbules & Torres 2000; Dale 1999; La Belle 2000). Governments around the world invest heavily in the education of adults and adult education has clearly emerged from the margins. In the case of South Africa, the terms 'adult basic education and training' (ABET), 'further education and training' (FET), 'outcomes-based education' (OBE), 'human resource development' (HRD) and 'lifelong learning' are increasingly being used to signal new concepts of adult education, particularly to support economic productivity and economic growth. Education systems, it is argued, should concentrate on developing people's competencies, their skills, knowledge and values to enable them to move across jobs from one sector of the economy to another and even from one country to another. Curricula are redesigned along competency-based lines, enabling recognition of existing competence as well as the more effective articulation of different levels of education and training. Education is seen as one component of a comprehensive approach to workplace restructuring, one which includes changes in industrial relations, technology and workplace organisation. The aim of education is a highly skilled, mobile workforce that will help make industry more competitive in the world economy (Brown 1999; Foley 1994; Welton 1995).

Human capital theory is integral to this restructuring of education (Brown 1999; Fragoso & Lucio-Villegas 2002). The term 'human capital' refers to knowledge, skills and attitudes that are developed and valued primarily for their economically productive potential (Baptiste 2001). It refers to the productive capacities of human beings as income-producing agents in an economy and to the present value of past investment in the skills of people. 'Human capital formation' is the term given to the process by which such

capital is deliberately developed. Expenditure in terms of time, money, resources and so forth, is called human capital investment. Schultz (cited in Baptiste 2001) made the unqualified declaration that human capital enhances the productivity of both labour and physical capital. People at each skill level are more productive in a high capital environment compared to one that is low in human capital (Schultz cited in Baptiste 2001). Blaug (cited in Torres 1990) and others have argued that literacy and basic education of adults, in general, contribute to economic development in distinct forms. This contribution is achieved through: 1) increasing the productivity of the newly literate; 2) increasing the productivity of those who work with the newly literate; 3) expanding the diffusion of the general knowledge of individuals through training in health and infant nutrition and generally reducing the cost of transmitting practical information; 4) stimulating the demand for technical training and vocational education; 5) acting as an instrument for selecting the most valuable elements of the population thereby enhancing occupational mobility; and 6) strengthening economic incentives through exploiting the tendency of people to respond positively to an increment of compensation for their efforts (cited in Torres 1990).

Human capital theory that reduces adult literacy to an instrument of economic productivity has spawned critique, especially from radical adult educators. Critics like Baptiste (2001) have cited the theory's overly-mechanistic, one-dimensional view of human beings, its narrow understanding of labour, its use of correlational data to establish cause, the inconclusiveness of its empirical evidence and the insurmountable methodological hurdles associated with calculating returns on educational investments. Amongst these hurdles are the difficulties of separating educational consumption from investment, of determining the stock of its educational capital and of ascertaining the marginal productivity of education.

Other critics (Foley 1994; Welton 1995) have examined the theory's ominous societal impact, for instance, its exacerbation of social inequalities, its development of underdevelopment and its blaming of the victims. Some criticism has also been levelled at the theory's negative impact on day-to-day pedagogical practices. Baptiste's analysis provides a succinct description of the implications of human capital theory for pedagogical practices. He argues that: 1) human capital theorists treat people as 'homo economica' – radically isolated pleasure-seeking materialists who are born free of social constraints

or responsibilities, who possess no intrinsic sociability and who are driven largely by the desire for material happiness and bodily security; 2) it assumes that the world is an educational meritocracy in which a person's socio-economic status is limited presumably only by his or her educational investment – more educated people are always more productive than less educated people and this differential productivity is sufficient to explain all social inequities; 3) it construes social inequalities not as injustices – the result of exploitation and oppression – but rather as the natural and inevitable outcome of a competitive free market; 4) the free market is the most, if not the only, legitimate social institution – the only institution that can adequately and justly govern, regulate and explain human behaviour and achievement; 5) human capitalists believe that there is no need to appeal to non-market forces such as unequal power or structural barriers to explain human and social behaviour; and 6) they are certain that the invisible hand of the free market, the co-ordinated force of price, supply and demand is well able to account for most, if not all, of the functions assigned to structure in sociological theories.

Instrumentalism permeates government educational policy, programmes, plans and strategies. It portrays ABE as education that increases productivity and leads to more employment opportunities. There remains, however, no convincing evidence to support this claim. This ethic is perpetuating exclusion and has failed to contribute to social change in South Africa. This failure is linked to globalisation, whose implications are best captured by Hall (cited in Foley 1994). Hall points out that globalisation: 1) is *narrowing the scope* of adult education through an increase in emphasis on *training*; 2) precipitates the *withdrawal of the state* from the financing of education; 3) has led to an increase in the *centralisation* of adult basic education policy formulation; 4) has led to an increase in *crisis-orientated adult education*; and 5) has led to an *increase* in the number of people in the world who do not read and write (our own italics added).

Emancipatory ABE

The emancipatory ethic, mostly associated with education for liberation or popular education, and largely linked to the work of Paulo Freire (1970), is a collective educational activity which has as its goal social and political transformation. This tradition is driven by the belief that people living in unjust situations can change their lives through their collective actions. It argues that

the aim of ABE should be to develop a critical understanding of major contemporary problems and social changes, and the ability to play an active role in the progress of society with a view to achieving social justice. It is also informed by an educational approach that places great emphasis on relating education to real issues and problems, establishing closer links with day-to-day struggles, community action and social movements, creating an alternative adult education system which stresses linking education and action.

