

SECOND CARNEGIE INQUIRY INTO POVERTY  
AND DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Illiteracy and adult basic  
education in South Africa  
by

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NOTE:

Two points need to be made at the outset:

- . The term 'literacy' does not always reflect the concept under discussion fully. The process goes beyond merely reading and writing to include at the very least numeracy and language learning, and the term 'Adult Basic Education' (ABE) is often more appropriate. The two terms are here used interchangeably.
  
- . This paper has of necessity had to rely on official census figures for statistics. Given the socio-political reality of South Africa, government publications present these figures in terms of the 'racial classifications' accorded to all inhabitants of this country. The author wishes to distance herself from the principle of so classifying and distinguishing between people who all share a common humanity. The only advantage provided by this practice is that inferences concerning unequal opportunities or discrimination can be drawn when separate tables show significant differences in levels of education between different 'population groups'. This could indicate the relative extent of need for each 'group', thus informing decisions concerning where support in the form of literacy provision would be appropriate.

INTRODUCTION

Poverty is not a necessary condition for illiteracy. In most societies a small percentage of the non-literate population is likely to have been excluded from basic education for other reasons (a mental or physical handicap, for example). However, the correlation between poverty and illiteracy is sufficiently high to assume considerable significance. Fisher<sup>1</sup> has compared the

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1) Fisher, EA, "Illiteracy in context",  
Prospects, Vol XII No 2, 1982 at 155 - 162

degree of social, cultural and economic deprivation of countries whose population is 'highly illiterate' (>66%) with those countries having a largely 'literate' population (<34% illiteracy). He found that with a few exceptions there was a "fairly marked positive correlation between literacy and GNP per capita"<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, high rates of illiteracy correlated strongly with numerous other social indicators of poverty.

For example, in relation to 'literate' countries, the 'illiterate' countries displayed considerably

- lower life expectancy and higher rates of infant mortality;
- lower levels of food production;
- higher incidences of malnutrition and starvation;
- lower availability and poorer quality of health services;
- poorer communication systems;
- lower levels of urbanisation and industrialisation;
- lower levels of educational provision and access.<sup>3)</sup>

This lends considerable support to the argument that illiteracy is found predominantly among the poorest sections of the population. This comparison between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' applies equally whether the comparison is between countries, or within a given country.

In South Africa, class divisions correspond closely to official 'racial' definitions of the population. It is therefore not surprising that census figures show the majority of the non-literate population to be found among the poorest members of South African

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2) *ibid* at 160

3) *ibid*

society - those persons officially classified 'Black' and 'Coloured'.<sup>4</sup>

This is reflected in a survey of illiteracy in South Africa which was conducted by the author during 1983.<sup>5</sup> The survey included a statistical analysis to determine the numerical and geographical extent of illiteracy; an overview of attempts being undertaken to address the problem; the drawing together of recurring themes, problems and focal issues emerging from the investigations; and the exploration of various possible courses of action to confront the situation.

1. THE EXTENT AND DISTRIBUTION OF ADULT ILLITERACY IN SOUTH AFRICA:

Statistics from the 1980 S A Population Census<sup>6</sup> form the basis of this analysis, which commences with an examination of definitions of literacy and the criteria by which levels of literacy are determined.

- 4) Other papers in this Inquiry discuss more fully the fact that in South Africa poverty is endured mainly by black persons, and that there is differential access to basic educational provision. See for example

Wentzel, W. Hard times in the Karoo - Case studies and statistical profiles for five peri-urban residential areas.

and

Nasson, B. Bitter harvest - farm schooling for black South Africans.

- 5) Wedepohl, L. A Survey of Illiteracy in South Africa, Cape Town, Centre for Extra-Mural Studies, forthcoming 1984.
- 6) R.S.A., Population Census 80: Social Characteristics - Sample. Report no. 02-80-02, Pretoria, Government Printer, 1982.

A definition of literacy should go beyond a mere 'ability to read and write' to see literacy as enabling and functional. It must be accompanied by understanding and insight, be related to the life of the learner, and contribute to the growth and development of the individual and his/her community.

Criteria for evaluating literacy can change over time and place, and literacy should therefore be evaluated within a social context, since the degree of literateness required for adequate functioning could be different for each learner and each social context.

Resorting to the purely quantitative criterion of census figures is therefore only partially satisfactory. The limitations of this method are acknowledged, and figures should be seen as indicating patterns or trends, rather than as an accurate reflection of the situation.<sup>7</sup> The variations in Table 1 below illustrate this clearly.

