A review of adult basic education and training in South Africa

J.J.W. Aitchison
Centre for Adult Education, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg

Abstract
This paper provides a review of the state of adult basic education and training in South Africa that draws on existing research, publications, and policy implementation documents that have arisen out of the ferment of political change in South Africa over the last fifteen years.
The review starts with a brief account of the current demographics relating to adult basic education in South Africa with respect to both the potential numbers of learners (previously overestimated) and the numbers already participating in programmes.
The number of adults who lack a basic education (Grade 9) has been adjusted down from 15 million to 12.1 million. The number who lacks functional literacy (Grade 7) is now estimated as 7.4 million. The distribution of adults who lack education varies across South Africa’s nine provinces. There are provinces in which there are large numbers of people who lack education, but who form a small percentage of the population, as well as provinces in which the numbers are much smaller, but in which they represent a more substantial proportion of the population.
The limited corpus of literature on adult basic education is outlined and assessed. Much of the literature is restricted to the emerging policy documents themselves. The exception is Harley et al’s comprehensive A Survey of ABE in South Africa in the 90s (1996), and Prinsloo and Breier’s The Social uses of literacy: theory and practice in contemporary South Africa (1996) compilation.
The remainder of the paper looks at the literacy struggles prior to the Nineties, the period of policy generation from 1990 to 1994, and the implementation efforts and failures from 1995 to date, together with a summary of the content of the policy and implementation plan documents produced in this period.

The literacy movement was driven by various NGOs and adult education departments in some universities. This movement began to be partly co-ordinated in the early Nineties within the National Literacy Co-operation.
A central trend in the policy development in the Nineties has been the formalisation and systematisation of literacy into ABET (adult basic education and training) which has more recently, particularly as reflected in the structure of the directorate in the national ministry, been expanded beyond the basic to include further education (Grades 10-12) under the heading of Adult Education and Training (AET).
Within the National Educational Policy Initiative (NEPI), and particularly arising from the influence of COSATU, the trade union confederation, an emphasis was placed on a more generalist and portable education, as opposed to a narrower vocationalist training, as proposed by the National Training Board.
The implementation of ABET following the 1994 general election was fraught with problems and delays. The South African Council for Adult Basic Education floundered in 1995, though it was to some extent replaced by the national Department’s National Stakeholders Forum, which has grown to rather unmanageable proportions. Legislation on ABET is sorely lacking. National campaigns were beset with poor planning and co-ordination, but have met with some modest success in some provinces.

The budget has remained derisory, and appointments of ABET officials in provinces has remained uneven. The gross under spending in the state sector was accompanied, ironically, with massive funding crises in many NGOs. This irony is finally being addressed, but much of the NGO capacity has been lost.

What is most lacking in policy documents is financing and structure, and a commitment to capacity in planning and co-ordination. Also lacking is anything about community empowerment and culture, as most of the current policy tends to see ABET in largely instrumental terms.

The attempts to develop a cohesive national plan for ABET have gone through many drafts and conferences, and will, it is hoped, finally result in a useful document in the latter part of 1997.

**The definition of adult basic education**

This review works with a definition of adult basic education as: education provision for people aged 15 and over who are not engaged in formal schooling or higher education and who have an education level of less than grade 9 (Standard 7).

In South Africa in the 1990s, a discourse about adult basic education (ABE) (and more latterly adult basic education and training (ABET)) replaced the previous discourse of the 1980s in which the term literacy was dominant. The change reflected the move from a decade of struggle and resistance to a new era of reconstruction and development.

**The current demographics relating to adult basic education in South Africa**

Using less than nine years of schooling and a cut-off age of 15 years of age, it is estimated that there are slightly over 12 million adults who have not received a full general education (i.e. 45% of adults). Of these, 2.9 million (11% of adults) are estimated to be totally illiterate. In terms of potential learners, therefore, there are at most 12.1 million who lack the equivalent of a full basic schooling.

Taking a Standard 5 (Grade 7) level as a crude indicator of functional literacy, there are 7.4 million who fall into this category. However, it is well known that neither obtained formal education levels nor self-reported literacy levels are particularly good predictors of actual functional literacy. This estimate is likely to underestimate the number of low literates and illiterates in South African society, particularly as the demands of a complex industrial economy mean that in any case the goal costs of necessary and sufficient literacy skills are constantly shifting.