The emancipatory ethic also opposes the social pathology approach that characterises current ABE practices in South Africa where emphasis is placed on helping adults to *adapt* to the existing deteriorating order. Under-educated and illiterate adults in South African society face multiple forms of oppression including unemployment, disease, poverty, homelessness, and many more. This liberal orientation to education, which creates a belief that education provides the means of further benefits and fulfilment, whilst at the same time promoting social justice, equality and the integration of the diverse interests of differing groups in society, is rejected because of its failure to address growing disadvantage and alienation (Lovett, Clarke & Kilmurray 1983).

Programmes informed by the emancipatory ethic are designed as mechanisms or instruments of pedagogical and political collaboration with subordinate social sectors. It is a pedagogy for social transition, and hence defines its educational activity as cultural action (Freire's term) whose central objective can be summed up in the term 'conscientisation' (Torres 1990). Torres describes it as a non-authoritarian pedagogy that emphasises the sharing of experiences in dialogue within cultural circles. A principal characteristic of this approach is its resistance to links with the state and the bureaucratic organisation of educational practice. Adult education, from this perspective, is more closely linked to the needs of communities and responds more easily to the demands of communities than does the system of formal education. It is also characterised by curricular and organisational flexibility that formal schooling lacks. The results of this form of education are usually more immediate than those of schooling. Adult education, inspired by this tradition, has proved to be of great importance as an instrument of mobilisation and the development of political consciousness in revolutionary states such as Cuba and Nicaragua (Torres 1990). This ethic plays an important role in community work, community development, community organisation and community action and highlights the failure of the formal education system to effectively address the

struggle for social and political justice. Lastly, adult education is also viewed as an important vehicle in the struggle for democracy – a belief in the value and worth of people, and in their rights and freedoms; in the recognition of people's desire and right to manage their own affairs and to participate actively in decisions that affect their lives.

Given these two ethics – instrumentalism and emancipation – we would argue that the emancipatory ethic could contribute more effectively to social change in the country. We recognise the limited role of ABE in economic development, and remain sceptical of its ability to address social, political and community problems. ABE does not support economic productivity or lead to employment opportunities. The emancipatory ethic, we would argue, presents alternative routes that incorporate solutions for both the social and economic challenges. This orientation argues: 1) for adult education as a vehicle in fostering democratic social action; 2) for action based on theoretical constructs; 3) against instrumental rationality that works purely to the advantage of business, industry and large-scale organisations; and 4) for inclusion – serving the interests of the poor, oppressed, disenfranchised and exploited. We argue that this tradition needs to be reinvented to help construct a vision of a new democracy based on equality, freedom and social justice. We will show that ABE for instrumentalism is emerging as the dominant ethic and that it fails to address the illiteracy dilemma in South Africa.

Overview of developments in the adult basic education field since 1990

A connection with the past

It is important that we place our analysis within its rightful context by providing a brief outline of the legacy of apartheid with specific reference to ABE. The history and development of ABE in South Africa is well documented (Aitchison 2003; Aitchison, Houghton, Baatjies 2000; Bird 1984; French 1982; Harley, Aitchison, Lyster & Land 1995; Roux 1964). The intention here is not to reproduce these works. Instead, this chapter draws attention to developments of ABE from the period when the first official government policy for ABE was developed. It is also necessary to highlight the connection between the changes in economic policy and how these changes shape education policy formulation.

In his *A History of Inequality in South Africa 1652–2002,* Terreblanche (2002: 25) notes that the democratically-elected South African government of 1994 'inherited a contradictory legacy: the most developed economy in Africa on the one hand, and major socio-economic problems on the other. The most serious of these are high rates of unemployment; abject poverty among 50 per cent of the population; sharp inequalities in the distribution of income, property and opportunities; and high levels of crime and violence'. Unemployment is high, and adult illiteracy[2] stands at 50 per cent (see also Bhorat, in this volume).

Apartheid policy deprived black people of access to education and opportunities to work towards prosperity. This was intended to provide a regular supply of cheap and unskilled labour for the apartheid capitalist state. The ruling political class, whose power was anchored in the economic structure of apartheid capitalism, shaped the political economy of adult basic education. Illiteracy among black adults was an integral part of the concrete forms of domination and asymmetrical relations of power that functioned to actively silence blacks (Baatjes 2003a). It was only in the early 1990s that academics and institutions produced several studies and policy proposals in preparation for the new South Africa.[3] Until this point, the tradition of ABE as an agent of social change (alternatively referred to as the emancipatory ethic) was prominent among many NGOs and activists in higher education. These groupings viewed ABE as a fundamental vehicle for achieving social, political and economic power and central in providing people with knowledge and skills to enable them to live productive lives. However, during the same period, instrumentalist ABE gained prominence within the business sector and the labour movement working together on the National Training Strategy Initiative (Harley et al.1995), which championed this approach.