Two questions relating to literacy appear on the 1980 census form:

- . Indicate whether you can read/write any of the following languages (i.e. a self-assessment of one's ability);
- . State highest school standard passed (i.e. level of formal school education).

The underlying rationale for this criterion is that several years of reinforcement subsequent to learning to read are considered necessary to ensure retention.

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7) One such limitation, for example, is the fact that the 'independent homelands' are excluded from 1980 census figures, but are believed to have high rates of illiteracy. This means that the actual situation is consistently under-represented before the analysis even begins. Several other intervening variables also skew results.

The following is a comparison of various tables extracted from these statistics:

Table 1 : Comparison of tables attempting to quantify illiteracy in S.A. according to different statistical dimensions:

Persons Classified	Self-assessed illiteracy (15+ yrs)		Less than Std 4 (≤ 15 yrs included)		Less than Std 4 (20+ years)	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
White	23 560	.72	(709 890?)		88 540	1.95
Coloured	246 680	15.51	1 506 900	57.66	483 280	18.49
Asian	39 180	7.59	371 700	45.25	102 660	12.50
'Total Blacks'	3 343 140	33.05	12 464 540	74.64	5 039 440	29.77
Total	3 652 560		15 053 120		5 713 920 *	

\* Probably closer to 8 or 9 million

Even from official government statistics it thus becomes clear that the group enjoying political, economic and social privilege in South Africa - those persons classified 'White' - have also been in the most favourable position as regards educational opportunities. The provision of education for this group has been sufficiently extensive to reduce 'illiteracy' to negligible proportions. Conversely, a lack of functional literacy appears to relate directly to the degree and extent of disadvantage and deprivation - political, economic, social and educational - suffered by the other 'population groups', with persons classified 'Black' and 'Coloured' at the bottom of the heap.

When the geographical distribution of illiteracy among these two groups is scrutinised, it becomes evident that the 'spread' of the problem is so extensive that it becomes difficult to select 'areas of greatest need'. It could be argued that there is a need almost everywhere in the country.

2. CURRENT ABE PROVISION:

Attempts to address this problem by providing Adult Basic Education are undertaken by various agencies.<sup>8</sup>

The response of both state and private sector must be seen against the background of strong pressures from within the country and abroad to promote Black advancement, and the use of education and training to achieve this. State response is most extensively manifested in the Basic Education programme of the Department of Education and Training (DET), of which several aspects have been criticised.<sup>9</sup>

Industrial literacy programmes are on the whole geared to productivity by preparing workers for job-skills training.

Three countrywide voluntary organisations<sup>10</sup> and numerous smaller independent church and community initiatives undertake literacy training according to various methods and with varying degrees of success.

While acknowledging the enthusiasm and achievements of many literacy groups, one must not lose sight of the sobering statistic that in 1980, out of an estimated 6 million<sup>11</sup> illiterates in South Africa, all the above efforts taken together assisted no more than 25 000 persons to attain literacy.<sup>12</sup> (a) + (b)

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- 8) n5 at 28 -76
- 9) n5 at 30 - 33
- 10) Learn and Teach, Operation Upgrade, and the Bureau of Literacy and Literature.
- 11) As mentioned under Table 1, the figure is actually likely to be closer to 8 or 9 million, which further reduces the fraction expressing the success rate.
- 12) (a) Litsa News, 1/82, Johannesburg, Bureau of Literacy and Literature, 1982 at 1.
- (b) French, E. The Promotion of Literacy in South Africa - A multi-faceted survey at the start of the 80's, Pretoria, HSRC, 1982 at 24, 117 and 76

This constitutes less than 0,5% of the total. It is clear that means of reaching more people more effectively and meaningfully need to be devised. This will be explored under Section 4.

3. RECURRING THEMES, PROBLEMS AND FOCAL ISSUES:

Areas of importance emerging from the research<sup>13</sup> are the following:

- 3.1 A tendency to think along set lines - usually a model incorporating traditional first-world perceptions of technology and formal schooling - was frequently encountered. Alternative ways of looking at situations should be encouraged.
- 3.2 The most striking observation to emerge from the research concerns the magnitude of the problem, the limited extent of improvement effected by present efforts, and the low priority accorded to literacy work in South Africa.

