

Reversing the effects of apartheid

A literacy campaign is changing the lives of adults in KZN

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There's a joke about an illiterate Zulu woman receiving a letter from a husband who works in the Johannesburg mines. Anticipating that the letter might carry sexually explicit content, she asks her grandson to close his ears while he is reading it to her, so that he does not "hear" the explicit sexual messages.

If you go beyond the periphery of this joke, it describes the sadness and humiliation visited upon the majority of people because of a deliberate plan to ostracise them educationally. The fact that the majority of illiterate people in the country happen to be of a particular race is not coincidental.

The KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education, together with the Office of the Premier, introduced the Masifundisane Adult Mass Literacy Campaign in 2006, with a view to having KZN declared an illiteracy-free territory by 2010.

Unless you have attended Masifundisane graduation ceremonies, it is difficult to fully appreciate this programme's impact on the lives of ordinary people. Moving assertions like, "Now I can count my pension money", "I am now able to read my Bible" or "Now I can read which bus to take when going to town", are often made by the students, who, in the twilight of their years, have finally seen the promised land. The effects of apartheid on their lives become very glaring and regrettable.

I know I will be accused of using apartheid as a scapegoat for all that goes wrong in the country. No one could have said it better than Dr Cassius Lubisi, KZN Education Department's head. Lubisi talks of a body of opinion that seeks to discount and downplay the legacy of apartheid on education. "This body of opinion, based on a severe case of lazy thinking and analysis, seeks to convince the rest of us that the malaise we see in education in the current era all results from limitations of post-apartheid education policies."

Despite the legacy of apartheid, the Masifundisane Adult Literacy Campaign, which is based on a Cuban model, has changed the lives of many people in the province.

Who could ever forget when 101-year-old Bonezinkulu Magubane shook the premier's hand after receiving her literacy certificate? There was palpable joy and a shining sparkle in her teary eyes. It was a defining moment for a person who, for close to a century, could not enjoy the basic human right to education.

This campaign has not only freed its beneficiaries from the shackles of illiteracy, it has helped put food on the table of more than 4 000 facilitators, supervisors and monitors. About R33 million was paid to them as stipends in the 2007 and 2008 financial year. Since 2006, Masifundisane has reached 382 974 adult students in KZN.

Two research papers have been produced on Masifundisane, under the auspices of the Maurice Webb Research Unit of the University of KZN. One is entitled “Masifundisane as an Entrepreneurial Nursery for Youth” and the other is “Perception of Volunteer Facilitators on Masifundisane”. In September, these papers were presented at a seminar attended by three other provinces. This means that other provinces are learning from our province. There is also an exciting partnership with the KZN Blind Society, which has started translating Masifundisane curriculum manuals into Braille.

Supported by the KZN Department of Health, Masifundisane has distributed 200 pairs of reading glasses, 500 walking sticks and assessed over 400 students for poor vision. This campaign has published a newsletter called Sengiyakwazi Ukubhala, with adult students writing for the publication. Talk about an innovative approach to the fight against illiteracy.

Masifundisane has been a resounding success. True to the lessons learnt in Cuba, political will and sound political leadership are critical if a mass programme of this nature is to succeed.

The road towards reversing the devastating effects of apartheid on our people is without doubt fraught with a plethora of challenges, but we have numerous reasons to be optimistic.

• Sihle Mlotshwa is the media and citizen liaison official for the KZN Department of Education, but writes in his personal capacity.

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