The changing economic policy framework

Government policy during the period 1994 to 1996 was inspired and driven largely by the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). This programme was informed by the principles of social justice and adopted a strong redistributive agenda. ABE as an object of social policy was viewed as integral to other social issues such as housing, water, unemployment and health. In fact, the RDP policy recognised ABE as an integral part of all development projects (ANC 1994). As part of a redistributive policy, the RDP would play a

significant role in the redistribution of life chances of the historically disenfranchised. Implementation initiatives such as the Ithuteng Campaign were informed by this redistributive agenda and took on a strong political and revolutionary passion. Ithuteng was rooted in the political and social analysis of the living conditions of the marginalised and their deepening problems (poverty, unemployment, hunger, disease and death) and attempted to engage them in collective awareness of those conditions.

Perspectives and orientations in response to the structural position of the marginalised began to change in 1996, when the RDP was abandoned in favour of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy (Baatjes 2003a; Bond 2000, 2002). Subsequent policy and implementation plans precipitated a more formal, standardised and utilitarian adult education system. The perspective of ABE as a vehicle in the reconstruction of South African society shifted from a *political-revolutionary position* (ABE for emancipation) to a *social-gradualist position* (ABE for economic growth). Both positions are contributing to efforts to educate marginalised adults in South African society. However, these are potentially competing and contradicting ideologies with different social, economic and political interests as highlighted in the earlier sections.

The promises of the policy-making process

ABE as an agent for social change was institutionalised within the government bureaucracy in 1995 when the national government established the Directorate for Adult and Community Education, later renamed the Directorate for Adult Education and Training. The establishment of this unit within the national Department of Education (DoE) was viewed as a significant development and was well-received because it was believed that the new government had a good understanding of the socio-economic and political characteristics of the educational clientele. The ideological position of policy planning held by the policy planners and policy-makers was supportive of the plight of the excluded, subordinate and marginalised. It was also believed that policy-makers, given their strong connections with the marginalised, would ensure and secure, through rapid policy-making processes, a voice for the marginalised. From the perspective of the state, ABE policy and programmes were also viewed as mechanisms that would promote political participation in civic and governmental affairs – participatory ABE policy and programmes

were perceived as meaningful developments that would provide political legitimation of the state.

A significant development in the policy process was the shift from literacy to ABE in the mid-1990s. With the growth in technological advance and transfer, the ever-changing definition of literacy and the emergence of lifelong education as an important societal concern, the state committed itself to the universalisation of basic education, which increased the commitment to education beyond simply the ability to read and write.[4] Post-literacy was recognised as necessary. ABE became enshrined in the Constitution and literacy was subsumed in the definition of ABE. ABE is defined as:

> ... the general conceptual foundation towards lifelong learning and development, comprising of knowledge, skills and attitudes required for social, economic and political participation and transformation applicable to a range of contexts. ABET is flexible, developmental and targeted at the specific needs of particular audiences and ideally, provides access to nationally recognised certificates. (DoE 1997a: 5)

This expansion of ABE to subsume literacy meant that approximately ten million people require or could benefit from ABE. The term 'adult basic education' in South Africa has taken on an extra meaning with the introduction of training as a vital element of the new education and training enterprise. South Africans – government, labour, civil society, business and industry – have adopted the term 'Adult Basic Education and Training', which supposedly reflects greater integration of education and training (the right to work and the right to be educated to work). The emphasis on training emanates from organised labour, which argues for the recognition of existing technical skills of the worker and the need for these skills to be acknowledged as part of the learning and teaching process (Baatjes 2003a).

Key policy developments

Government initially supported ABET and introduced a range of policies, programmes, projects and campaigns (see Aitchison et al. 2000). We highlight a few of the key developments that have shaped the current bureacratisation and formalisation of ABE and laid the foundation for the dominant role that the instrumentalist ABE is currently playing in South Africa:

- In 1995, two significant developments took place: *The Interim Guidelines* appeared as the first ever policy for ABET in South Africa. This policy played an important role in unifying the ABET sector. The Directorate for Adult Education and Training was established to work closely with a stakeholder-driven body, the National Stakeholders Forum for ABET.
- In 1996, sub-directorates of ABET were established in all nine provincial departments of education and the government launched the Ithuteng 'Ready to Learn' Campaign with a once-off budget of R50 million; new staff in the national department and provincial departments were also appointed.
- In 1997, the *Interim Guidelines* were replaced by the *Policy document on Adult Basic Education and Training*, operationalised through the *Multi-Year Implementation Plan* and nine Provincial Multi-Year Implementation Plans. This concluded the first phase of legislation for ABET which started in 1996 – the development of a Regulatory Framework that would transform existing sites of delivery, better known as night schools, into effective Public Adult Learning Centres (PALCs).
- Between 1998 and 1999, a range of policy developments were concluded. Examples of these are: 1) the establishment of a new stakeholder representative structure – the interim ABET Advisory Board – with sub-structures; 2) the development of Conditions of Service for Adult Educators; 3) the registration of existing adult educator qualifications for remuneration purposes; 4) the development of the first unit standards-based qualifications for adult educators; 5) the development of basic policy for ABET materials; 6) the registration of qualifications and unit standards in eight sub-fields of learning with SAQA; 7) the development of draft learning programmes for implementation in the provinces; and 8) the conceptualisation of the Ikhwelo and Rivoningo Projects[5] was completed.
- In 2000, the DoE launched the South African National Literacy Initiative (SANLI) as a literacy campaign targeting 500 000 learners (out of three million) in the first year of its implementation.
- In 2001, the DoL launched the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS), setting a target of raising the basic education levels of workers in the workplace so that 70 per cent of all workers would have a General Education and Training Certificate (GETC)[6] by the year 2005.
- By the end of 1998, the DoE had effectively managed to complete, at great financial expense, the key elements of the ABET policy, except for the

development of an *Adult Basic Education and Training Act,* which was completed only in 2000.