According to French, "the budget for adult literacy amounts to less than 1% of the education budget for the Black education departments, and to a tiny fraction of the national education budget."<sup>14</sup>

If the lack of interest in literacy promotion in South Africa is seen in conjunction with the State's reluctance to grant tax concessions for literacy training, together with the annual increase of African and 'Coloured' early school-dropouts, the conclusion is reasonable that even less than .41% of the country's illiterates will in future become literate every year.

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13) n5 at 77 - 98

14) n 12 (b) at 79

### 3.3 The Teacher

This is widely regarded as the single most important factor in ABE. Statements to the effect that the teacher is crucial were reiterated at every level during the data-collecting stage of this investigation. These statements echo what has been established in other research.

Pretorius quotes Marian Halvorson's<sup>15</sup> reference to research findings that "no particular approach stood out as being superior to others ... of greater importance ... was the quality of teaching"; and "there does not seem to be any answer yet as to which method of teaching is best, unless it is that the teacher is the significant factor."<sup>16</sup>

French reports an HSRC pilot literacy programme which "confirm(ed) the common observation that the quality of the teacher far outweighs the quality of the materials as a factor in the success of training."<sup>17</sup>

3.3.1 According to Rachel Jenkins, teaching literacy or second language at a basic level to adults is one of the most difficult tasks a teacher can face:

- . there is no method which is universally acceptable and effective;
- . the students have a variety of educational backgrounds, from no schooling at all to partly remembered schooling;

15) Literacy consultant for Africa for the National Council of Churches, and for 20 years ABE teacher and UNESCO consultant in Tanzania.

16) Litsa News, Vol. 2 No. 1 1983 at 1

17) n 12 (b) at 81

they have individual needs relating to their roles as industrial, domestic or other workers, job seekers, parents and responsible members of the community.<sup>18</sup>

Yet the training for this demanding task is generally inadequate. Halvorson points out that most ABE teacher training has built into it "the mistaken idea that anyone who knows how to read can, within a few hours or days ... develop skills to teach adults to read"; teachers of school-children receive several years of training, but ABE teachers are often given little more than a week-end crash course.<sup>19</sup>

Teachers are consequently ill-equipped to deal with the demands of their task. They tend to rely heavily on the materials provided by their organisation; lack flexibility when unexpected problems arise; do not understand the learning process; have only a limited awareness of students' needs; do not realise the potential inherent in student writing;<sup>20</sup> most are unaware that students are not 'ignorant', but bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to classes.<sup>21</sup>

- 3.3.2 The problem is exacerbated by lack of support for the teacher subsequent to initial training. This was variously expressed to the writer : no day-to-day management of courses; teachers need someone who can 'help them if they're stuck' or 'give them ideas'; teachers need someone who co-ordinates the programme, meets regularly with them to discuss problems and suggest remedies; someone who 'acts as resource' for the teachers.

18) Personal communication from Rachel Jenkins, British consultant appointed through the British Council to the Centre for Extra-Mural Studies, U.C.T.

19) n 16 at 1

20) See 3.4.2 below.

21) See 3.11 below

French reports a similar finding: "... there is a marked lack of adequately trained 'middle management' in literacy work in South Africa .... The provision of trained and experienced personnel to offer supportive services and guidance to the instructors in literacy centres could make the most important single contribution of any development in literacy work, and may even make up for poor training of instructors".<sup>22</sup>

3.3.3 One attempt to circumvent teacher training problems is industry's demand for tertiary qualifications (preferably formal teacher-training) as prerequisite for literacy teachers. This might be appropriate in the sophisticated technological first-world setting for which it has been designed. However, it is likely to be too expensive and inappropriate to other contexts, and would not produce sufficient instructors to meet the urgent need. It is simultaneously another example of the tendency to think only in terms of a first-world formal-schooling model. The assumption that only persons with formal teacher training or similar qualifications can teach ABE has been challenged by instances of school-teacher instructors who treat adults as though they were children, and act in a high-handed authoritarian manner.

Some Socialist mass campaigns have used school pupils, many of whom were successful as tutors. In other instances (including the British campaign), neo-literates who have volunteered to teach others have established rapport and a non-judgmental atmosphere, and have displayed an understanding of the problems of being illiterate and the process of learning to read as an adult, which only personal experience can provide.

Other possible ways of improving the situation relate to improved pre-service training, in-servicing training courses for literacy teachers who feel insecure and need additional input, and assistance in the development of supportive resource staff and services.

