

# Adult education

## Imagining what might have been

There have been lost opportunities to take adult education to the people. These included missing out on mass literacy campaigns as has been the norm in most countries after democracy, writes **Sheri Hamilton**.

**A**fter the proclamation of the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training in January 2014 and a few weeks before the May 2014 elections, a high-level meeting on adult education was convened by the Minister of Education and Training, Blade Nzimande. At this meeting members of his senior staff and advisors were present together with representatives of the remaining outposts of adult education in the universities and in the adult education non-governmental organisation sector.

Nzimande acknowledged the chronic underfunding and lack of support for adult education since the historic 1994 elections and the consequent decimation of this once vibrant sector. At this meeting one university representative reported on the recent demise of *Learn with Echo*, the last remaining newspaper for newly literate adults that has been discontinued as a supplement carried for almost 20 years by *The Natal Witness*. *Learn with Echo*, will join the graveyard of newspapers and magazines dedicated to newly literate adults such as *Learn and Teach*, *Speak* and many others.

Among the first to experience disappointment with the post-apartheid government for the failure

to launch a mass literacy campaign, was a layer activists working in adult education. Mass literacy campaigns had been the practice of most of the newly liberated countries after centuries of colonial oppression and exploitation. For example, among the first acts of post-colonial governments in Africa, from Angola to Zimbabwe, in Latin America, from Cuba to Nicaragua, to the former Soviet Union, was the launch of a mass literacy campaign. Through this, for example, the former Soviet Union was able, in just one generation, to outpace America in its output of scientists, doctors and engineers and even in its space programme. Although subsequent campaigns had mixed results, there is no doubt that mass literacy programmes or campaigns were a key factor in galvanising support for state development efforts among the poorest members of the population in these countries.

It is not difficult to imagine, for instance, what might have been achieved through the training colleges system if it was not shut down and geared towards training literacy or adult basic education training (ABET) teachers on a large scale, drawing on returned exiles, unbanned persons, released political prisoners, and many

unemployed to set about the task of eradicating illiteracy and building the new nation. Such an act would have provided the opportunity 'to implement by the next morning what was learned the previous evening,' as Nyerere once said, reflecting on the difference between adult education and schooling. The values and principles of the new Constitution could have been taught as part of a core curriculum along with other key development objectives. That moment in time, in the aftermath of the snaking queues that marked the birth of democracy has been lost perhaps for generations to come. South Africa missed this historic opportunity and forfeited the goodwill that liberation from racial oppression evoked that could have so easily been harnessed to support a mass literacy campaign.

But hope springs eternal and when literacy was declared a Presidential Lead Project in the Reconstruction and Development Programme, it was seen as another chance to rescue the moment. However, these hopes were soon dashed when no budget was allocated to the campaign. Literacy and adult education entered a slippery downhill slope from grand mass-based plans to programmes and initiatives that produced negligible results given the consistently



*Busy with studies: An adult literacy class in session. Credit: William Matlala.*

poor budgets allocated to such efforts. Except for a committed and determined few, ultimately, these failures did more than exhaust the goodwill and enthusiasm that existed for this work, such as the would-be beneficiaries of the land reform programme who would not outlive the missed opportunities to redress legacies of the past, many illiterate and poorly educated adults have been denied the 'light' and 'dignity' which so many newly literate adults have avowed about the benefits that literacy has brought to their lives.

Now that the minister acknowledges that adult education has been neglected by the present government for the 20 years of its rule, and that the new community education and training centres or community colleges mooted in the Post-School Education and Training White Paper provide an opportunity to correct the past mistakes: we renew our hopes in this promise to rescue an ailing adult education sector. We continue to ask however whether this hope is and to ask the question: 'What has fundamentally changed to makes this latest promise plausible?' As I see it, a great deal has changed and hopefully the government's latest promise is a belated response to a changed context.

Firstly, the neo-liberal triumphalism which influences every single aspect of life has been exposed as a lie in South Africa and internationally. There are very few illusions about the impact of the approaches to education that have led to its commodification and contributed to the demise of literacy and ABET. Secondly, there is a healthy skepticism towards any new panacea that is proposed by government, given a reality and experience of far greater inequality now, higher levels of unemployment and other seemingly intractable social problems such as crime, violence - especially against women and children - and substance abuse. Thirdly, there is a search for alternatives that are based on the principles of collective, sustainable and participatory solutions that place the needs of people before those of profit. Finally, there is also the recognition that there is a need to rebuild organisations, reinvent methods and approaches that support them and reignite the activism that brought about the liberation from apartheid and colonialism.

Community colleges that can hopefully incorporate the current public adult learning centres might offer a new system of youth and adult education not characterised,

as it is presently, by mainly second-chance schooling but by institutions that serve as bridgehead between schooling and the post-school education and training system and is linked directly to the development needs of communities. For example, the various development and job-creation initiatives such as the Expanded Public Works Programmes can be tied directly to education offerings in community colleges that prepare youth and adults as part of initial in-service training. Such programmes should be linked to further and continuing education and training opportunities in other PSET sectors, in firms, factories, farms and communities as part of 'professionalising' this work in communities. This is the only way to address the 'skills shortage' by tying jobs creation to education and training. It is also the only way to move away from 'job opportunities' to decent jobs.

Tying job creation that responds to the needs in communities to education and training through community colleges linked to other post-school education institutions will be the basis upon which we can rebuild an adult education movement. Such a movement can have an impact, in the first instance, on the lives of adults and youth who can immediately contribute to change in their communities. Therefore, our hopefulness should not be based on the government's latest promise but on the lessons we have learnt from past experience, from understanding the present context, and for strengthening the activism that has endured throughout the last 20 years of democracy. Such activism continues to be the only way to effect real change. <sup>18</sup>

*At the time this article was first published in the Post-School Education Review 1(1), July 2014, Sberi Hamilton was a researcher at the Centre for Education Rights and Transformation.*