- Between 1998 and 2000, the policy development process continued alongside the implementation of projects, including the Ikhwelo and Rivoningo Projects and more recently, the SANLI Campaign. During 1999, the first assessment of ABET learners through the South African Certification Council (Safcert)[7] was undertaken and the Ikhwelo and Rivoningo Projects were implemented.
- The number of NGOs in ABET started to decline in 1997. Effective partnerships between the state and ailing NGOs failed to materialise, leading to the demise of many NGOs. This demise has been linked to bilateral and multilateral agreements between the state and donor agencies which significantly reduced funds to NGOs. For instance, in a study published in 2000, only 38 of 150 ABET NGOs surveyed in 1997 were still in operation (Aitchison et al. 2000). By contrast, commercial providers of ABET that provide programmes to business and industry in line with the NSDS have flourished.
- Funding for ABET through PALCs has remained meagre while the NSDS is channelling more funds to ABET programmes in mainly big business and industry, such as in the mining and manufacturing sectors (Baatjes, Aitchison & John 2002; Baatjes 2002b). Small-scale ABET provision in support of the instrumentalist orientation has displaced mass-based ABET provision for emancipation over the last four years. This is evident in the current scale of state-centre provision versus Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETA) supported provision as well as the distribution of funding between these two kinds of sites. We will return to this point a little later.

In summary, since 1996 a range of policy developments have taken place with emphasis on the formalisation of a national ABET system placing ABET under firm control of government with the understanding that government would be the major driving force of ABET as a vehicle for social change. We discuss this in greater detail in the next section.

Discussion of ABE policy and implementation since 1994

The South African print media has been very sympathetic to ABE, especially the *Mail & Guardian*, which has constantly published articles on government

provision of ABE. Various commentators (Aitchison 1999, 2000, 2003; Baatjes 2002a, 2003a and b; Mathe 2001, 2002; Rule 2002) provide detailed analyses of the failure of the implementation of government ABET policy. We draw on these analyses as part of our discussion.

The failure of the state-sponsored mass ABE campaigns

The first attempt by the state to implement an ABE campaign, which aimed at reaching 90 000 learners in the country, failed. The targeted numbers were not reached and critical success factors were not properly addressed (Baatjes 2003b). It was believed that Ithuteng would precipitate a mass ABE campaign that would mobilise communities in support of literacy education. However, it soon became clear that this would not happen given, amongst other things, the poor economic commitment to the campaign and, perhaps of greater concern, the political consequences of the emerging *reformist,* neo-liberal economic policies that perceive ABE as an *expense* rather than an *investment* in social development.

Following the failure of the campaign, the DoE, supported by an enthusiastic NGO-sector, developed a very sophisticated policy and an ambitious plan for ABET (DoE 1997a, 1997b). The development of both policy and plan started during the second year of what became a two-year Ithuteng campaign. Ithuteng was originally planned as a one-year campaign, but was extended because most provinces could not implement the campaign for a number of reasons including staffing, availability of funds, insufficient planning and tender regulations and procedures.

The state as a major ABET provider would set high targets for itself in the *National Multi-Year Implementation Plan (1997)*. This was largely based on the belief that the state would honour its commitment to ABE as stated in the RDP, and commit sufficient resources to it. The *Multi-Year Implementation Plan* (MYIP) would have required R18 billion over a period of five years. This soon proved impossible as the state continued to commit less than one per cent of the overall education budget to ABE (Aitchison et al. 2000; French 2002).

In 1999, ABE received a boost with the appointment of Kader Asmal as Minister of Education. He immediately threatened to 'break the back of illiteracy' as a priority of his *Call to Action*.[8] In the same year, he echoed his commitment to ABE on International Literacy Day, stating that: 'No adult South African should be illiterate in the 21st century ...' Beginning in 2000,

Asmal instituted various planning processes, including the establishment of SANLI and a Board of Advisors to assist with his national literacy campaign. Three years since the launch of SANLI the initiative has hardly produced any results. Various analysts attribute this inertia to the power struggle within the department over the control of SANLI and the constraints that GEAR places on funding the initiative (Mathe 2001; Baatjes 2003a; Aitchison et al. 2000; Rule 2002).

The allocation of resources by the South African government must be understood within the context of the elite compromises of the early 1990s between the liberation movement and the corporate sector and emergent GEAR policy. From this point of view, committing the resources that would be required to 'break the back of illiteracy' would increase the government deficit or require other forms of funding (such as increasing taxes) and would therefore be inconsistent with the policy commitment to which the ANC had attached itself. Government denies that GEAR dictates the South African ABET agenda (Mathe 2001). Explanations by the state for the lack of financial support for ABET are yet to be provided.

The formalisation of ABE

ABE in South Africa is currently firmly placed in the hands of government, and to some extent, a reluctant business sector. This centralisation of ABE through the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (see Muller, this volume) has also been linked to the formalisation of ABE programmes and plans. The formalisation is characterised by: 1) the institutionalisation of ABE provision and delivery through PALCs; 2) the employment of schoolteachers as part-time adult educators; 3) the development of a unit-standards-based qualification (GETC); 4) the delivery of a national learning programme consisting of combinations of learning areas (old school subjects) and some specialisations; 5) the rather poor supply of books; 6) the establishment of an assessment system through UMALUSI that is similar to the current matric examinations; 7) the development of adult educator qualifications to support the professionalisation of the sector; and 8) legislation that is very similar, if not identical, to that for formal schooling.