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22) n 12 (b) at 79

### 3.4 Materials:

- 3.4.1 French makes the observation that literacy promotion in South Africa has a strong materials-orientation, due to the fact that unsophisticated and poorly-trained instructors need structured, fully set out course books. The misguided assumption among many literacy workers that there will eventually be an "'ultimate' course which would solve all problems" further stunts creativity and initiative. He cites criteria such as clear, teachable method, linguistic validity and sound educational principles, relevant content and realistic cost as basis for materials production.<sup>23</sup>

Teachers' high dependence on materials has also been noted by Rachel Jenkins. They are seen to be unable to move beyond the organisation's materials to develop their own aids appropriate to the situation.

Once again, teacher training needs to promote teachers' self-confidence and assist them towards reduced dependency on materials.

- 3.4.2 Another area which is lacking is the provision of appropriate post-literacy reading matter ('bridging material'). A need for such material was voiced frequently. The literacy organisations have attempted to meet this need, producing readers such as the 'advanced' course books of the Bureau of Literacy, some Operation Upgrade readers, booklets on history, unemployment etc. by Learn and Teach, and the Learn and Teach Magazine.

However, very little use has hitherto been made in South Africa of a rich source of supplementary reading matter : the production of students' own writing. Some examples do exist, such as a Learn and Teach collection of student writings as a basis for their English course, but nothing as extensive as for example the British

effort, which has produced writings by neo-literates for neo-literates in the British newspaper 'Write First Time', and numerous booklets written about themselves by post-literacy students in the course of weekend writing workshops and regular literacy classes.

Apart from their value as reading matter for others, these writings provide psychological benefits for the writers. Illiteracy has a stigma attached to it, and an inability to comprehend or cope with the printed word has oppressed the illiterate person throughout life. Frequently the printed word has come to be regarded as a threat and a constant reminder of one's inadequacy. Not only having mastered the printed word, but actually 'appearing in print' oneself, finally demystifies this threat and contributes to a growth in self-confidence.

This is an area which should be promoted with much more vigour in future. The costs are not negligible : conducting writing workshops requires skilled co-ordinators, and travelling and other costs are frequently involved. Ideally, a resource service in this area should include printing facilities, so that for example small community groups with limited financial resources are not excluded from the satisfaction of seeing themselves 'in print'. Even if printing equipment and staff prove too expensive, minimum equipment would include typewriters with extra-large type, and duplicating facilities.

An invaluable aid, given the widespread distribution of rural illiteracy in South Africa, could be the equipping of a small bus or panel-van as mobile printing workshop, in which course instructors could travel to outlying areas to conduct writing workshops. If this bus could double as itinerant library with reading matter for neo-literates, so much the better.

### 3.5 Dropout

Regular attendance at literacy classes and completion of courses is always a problem for adults having to earn a living by doing a full day's work and in addition coping with the demands and responsibilities of their personal lives. Tiredness, shift work and classes held after hours were frequently mentioned as factors causing the failure of literacy programmes. Long travelling distances, danger after dark, in rural areas the seasonal demands of agricultural activities and the prejudice of the community<sup>24</sup> are further factors militating against regular attendance and course completion.

Persuading employers to allow courses during work hours, obtaining the co-operation of the community for members learning to read (as for example in child-minding or other supportive services in order to free students for classes) are extremely difficult tasks. Possibly creating a greater public awareness of the importance of literacy could be a first step.

### 3.6 Evaluation:

A need for a sound system of evaluation, and a great deal of uncertainty concerning what and how to evaluate, were very generally expressed. A fair degree of consensus exists that work needs to be evaluated in order to gauge progress and effectiveness, ensure a consistent standard, and act as safeguard against the exaggerated claims of some literacy agencies that they are able to teach people to read in a minimum number of hours. Less consensus exists concerning the 'what' and 'how' of evaluation.

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24) As for example against women 'going out alone' and attending classes - n 12 (b) at 55.

The HSRC interprets evaluation quite strongly in terms of testing, and is at present developing a series of standardised tests for adults (until recently tests designed for children had been used with adults). A great deal of thought is being put into the tests, and they will no doubt be a valuable aid to measuring and standardising progress.<sup>25</sup> To rely solely on tests, however, is to revert to the tendency to see ABE in terms of a formal-schooling framework.

The frame of reference for evaluation needs to be widened beyond 'testing'. Charnley and Jones<sup>25</sup> have suggested a wide range of additional alternative criteria which can be introduced into the evaluation process. A narrowly test-oriented approach completely ignores these more intangible qualitative benefits which could accrue to the learner. For example, while employers might be interested to know, "Can he now complete a work-schedule?", the learner might consider it more important to say, "I no longer have to pretend to be 'too busy' because I'm too ashamed to admit to my child why I can't help him with his homework"; or "At last I can write to my wife in Transkei, or read her letters, in privacy".