Variations in basic education levels exist within the categories of "race", sex, and geographical location. "Race" is still the single most powerful variable determining
educational level in South Africa. This clearly reflects the awful consequences of the apartheid system. The average levels of education and the lack of it in South Africa therefore follow a very predictable pattern. Taking functional literacy (a Standard 5 level of education) some 33% of Africans are illiterate, 26% of Coloureds, 12% of Indians and only 1% of Whites.

The difference between men and women is however relatively small (though such differences as there are always favour men) as seen in the following table.

**Adults aged 15+ in South Africa with less than Std 5 in %**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African women</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African men</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coloured women</td>
<td>27</td>
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<td>Coloured men</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>Indian women</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>Indian men</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>White men</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White women</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One can only speculate as to why this situation is contrary to international patterns. Early missionaries did not discriminate against girls and South Africa does not have a viable subsistence agricultural economy, which would tend to keep girls out of school. In rural areas young boys are kept out of school to look after cattle, which would possibly balance the young girls, kept out of school to perform housekeeping and child-minding duties.

There are considerable variations between the nine provinces in South Africa. The provincial picture is complicated in that some provinces have high numbers of people in need of adult basic education and training though they form a relatively small percentage of the population (as in Gauteng) whilst other provinces may have small numbers but high percentages (as in the Free State and Mpumalanga). Others have both high numbers and high percentages (as in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal). The following graphs depict the situation in the provinces:

The second graph, ordered by the actual number of adults with less than Std 5 in each province, gives some idea of the actual scale of provision needed in each province. If resources are to be prioritised for particular provinces some weighting of these factors has to be done. A province with high relative numbers of poorly educated people may be held back from participating in national development because of this. However if the actual numbers of poorly educated people are small, economies of scale in provision will be difficult to achieve. This might be the case in, for example, the Free State and Mpumalanga. Other provinces may have relatively small percentages of people lacking basic education but have large numbers of them. This is well illustrated in Gauteng. The Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal both have the problem of large actual numbers and a fairly high percentage of the poorly educated.

When it comes to the number of adults participating in literacy and adult basic education programmes it is likely that between 300 000 and 430 000 people so engage. Harley et al (1996, pp. 51-74) estimated that in 1994/95 there were about 335 500 participants. The
October Household Survey 1995 revealed a more modest figure of 267 750 participants. Though there has been some expansion in provision in 1996 and 1997 it is unlikely that the number of actual participants has exceeded 430000 (only 4.5% of the total number of potential learners are aged between 15 and 64). The learners received adult basic education in a number of sectors. Since 1995 there has been some expansion in State night school provision and hence the percentage of learners educated by the state may have increased somewhat.

The literature on adult basic education
The South African literature on adult basic education is largely a product of the late Eighties and Nineties and came into being within the literacy eddy that was part of the surge towards democratisation during this period. It was a time characterised by action and organisation building rather than reflection. The quantity of publications is accordingly small. This literature can, for convenience, be divided into three major categories: policy, practice and research.

The literature on policy is largely the actual policy documents themselves. Few of the actual policy documents (except for those from the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) of 1992/93) have been formally published. There is also some grey literature, usually photocopied working papers written by policy task team members (as in the cases of the NEPI and Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD) ABE groups). There is even less published about the policy documents. Exceptions are Harley et al’s substantial *A survey of adult basic education in South Africa in the 90s* (1996) and some journal articles and papers in conference proceedings (for example, Fisher, 1992; Morphet et al, 1992; Greenstein, 1995; Aitchison, 1996a, 1996b; Bhola, 1997).

If anything, the literature on educational practice is even more limited, some teachers’ guides to courses, Wedepohl’s two books on literacy practice (1988a, 1988b), a book developed by a consortium of university adult education departments, *Adult basic education in South Africa: literacy, English as a second language, and numeracy* (Hutton, 1992), and some conference papers. The start of a new ABET Journal in mid 1997 may lead to greater visibility for reports on practice.