PALCs have become 'schools' for adults. This second-chance education is modelled on the NQF levels which assume that adult learning and educational

needs are similar to those of children. A closer look at the ABET curriculum shows very clearly that it is reproducing the curriculum categories of schooling and this is done through the delivery of a national curriculum consisting of school subjects. Poorly-trained and part-time adult educators, who are mainly schoolteachers, continue to be used to teach in ABET classes. Today, most PALCs can be described as dysfunctional institutions with few or no administrative and management systems (Nzimande 2003). The instability of these institutions is compounded by high attrition rates, deterrents to participation and a high turnover in educators.

The formalisation of ABET has also been shaped by a new quality assurance policy which suggests that providers be registered and accredited. This policy, which is highly prescriptive and burdensome, although it is not strictly applied to PALCs, has created a new bureaucratic system that has significant implications in particular for smaller NGOs. One of the key elements of this policy is the curriculum of providers which must comply with the national standards regime. This is clearly another mechanism that ensures control over providers of education in general and lends itself to the formalisation process of ABE in particular, as well as playing a key role in defining the role that education should play.

The level and quality of ABE provision

State provision of ABE has remained conspicuously weak even under the new democratic government. The number of PALCs declined from 1 440 to 998 during the period 1995 to 2002 (Baatjes 2003a), and the enrolment was estimated to be 250 000 learners by 2002 – far less than was anticipated in the MYIP. There are no reliable statistics on the level of provision by the private and NGO sectors. However, it is safe to say that, given the much-documented decline in the NGO sector (see Aitchison 2003; Baatjes 2003a) and the increase in unemployment which affects unskilled and semi-skilled workers (ABE candidates), enrolment in both these sectors combined is considerably low. This is excluding ABE provision that results from SETA delivery processes, which we discuss later. With the benefit of hindsight, the MYIP and the SANLI plan were both attempts by ABE activists to persuade government to prioritise and allocate necessary resources to ABET work.

Aitchison (2003) analyses the examination results and participation rates of the ABET Level 4 learners in PALCs in 2002 and identifies the following trends:

- Of the 40 974 learners enrolled, 21 148 wrote the exams and 17 926 passed between 1 and 8 learning areas;
- Compared to the enrolment estimates by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) for 1999, the number of learners enrolled in 2002 in each province was less than 50 per cent;
- The number of learners who wrote the exams per province as a percentage of enrolment ranged from 36 per cent in Mpumalanga to 68 per cent in the Western Cape;
- The enrolment in ABET Level 4 as a percentage of PALC ABET learners in 1999 ranged from 11 per cent in the Western Cape to 52 per cent in the Free State;
- The lowest was 8 per cent (the Western Cape) and the highest 26 per cent (the Free State) of those who wrote as a percentage of those enrolled in 1999;
- Those enrolled in ABET in PALCs as a percentage of those aged 20+ with no schooling formed as little as 1 per cent in KwaZulu-Natal, the highest being in the Eastern Cape with 6 per cent; and
- A small number of approximately 790 learners qualified for a GETC although the quality of the assessment remains questionable (see Baatjes 2001 for discussion of portfolio assessments).

The above suggests a serious problem with learner retention in the state-driven ABET system. There is also often a positive correlation between high drop-out rate and poor quality of instruction. More than 50 per cent of adult learners drop out of ABET programmes run by the state. Poor quality of instruction can also be related to the employment of un- or under-qualified educators and lack of learning material. Many PALCs are simply dysfunctional (Baatjes 2003c). The situation is even worse when analysing the numbers of entries for learning areas and the number who actually wrote. The higher the number of learning areas, the lower the number of people who actually wrote for all the learning areas they entered.

There are currently two examination systems for ABET learners in South Africa – the state-run system (analysed earlier) and the one run by the Independent Examinations Board (IEB). While no statistical comparison of the two systems has been conducted, there is widespread belief among those

in the field of ABE that the standards of quality of the two systems are significantly different in favour of the IEB system.

SETAs as delivery machinery of ABE

The *Skills Development Act* (SDA) of 1998 and the *Skills Development Levies Act* (SDLA) of 1999 respectively established institutions and set in place a system which requires employers to pay one per cent of their payroll to fund skills development of their employees. The Revenue Services Department collects levies, and the DoL and its subsidiary institutions manage the fund. The essence of this legislation is that it makes the training of employees a statutory requirement. Training is targeted at the employed, the unemployed and the employable. The SDA and all its subsidiary regulations constitute adult education legislation and therefore deserve a mention in this chapter. It also signals that, although adult education is still under-resourced, it should no longer be regarded as a marginal activity.

Among many institutions and systems introduced by the SDA, are the SETAs. Twenty-five SETAs were established to represent all economic sectors, with the main purpose of facilitating the implementation of the SDA across sectors. SETAs also have quality assurance of education and training in their respective sectors as one of their functions. In 2001, the DoL launched the NSDS, which identifies five key objectives and sets a number of targets that must be achieved by the skills development regime by March 2005. The most relevant of these is that by March 2005, 70 per cent of workers should have at least a NQF Level 1 qualification. The skills development regime and its institutional framework are new and it would therefore be unfair to judge them. However, there are design features of this system which, when scrutinised closely, leave us no choice but to question its ability to succeed.