Two alternative 'testing' models to the formal-schooling examination type model are

- \* the model contained in a booklet produced during the British campaign, which helps learners to evaluate their own progress by means of a clear, simple but workable set of criteria<sup>27</sup>.
- \* the model proposed by Rachel Jenkins, whereby students and instructor co-operate in developing their own test, deciding what needs to be tested and how best to do it, and then proceed to implement it.

25) n 12 (b) at 85

26) Jones, H A + Charnley, A H, The Concept of Success in Adult Literacy, Cambridge, Huntingdon, 1979 at 8-9

27) Good, M. Holmes, J. How's it Going? An Alternative to Testing Students in Adult Literacy, London, ALU, 1978

Both these models presuppose that it is important to the learners themselves to evaluate critically whether they have attained the desired standard - not that they are being judged from outside and possibly pronounced a failure.

It was pointed out to the writer that this is all very idealistic, but fails to take into consideration that literacy organisations are often accountable to sponsors. The granting of substantial funds by a donor to develop a new course, or having been contracted by industry, were examples mentioned. In such instances, sponsors require concrete proof that their investment has not been wasted, and are not excessively interested in qualitative, intuitive, idealistic statements. Testing is regarded as the most effective method of producing tangible results.

One attempt out of this dilemma was the multi-faceted evaluation undertaken by Learn and Teach in 1980,<sup>28</sup> which tried to avoid formal testing while providing the organisation with information on which to base future planning, as well as satisfying potential donors.

The evaluation method chosen was Mezirow's 'synchronic induction' approach,<sup>29</sup> which has been developed as an alternative to the traditional testing approach. Rather than attempting to measure outcome, the evaluation focuses on processes, analysing the differences (or similarities) between intent and current practice within a variety of processes and areas.<sup>30</sup>

This was considered to be an appropriate approach for an organisation based on democratic, communal decision-making principles, and it was consequently adapted to the Learn and Teach situation.

28) Bird, Adrienne, Learn and Teach - An Evaluation, Johannesburg, Learn and Teach, 1980.

29) Mezirow, J. et al. An Evaluation Guide for Adult Basic Education Programmes. Washington, D.C.; US Govt. Printer (cited in Bird, n 28)

30) n 28 at 13/14

Obtaining feedback on students' perceptions concerning the process of undergoing literacy training and its effects on them, is an area which is sadly neglected in most evaluation procedures. In their study of the British campaign, Charnley and Jones extensively surveyed learners' perceptions<sup>31</sup>. An awareness of the importance of this aspect should be promoted<sup>32</sup>.

### 3.7 Young illiterates:

A source of concern is the substantial number of young illiterates in South Africa. Mr Johan Pretorius of the Bureau of Literacy has estimated that there must be two to three million persons between the ages of 10 and 24 who are illiterate. The figure is arrived at as follows: the government maintains that 80% of all South African children of schoolgoing age (i.e.  $\pm$ 4 000 000) are at school<sup>33</sup> - which means that 1 000 000 are not at school. A further million aged 15 - 24 are functionally illiterate according to census figures which brings the figure to 2 000 000 - "and then there's another odd million we don't know about."<sup>34</sup>

One substantial source of the 'odd million' was described to the writer by Mr Pretorius: This relates to the situation of (Black) farm labourers on (White-owned) South African farms. The government does not provide farm schools for labourers' children, so that any 'schools' are of necessity private, i.e. provided by the farmer. Since schools are privately owned, parents have no control over the education of their children : the farmer can close the school at will.

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31) n 26

32) A valuable contribution is made in Murray, Nancy Xhosa Literacy Students' Perceptions of their Course Diploma Course for Educators of Adults project, Centre for Extra-Mural Studies, UCT, 1983

33) This figure is likely to be optimistic, which even further increases the actual numbers of illiterates in this age group.

34) J. Pretorius at seminar on ABE held at Centre for Continuing Education, University of the Witwatersrand, on 27.4.83.