Research literature is also very limited, though there are three notable publications, namely, Edward French’s *The promotion of literacy in South Africa: a multifaceted survey at the start of the eighties*, published by the Human Sciences Research Council in 1982, and two products of research grants from the Joint Education Trust, the aforementioned Harley et al *A survey of adult basic education in South Africa in the 90s*, an empirical study, and Prinsloo and Breier’s *The social uses of literacy: theory and practice in contemporary South Africa*, a set of ethnographic studies. Much ABET research has either been policy or curriculum policy related or taken the form of evaluation reports (which are usually private documents for donor agencies). More recently there has been considerable output of research documents from the Education, Training and Development Practices project of the National Training Board, though of course only a portion of this has been directly related to ABET. Reviews about the research enterprise are few, for example, Aitchison’s chapter in Harley et al., *On Evaluation and research* (Harley et al, 1996, pp. 493-500), and Oxenham and French’s *Universities and adult literacy in South Africa: an exploration of their relationship* (1990) and some journal articles and conference papers touching on research issues.
Genuine intellectual debates are extremely rare, partly because of the strong consensus that developed post 1990 about what an ABET system should be like and the uncritical acceptance of outcomes based education as a panacea. Such research debates as these have tended to be about policy and policy implementation strategies rather than ideological or educational issues, though there is the rare exception (such as Geidt, 1994).

**Before ABET - literacy struggles prior to the Nineties**

The lack of a substantial literature on literacy or adult basic education is one of the side effects of the fact that adult literacy work, like many other things, went through a dark age during the apartheid era. For much of this period, teaching literacy to black people (who made up the bulk of the illiterate population) was illegal in terms of the Bantu Education Act of 1954 (unless it was in an officially approved registered night school). However, in the late sixties and early seventies, the conservative Bureau for Literacy and Literature was allowed to do some work in the gold mines and produced good, if somewhat unexciting materials. The more religiously orientated *Operation Upgrade* worked within community groups such as churches and made concordats with the government department that dealt with education for blacks, used a debatable methodology and portrayed itself as a weapon against communism and poverty.

In the early seventies, small university groups inspired by their illegal copies of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* tried out radical literacy work on a very small group or one to one basis without any major impact on South Africa’s literacy statistics (it is doubtful that more than a couple of thousand people were reached). However, the Freirian process of conscientisation they advocated began to inform the practice of the internal anti-apartheid movement with enormous consequences, first in the radical University Christian Movement and the Black Consciousness Movement in the Seventies and, in the Eighties, in the independent black trade union movement and the United Democratic Front.

It was precisely within the political ferment after Soweto 1976 and the revival of strong anti-apartheid resistance in the Eighties that a literacy movement revived and the small politically committed non-governmental educational organisation came into its own. Learn and Teach, USWE and others combined a modified Freirian method with service to trade unions and United Democratic Front groups. Their methods and materials were often of extremely high quality, though their organisational structures often limited their size and their offers of direct literacy service to the Democratic Movement and were only infrequently taken up. The late Eighties also showed some ventures in literacy and adult basic education work by the few universities with adult education departments. The interaction between the more radical of these departments and the NGO literacy sector was important and often intense. The university connection played a particularly important role in the reconceptualisation of literacy as adult basic education, particularly as the possibility of a post-apartheid society became realisable. Meanwhile larger literacy and adult basic education providers such as the Pretoria based *ProLit* arose and by the end of the Eighties there were uneasy moves towards co-operation between the politically correct NGOs (networked in the National Literacy Co-operation (NLC) formed in 1986) and the others such as *Operation Upgrade* and *ProLit*. 
The history of literacy work in the period before February 1994 has been very inadequately documented. French has written a number of pieces (for example, in Hutton, 1992, pp. 48-85) and perhaps one of the most interesting contribution has been the 1995 television series, *The struggle for Literacy*, commissioned by the South African Broadcasting Company.

**The policy generators - ABET policy development from 1990 to 1994**

The year 1990 was, apart from momentous political developments and hideous political violence created by the apartheid state’s ongoing destabilisation strategies, *International Literacy Year*. Much to everybody’s surprise it took off and suddenly the trades unionists, politicians and librarians had literacy on their agenda. The drawback was that the newly aroused expectations were not matched by any great capacity to deliver.

In the first four years of the Nineties there was considerable expansion of co-operation among NGOs - the *National Literacy Co-operation* broadened to include virtually any NGO that wished to join (including a new look *Operation Upgrade* and a *ProLit* which had turned into a delivery agent of some size), though there was a political split with the formation of the *South African Association for Literacy and Adult Education (SAALAE)* in April 1992 which espoused a more Black Consciousness and Africanist line. There was also considerable activity among commercial providers serving industry who had seen the need for a better-educated workforce and were also under pressure from the unions to provide ABE.