Although detailed information about the successes and challenges of SETAs is not currently available, the overall picture is not a positive one. SETAs are having great difficulty with the implementation of the NSDS and are mostly likely to fail in meeting the set targets. They have become new bureaucratic structures preoccupied with the development of administrative and policy systems which have not only hindered the implementation of the NSDS, but also created barriers to providers to fast track education and training programmes and projects. Significantly, they have great difficulty in mobilising companies

to support the implementation of skills legislation and the NSDS. This is evident in the small number of companies who have submitted Workplace Skills Plans and the increase of unspent money in the National Skills Fund (NSF). A small number of learnerships and skills programmes have been developed and the quality of these programmes requires investigation. A major hindrance to their success is the fact that education and training providers involved with unemployed and poor communities have great difficulty accessing funds from SETAs and the National Skills Authority (NSA) because of bureaucratic hiccups. And finally, although some SETAs and the NSA have allocated funds and discretionary grants to strategic projects, the effectiveness of these projects is unknown.

Mathe (2002: 90) argues that, given the rising rate of unemployment, the private sector is employing people with more than NQF Level 1 qualifications even for menial jobs, and that this will lead to those who have some training getting more, and those who have less, getting less or nothing. At the same time, those workers who would benefit from ABET are the most vulnerable to retrenchments. Workers with less than nine years of schooling in the mining and mineral sector are the first to be retrenched (Baatjes et al. 2002). This argument is corroborated by the *Human Resources Development Strategy*, which states that already '64.1 per cent of persons currently employed possess the GETC (equivalent to the current Grade 9 certificate) that is pegged at NQF Level 1' (DoL 2001: 38). This means that the 70 per cent target can easily be achieved (despite the apathy shown by employers[9]) without significantly altering the literacy profile of the country. This is especially so since there are no clear plans and specific targets set in the NSDS for reaching unemployed illiterate and under-educated adults. Also, the facilitation of skills development of the unemployed was initially made the responsibility of the DoL and financed from the NSF, which is made up of 20 per cent of the levies paid by enterprises. However, no institutional framework and infrastructure similar to that put in place for facilitating training in workplaces has been established for the unemployed. This responsibility was later shifted to the 25 SETAs whose main target is the formal (employment) sector, and given the fact that all 25 SETAs, with no exception, are struggling to meet challenges in their sectors, it is unlikely that they will do justice to this 'added responsibility'. It seems quite likely that, despite the enthusiasm and excitement generated in the ABE field, the *Skills Development Act* will be another empty promise.

The rise and fall of movements for social mobilisation in ABE

One of the constant features of the ABE sector is its lack of a powerful voice that represents its interests in national debates, especially around resources. The past decade has seen the demise of numerous ABE NGOs (see Aitchison et al. 2000; Baatjes 2003a for more details). The majority of organisations closed because of funding crises. As the next section will show, they do however seem to have re-emerged in new forms in the more recent period.

The weaknesses of this sector are a result of both internal and external forces, and have led to ambivalence within the funding community and the state about continuing to support or taking this sector seriously (see Morrow, this volume). Government is responsible for some of the reasons that explain the collapse of these organisations, particularly its involvement in the funding mechanisms to NGOs and their measuring tools of success. The NGO sector frequently views government as a gatekeeper that has failed to facilitate the effective channelling of donor funds to the NGO sector since 1996. It has also resulted in bureaucratic and accountability systems that do not suit the NGO sector. Although civil society could have a profound impact on shaping community development and democracy, governments might also perceive it as a potential site of counter-hegemonic learning.

The rise of the adult learning network and its renewed focus

A characteristic of the ABE sector is its resilience. This can be attributed to the long history of this sector in struggles against oppression, marginalisation and exclusion. Despite the high-profile collapse of organisations such as the National Literacy Co-operation, the Adult Educators and Trainers Association of South Africa (AETASA) and the World University Service (WUS) South Africa, the NGO sector has been able to regroup, reorganise and advance. It took no more than a year after the closure of AETASA for the new Adult Learning Network (ALN) to emerge as a new formation to: 1) provide a national networking structure for organisations working in the field of adult learning, basic education and development; and 2) promote redress and transformation, with the key focus on improving the status, quality and provision of adult education. Critics pointed out that, while this is a sign of resilience, it can also be a weakness to form organisations one after another without conducting a proper audit of why previous organisations have failed.

This criticism is justified. However, although the formation of the ALN was in response to requests from the sector and demands on those who had been part of previous networks, care was taken to take proper stock before formalising the organisation.

At the time of writing, the ALN was supported by eight provincial networks (no network existed in Mpumalanga). For its part, the network in KwaZulu-Natal investigated its formation and has decided to shift its focus towards campaigning for the constitutional right to adult basic education (see Membership Guidelines, *Talking Adult Learning* 2003). This change of approach requires a careful examination of the relationship between the state and civil society. A key element is informed by a more coherent approach to the study and practice of adult education and its links with new social movements and organisations within civil society. For now, it is clear that the struggle for ABE remains highly contested and is driven by different social, political and economic interests.