The problem is particularly serious on smallholdings in peri-urban areas, which because of their size accommodate such a small number of labourers that a school is not seen to be justified. This means that none of these children receive any schooling.<sup>35</sup>

The future implications of so many illiterates in the 10-24 age group are serious. It is mistakenly assumed that most illiterate persons fall into the over-50 age category, that this was due to poor provision in the past, but that this problem no longer exists under the present dispensation. Society might still make allowance for older persons who are functionally illiterate, and who will somehow be able to cope during the rest of their life-span. However, future prospects are less favourable for young people who might still live another 60 years, during which time technology advances increasingly, leaving them further and further behind.

### 3.8 Second-language learning:

- 3.8.1 The importance for black South Africans of learning English as second language is one issue on which there is almost unanimous agreement across the entire spectrum<sup>36</sup>: both government and industrial leaders realise that it is essential for the effective communication needed to increase manpower quality and productivity; Blacks themselves show an overwhelming preference for learning English for purposes of advancement in work, coping with (Westernstyle) urban life, with officialdom, and communicating with a wider range of people; civil rights activists realise that the fragmentation of Blacks is in part linguistic (numerous different vernaculars are spoken) and English would facilitate organisation; it also enables communication on an international scale. Although

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35) Personal communication, Johan Pretorius  
In this regard, see also the paper by Nasson, n.4.

36) The only known exception being low-grade White middle-management in industry, who are said to feel threatened by Blacks speaking English.

English is overwhelmingly favoured, it is more appropriate to speak of 'second-language' generally. The multilingual nature of South African society will of necessity produce situations where languages other than English might also be required.

French has observed, "More urgently felt than the need for better courses is the need for a second (official) language course"<sup>37</sup>. This need has been reiterated by literacy organisations.

- 3.8.2 Language learning in ABE is frequently confused with literacy, a misconception which leads some ABE workers to believe that they can teach people to speak a language by letting them learn to read and write in that language. There is in fact a vast difference between the two processes. While literacy is relatively straightforward, language learning is a complex process requiring much more sophisticated knowledge and skills.

Research has confirmed that the greater the proficiency in mother-tongue literacy, the more effective second-language learning will be<sup>38</sup>. It is also considered that learning to speak, read and write simultaneously in a second language constitutes cognitive overloading.

As in literacy teaching, there is no definitive, 'ultimate' method of teaching a second language to adults. Rachel Jenkins points out that "no-one has really cracked it". Adults have a different background from school children : they usually come with a degree of passive or poorly developed knowledge of the language, unlike children who have frequently had little exposure to the other language(s)<sup>39</sup>. Other methods and linguistic insights are therefore necessary.

37) n 12 (b) at 82

38) Rodseth, J.V. The Molteno Project Report. Rhodes Univ., Grahamstown; Institute for the Study of English in Africa; 1978 at 101-106

39) Personal communication, Rachel Jenkins.

### 3.9 Certification:

The nature of certification required by the education departments, and the type of preparation needed, is a source of great dissatisfaction to persons in the field of ABE, since it affects their own work. The requirement for school-certification is so all-pervasive and absolute that it rules their students' lives, and thus also their courses.

Learners who wish to continue beyond ABE must of necessity be prepared for this process in order to be successful at the Standard 5 or 8 level. This in part explains the curious composition of the DET ABE course, which commences with mother-tongue literacy teaching, subsequently adding oral and literacy learning in both official languages (Afrikaans and English) in stages - all within the space of one year!

It is considered to be an urgent need to develop a syllabus equivalent to school certification, but which is relevant and meaningful to adults.

This would alleviate the present situation, but still does not move away from the stranglehold of certification. This could only take place if the tremendous importance accorded to formal certification is removed from official perceptions. The government's rigid insistence on certification creates an ethos which penetrates the social fabric, making it a universal value which must of necessity be subscribed to.

### 3.10 Creating awareness through the Media:

Using the press, radio and particularly television has been advocated as an effective aid to increase public awareness of the extent of illiteracy and its implications, and to publicise opportunities for adults to obtain basic education. In urban areas, most people either own or have contact with persons possessing a television set,

so that extensive coverage is possible. In rural areas it is seen to bring the information to persons who are relatively cut off otherwise.

However, any media publicity campaign needs to be preceded by very thorough preparation of all other services. Once the infrastructure has been established and literacy services are actually operating, viewers/listeners can be made aware of them and be referred to points of contact. Failing to do this could lead to the problems created in Britain: the BBC campaign exhorted viewers to contact the central co-ordinating service in order to have literacy teaching made available to them. However, ongoing broadcasts failed to inform viewers that such a backlog had accumulated that it could take up to six months for the referral service to put this into effect.<sup>40</sup> Thousands were lost to the campaign as a result.

The effectiveness of such a campaign might be reduced in South Africa, where the broadcasting media are state-controlled and are frequently used to present a government view. The majority of 'learners' fall into the group which does not share the ruling ideology, and they might regard the campaign with suspicion.

### 3.11 'My students know nothing':

Learn and Teach encourages instructors not to see themselves as the source of all knowledge.

Unfortunately, many literacy teachers have not yet reached this insight. They see their students as helpless, ignorant 'poor souls' who must be supported, carried and guided by a teacher who dispenses knowledge and wisdom. In actual fact, adult learners bring a rich resource to classes in the form of life experiences and numerous skills which can be used as base on which to build instruction. The teacher should build on these skills which his learners already possess. A teacher who draws on the resources,

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40) Rachel Jenkins, personal communication.

knowledge, experience, expectations and motivation of his/her students, can involve them in active participation in conducting the class. This relieves the burden of the teacher considerably and frees him/her to teach more effectively.

### 3.12 Linking literacy with community development:

Many literacy programmes have failed because they have tried to teach reading and writing as a mechanical skill divorced from real life. For adults even more than for children, relevance to daily life and to issues of central concern greatly increases motivation and successful learning.

Literacy work which is linked to education in areas like health, nutrition, agriculture, employment or legal rights, has frequently resulted not only in successful literacy learning, but in improved standards of health or agricultural methods, awareness of rights at work and effectiveness in daily life. Its aim is in other words to contribute to the more effective functioning of the individual within his community, helping the individual to improve the quality of his life and to assert himself more confidently.

This approach is relatively expensive: as many primers as there are different areas of activity (or even different agricultural crops) need to be produced. A 'functional' orientation also implies that the literacy teacher must simultaneously be an agricultural extension officer, health worker or political functionary.

The expense involved once again highlights the fact that the government must be prepared to spend money, i.e. literacy needs to be a national priority, if large-scale intervention is to be undertaken with a satisfactory degree of success.

Lest the 'functional' approach appears to be a panacea, it must be emphasised that such programmes are themselves not without problems. The expense has been mentioned. Misconceptions can also lead to failure : programmes which aim to help severely deprived people to grow slightly more food or be slightly more healthy, without investigating and confronting the causes of their deprivation, malnutrition and ill-health, will not move beyond the 'band-aid' conception of welfarism.

An international seminar on literacy held at Udaipur, India, in 1982, issued a declaration which contained the following statement:

"It is not enough merely to teach skills linked to general economic development if the poorer classes remain as exploited and disadvantaged as before. A literacy campaign must be seen as a necessary part of a national strategy for overcoming poverty and injustice."<sup>41</sup>

### 3.13 Control vs Autonomy:

The previous two sections raise a question: who controls the literacy process - the student or the teacher/organisation? Providing a 'band-aid' or welfare type of basic education, or perceiving students as helpless and reinforcing their dependency, discourages them from taking control of their own lives and attaining autonomy.

Control over the content of reading material can be exercised by the teacher or organisation. 'Neutral' material only which skirts around or suppresses issues can be presented, thus withholding from students information which would give them a clearer understanding of processes affecting their lives. Equally, however, a literacy organisation which does confront such problems should guard against imposing content on students in a "this is what they need; this is what's good for them" manner.

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41) International Council for Adult Education: The Udaipur Declaration, Toronto, ICAE, 1982 at 2

Control can be imposed at a national level by means of 'co-ordinating efforts' and insisting on registration. Taking matters to their logical conclusion, mass campaigns could serve to encourage individual autonomy but could also be used as a means of control.

#### 4. POSSIBILITIES FOR FURTHER ACTION:

Various courses of action to address the problem of illiteracy in South Africa could be considered.

##### 4.1. A National Literacy Campaign:

Given the magnitude of the problem, little short of a national State campaign with mass mobilisation of resources is likely to have an adequate impact on the situation. However, this possibility is unlikely for various reasons:

##### 4.1.1. The State itself is unlikely to undertake such a campaign:

- \* indications to the contrary have been expressed by officials;
- \* literacy is accorded low priority in South Africa and this position is not likely to change in the foreseeable future.

##### 4.1.2. Even if a national campaign were undertaken, the fact that it is state-initiated is likely to evoke widespread distrust among the group intended to benefit from it. In the perception of subordinate groups in South Africa the dominant group is associated with the ideology of apartheid, which includes practices hampering Black economic advancement and freedom of movement, and denies Black people full citizenship. Action emanating from the public sector will be seen to represent dominant interests, and may be rejected.