Summary and conclusion

In the decade since the first ABET policy was introduced in South Africa, there have been a number of significant policy developments and contributions to the field of ABE. At the time of writing, a well-founded policy was in place, as was a comprehensive, but partly dysfunctional system for ABET, with nine provincial programmes. The establishment of the evolving system has been created through literacy campaigns, projects and pressures from those within civil society representing the voices of the marginalised and excluded. Today, the state, business, and industry are playing a more dominant role in the provision and delivery of ABE programmes as a largely social and economic project. Although some loose rhetoric is heard regarding literacy, ABE for democratic participation and other forms of non-formal education continues to receive less attention from the state and the donor community. The NGO sector, which views ABE as a political project, has been in decline because of financial constraints but its resilience is shown in its reinvention and reorganisation and consistent attempts to maintain its role as a critical actor that is both defensive and offensive. Ongoing attempts are made to protect civil society from economic and political colonisation and to continue to exert influence and pressure on political society.

Enhancing the status and material wealth of the poor and marginalised population through ABE in South Africa reflects an ongoing struggle. Efforts by the state and business are increasingly being shaped by the human capital tradition and thus maintain the status quo, while the role and scope for emancipatory projects are ignored. The struggle for ABE remains a contested terrain of conflicting interests and ideologies. This tension exists between the two dominant ethics of adult education – emancipatory ABE and instrumentalist ABE. The emancipatory ethic recognises the importance of human resource development, but is mainly concerned with social justice and radical change. Its central position towards ABE is that it is an object of social policy and that literacy should be delivered as part of a political process that incorporates adult learners into democratic and participatory forms of citizenship and to fight against the colonisation of the lifeworld.[10] The radical tradition is critical of the instrumentalist tradition that is emerging as the dominant force currently driving ABE practices in South Africa. The terms 'ABET', 'FET' and 'lifelong learning' are increasingly being used to signal new concepts of adult education – particularly to support economic productivity and economic growth. There is greater emphasis being placed on linking adult education more effectively to the needs of the economy, concentrating on 'clients' needs', 'co-ordinating resources', 'effective delivery of services', and so on. These developments, according to Welton (1995), are indicative of the fact that adult education is becoming less marginal to the mainstream of education and the major preoccupation of the state. This neo-liberal tradition dictates that adult education become more and more relevant to the needs of the economy or corporate capitalism. Business and professional interests often invoke adult education as a means to increase efficiency and profitability, while many community groups look at adult education's potential as a vehicle for social reform. The neo-liberal tradition that has absorbed adult education into a 'cult of efficiency' (Collins's term; 1991) or instrumentalism is failing to create a more just and equitable society, therefore perpetuating asymmetrical power relations.

The human capital tradition has also shaped a number of developments in ABET in South Africa. Firstly, it precipitated the formalisation and bureacratisation of ABE. This process has placed ABET policy formulation under the effective control of government. One of the key problems of this development is the role that ABET is playing in the reproduction of the curriculum

categories of formal schooling. This is clearly reflected in the pre-packed curriculum being taught in PALCs and the emergence of formal qualifications for adult learners. ABET is hardly different to formal schooling and this is being reinforced by the systems adopted by state provision and delivery. ABET programmes, like schooling, are constantly being shaped by the market and it is highly unlikely that ABET will escape the narrowing focus of education on economic productivity.

Secondly, ABET provision and delivery in business and industry is also driven by human capital approaches and assumptions and will be increasingly linked to the workplace. However, the rather disturbing development in the workplace is the vulnerability of those with less education. Workers are constantly being lambasted and told that they lack the knowledge and skills for the new knowledge-rich society. We are not convinced that this argument is true because those with the least education are most vulnerable to retrenchment. The so-called emphasis on the skills-gap might well be a way to make people feel inadequate and a justification to cut jobs or to decrease the cost of labour and salaries of workers.[11] There are clearly not enough skilled or unskilled jobs for people to do and the use of screening techniques in selecting candidates for jobs is on the increase (see Payne 2000). For instance, a matric certificate has suddenly become a requirement to be employed in a low-skilled job.

Thirdly, there is the emergence of the private versus public ABET provision and delivery. Most of the NGOs in ABET have 'converted' to private providers or commercial providers as part of a strategy to survive. However, in the process they are abandoning the struggle for emancipatory possibilities and projects. Partly linked to the formalisation of ABET, these providers have to compete for resources made available through the NSDS-regime which services a small number of workers in mainly large companies at fairly high rates. On the other hand, public ABET continues to be poorly funded and the quality of programmes remains poor. Baptiste (2001) links the emergence of private versus public education to human capital approaches. He argues that greater pressure is being placed on poor and under-educated adults to pay for their education, which has become yet another commodity in the marketplace. The lifespan of these NGOs and commercial providers is very short given the current rate at which the economy is shedding jobs currently occupied by under-educated workers who could easily be displaced by the thousands of matriculants who enter the job-market on an annual basis.

Finally, but most importantly, is the value of ABET in the new knowledge-rich economy. We are increasingly being told about the lack of knowledge and skills amongst the South African population and that the 'promised' jobs would require higher levels of education. Both government, and business and industry do not appear to value ABET as an investment and an imperative for economic growth, but see it rather as an unnecessary and unwanted cost. ABET has very little economic currency and the state's inconsistent philosophy in approaching adult learning is reflected by its *laissez faire* attitude towards ABET compared to the interventionist attitude towards FET (Baatjes et al. 2002). It is highly unlikely that we will see an increase in support for ABET as shown through the current state of provisioning, SANLI and *Masifunde sonke*. ABET, however, remains a basic human right and the state needs to be pressured to fulfil its constitutional obligation towards the under-educated and to recognise alternatives such as those presented by the emancipatory tradition.