Furthermore, a survey of literacy campaigns in other parts of the world suggests that most successful campaigns were conducted following a

revolution, when there was a rapid process of social transformation. The relationship between the high ideological mobilization of the population and a powerful sense of a changing world contributed to the success of these campaigns. In some cases, funds in the form of foreign aid were available to make large-scale implementation possible. South Africa is embarking on a policy of slow reform. Even if funds were available and the will existed, this does not ensure an effective social matrix for such a campaign to succeed.

#### 4.2. Co-ordination of all literacy efforts

This is the remedy proposed by French. The aims of his survey include 'providing a basis for co-ordination', and 'assisting in the formulation of a national plan for literacy promotion'.<sup>42</sup>

Present literacy efforts are seen as disparate, with unnecessary duplication and lack of communication among groups reducing effectiveness. The creation of a national forum with official backing and participation by all those involved in literacy work is seen as the solution.<sup>43</sup>

This is considered "most appropriate in the current dispensation", since it "fits in best with official concern to harness and co-ordinate available resources in a spirit of pluralism".<sup>44</sup>

In this plan, an Advisory Council for ABE will advise the Minister of Education; define priorities, areas of concern and utilisation of services; and co-ordinate different sectors to eliminate duplication. A Division of ABE in the central Education Department will implement the above decisions, including materials production, personnel training, allocation of funding, and advisory services.<sup>45</sup>

42) n 12 (b) at 2

43) Ibid at 85

44) Ibid at 87

45) Ibid at 88

This plan is not without its dangers. While it is no doubt put forward with sincerity, this does not necessarily mean that it would be implemented in the same spirit. Some of its concepts are close to the concepts of academic control inherent in 'total strategy' rhetoric.

The activities of the 'Division of ABE' could lend themselves to the extension of state control: if a State Department produces materials and trains personnel it could mean that these activities may no longer be undertaken by other groups; the allocation of funding "to all non-official projects" might mean that funds could be withheld from those projects which do not conform to official design.

Apart from the above reservations, there is the danger that in the enthusiasm to create an organisational structure, the 'target population' has been forgotten and its perceptions of officialdom overlooked. As was discussed under 4.1.2 above, any scheme seen to co-operate with and serve the authorities so openly runs the risk of being regarded with suspicion by the very people who are its potential clients.

#### 4.3. Creating Resources for the Support of Literacy Initiatives:

If the above courses of action are considered unlikely or inappropriate, an alternative response could involve the provision of an ABE resource facility for literacy organisations, community groups or other agencies and individuals conducting ABE work. The aim of such a facility would be to assist in upgrading areas of ABE work in such a manner that (a) the quality of literacy provision is improved and (b) the facility helps to create a multiplier effect.

Unlike a state campaign or national co-ordination, this model has the advantage of responding to initiatives at grassroots level rather than being imposed from above.

The following aspects of ABE work have emerged from this research as areas in need of support and improvement:

- \* pre-service teacher training and in-service training to upgrade existing teacher skills, including an understanding of
  - the principles underlying literacy, numeracy and second-language learning;
  - the difference between literacy and second-language learning;
 and an appreciation of
  - the resources of knowledge and experience which students bring to the class;
  - the value of student writing, both to develop students' own skills and to provide reading material for others;
- \* training of support personnel for teachers in the field;
- \* course design and materials production, including workshops to help teachers understand the use and design of learning aids and the development of student writing;
- \* the development of appropriate evaluation models to help organisations to assess their own work and make decisions concerning the deployment of resources;
- \* an ongoing research programme investigating different aspects of ABE in order to inform the practical work being done in the field; through publication of such research to stimulate literacy development elsewhere;
- \* the establishment of a library facility which gives ABE practitioners access to a wide range of publications and resource materials collected both locally and from abroad.

Improvement and support in these areas should provide a valuable resource for ABE workers. In implementing such a facility, rigid adherence to a first-world formal-schooling model should be avoided. Above all, the Udaipur declaration should be kept in mind: ABE is insufficient if it promotes economic development while the poorer classes remain exploited and disadvantaged; it should contribute to the overcoming of poverty and injustice.

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These papers constitute the preliminary findings of the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa, and were prepared for presentation at a Conference at the University of Cape Town from 13-19 April, 1984.

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Quoting (in context) from these preliminary papers with due acknowledgement is of course allowed, but for permission to reprint any material, or for further information about the Inquiry, please write to:

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