It is in relation to these alternatives that civil society and social movements are crucial. Radical adult educators continue to view ABE in the complexities of politics, social justice, economics and the intertwined issues of poverty, unemployment, racism, sexism, disease, crime, and moral decay. They foster the best and most suitable route to emancipation from the intricacies of exploitation, oppression, exclusion and marginalisation – a route that incorporates the themes of justice, freedom, care, equality, peace, stability and development (Baatjes 2003a; Welton 1995). An increasing body of literature (Apple 2002; Bello 2002; International Forum on Globalisation 2002; Kellner 2000; Morrow & Torres 1999; Murphy 2001; Ramadiro & Vally 2002; Welton 2001) on the role of civil society and social movements discusses the possibilities of how civil society and social movements should be organised and reinvented to confront the neo-liberal project and the growing global right-wing movement. One thing is clear: civil society and social movements that recognise ABE as a human right, a development imperative and an important aspect of social change, are re-emerging and already challenging governments and neo-liberal forces. It is evident that instrumentalist ABE in South Africa, if uncontested, will perpetuate marginalisation and exclusion. Close to ten million South African adults are so poorly educated that they cannot access the jobs on the market. The hope of being retrained or schooled for a new job in the elite knowledge sector is painfully out of reach for the majority.

Notes

1. Adult basic education is defined as all forms of organised education and training that meet the basic learning needs of adults, including literacy, numeracy, general knowledge and life-skills, and values and attitudes that they require to survive, develop their capacities, live and work in dignity, improve the quality of their lives, make informed decisions and to ... continue learning (Unesco 1997). Prior to 1996, ABE in South Africa consisted mainly of literacy in English and numeracy.
2. A fairly common and acceptable definition of literacy is the ability to read and write, not only by adults, but by children and youth as well. Literacy is a continuum of reading and writing skills. Often the term is used to include also basic arithmetic skills. It is widely accepted that an adequate level of literacy is achieved after seven years of schooling. Today, the term 'literacy' also includes various forms of basic knowledge and skills. These include knowledge and skills such as computer literacy, economic literacy, scientific literacy, technological literacy, political literacy, etc. Recently Unesco published literacy rates according to the number of people in a country who have gone to school. On the basis of this definition, South Africa has a literacy rate of 91 per cent. The South African government now targets the three million adults who have no schooling.
3. The first official government policy, namely *The Interim Guidelines*, was published in 1995. It was based on a range of policy discussions that took place during the period 1990–1994, including the *National Education Policy Investigation* (1992), COSATU's *Consolidated Recommendations on ABET* (1993) and the ANC's *Policy Framework for Education and Training* (1994).
4. In South Africa and in many other parts of the world, the provision of literacy and functional literacy is no longer enough and the need to provide ABE is increasingly being emphasised. ABE, which subsumes literacy, is increasingly emphasised as a vehicle to integrate poorly-educated adults in the emerging global society as parents, productive workers, participatory citizens and as fulfilled human beings. ABE is highlighted as necessary to stem the divisive and destructive forces of polarisation, marginalisation and exclusion.
5. The Ikhwelo Project was conceptualised in 1998 as a project that would provide ABET to approximately 3 000 adult learners in the Eastern Cape and Northern Province. The ABET programme was designed to provide adult learners with knowledge and skills in agriculture and SMMEs with the aim of encouraging self-sufficiency and self-reliance. The Ikhwelo Project was implemented in 1999 as a partnership project between Project Literacy and the DoE. The Rivoningo Project was also launched in 1999 as part of a strategy to develop good Public Adult Learning Centres (PALCs) in each of the nine

provinces. The Rivoningo Project was originally conceptualised as the Five PALC Project of the DoE, targeting five PALCs per province.

6. In terms of the new National Qualification Framework (NQF), the GETC is the first qualification achieved after the completion of the four ABET levels or nine years of general education in the case of schooling.
7. Safcert has recently been replaced by the Quality Assurance Body for General and Further Education and Training called UMALUSI. The Minister of Education launched UMALUSI on 11 March 2003 (see Muller, in this volume).
8. Asmal, K (1999) *Statement in the national assembly by the Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, MP on the occasion of International Literacy Day*, 8 September 1999. <http://education.pwv.gov.za/Media_Statements/Aug99/Illiteracy.html>
9. Out of the 25 000 companies registered with the Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services SETA (MERSETA) only 1 000 companies (four per cent) submitted Workplace Skills Plans (WSPs), which is the mechanism to fund education and training programmes (Baatjes 2002: 11) and of the 3 800 employers who pay levies in the Education Training and Development Practices (ETDP) sector, less than a third submitted WSPs in 2002 (Mathe 2002: 98).
10. Using Welton's (1995) definition of lifeworld, we use the term 'lifeworld' to describe the space in which we learn what life means and the practices – our interactions and organisations – that bind us together as human beings.
11. In recent instances where workers have been retrenched, they have been offered life-skills programmes that could increase their knowledge and skills so that they could access other jobs, including becoming entrepreneurs in the informal economy. This is part of a strategy to make people feel inadequate and that they need more education.

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