However much of this period was, as in the political sphere, of a transitional nature, with many people and organisations waiting for "something" or "the real thing" to happen (which was usually identified as being related to a new government putting literacy and adult basic education high up on the agenda).

The four years also saw talk about literacy overwhelmed by the new discourse about adult basic education (ABE) (to which latter term was later added "and training" (thus ABET). Both literacy and ABE are difficult to define, particularly with the former - given new academic interest in the ideological ramifications of literacy. However, if one takes a common-sense view that literacy is about being able to read, write and count, then ABE is also about what you read, write and make sums of that enables you to be classified as having had a basic education (more of less equivalent to primary or the compulsory period of education in schools) and in principle certificatable even if gained non-formally. Clearly ABE is much more formal than "literacy" and more amenable to being curriculated and presented in classroom courses through some kind of system.

The National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI), set up by the anti-apartheid National Education Co-ordinating Committee (NECC) in 1992, produced two reports that deal directly with literacy and ABE issues (Adult Education and Adult Basic Education) and another which touched on it (Human Resources Development). The massive Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was an influential presence within the NEPI and was wedded to the idea of some kind of general education (ABE) being provided to workers parallel to a more rational and generic form of skills training. Both these issues were strongly present in reports from a National Training Board investigation into a new system of industrial training for South Africa. COSATU then set up its own policy research process, the Participatory Research Project (PRP), that argued for a close
integration of ABE and skills training in a modularised system backed by new certification authorities and mechanisms for articulation in every conceivable direction. Also in 1992, the Joint Education Trust (a large new South African Trust with representatives from the business sector, political movements and unions) commissioned a report on Adult Basic Education which recommended that in the interim the Trust should continue to support NGO initiatives (some of which were experiencing funding difficulties as donors prematurely pulled back from the anti-apartheid education enterprise) and encourage research into ABE and promote the development of regional support agencies for ABE. Arising out of the report’s recommendations, two major JET funded research projects were set in motion in 1994. Researchers led the one, into the social uses of literacy from the Universities of Cape Town and the Western Cape. The other, into ABE capacity building in the country as a whole, was conducted by researchers at the University of Natal’s Centres for Adult Education. The results of both studies were published in 1996. At the same time the Independent Development Trust (IDT) which had been set up by government, apparently had budgeted about R90 million for literacy and ABE but reneged on this commitment (after they had commissioned the University of Cape Town to prepare a study on ABE). The IDT continued to support tertiary education academic development schemes rather distant from its original rhetoric of supporting the "poorest of the poor".

The National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) reports were deliberately general in nature, providing only the broadest "policy options" and definitely no recommendations or implementation plans. In 1993 the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD) was set up to serve the democratic movement. It had a number of working groups including one on ABE. In 1994 the CEPD was commissioned by the African National Congress to prepare an Implementation Plan for Education and Training (IPET). Another body that had some influence on ABE policy was the South African Committee on Adult Basic Education (SACABE) which represented a wide field of political, trade union, academic and community based organisation interests. Its founding (and only) conference was held in November 1993. Whilst potentially a powerful forum backing the interests of illiterates and adult learners it remained under resourced. Halting attempts were made in 1994 to organise provincial sections of SACABE after which time the body was to all intents and purposes defunct.

In retrospect this period was enormously productive given relatively limited resources and a total lack of previous experience in policy making. The sudden energy around formulating ABE policy, which started in the early 1990s, was clearly a response to the political changes that lead to the first democratic elections in April 1994. The prospect of a new democratic government created a climate in which the development of policy by its supporters was a burning issue. The main assumption underlying much of ABE policy work at this stage was that the government to be would take ABE far more seriously and would be far more involved in ABE provision. Part of this policy process therefore was that those previously marginalised from policy decision-making processes moved to centre-stage and their policy proposals now carried considerable weight.
The content of the policy documents from 1990 to 1994

There are seven key documents produced during this period to consider. These are:

2. the Joint Education Trust’s 1992 commissioned report Adult Basic Education: focus on a priority field for funding.
3. The Independent Development Trust’s 1992 commissioned report, Developmental strategy in adult basic education (Morphet et al, 1992)
4. COSATU’s Participatory Research Projects’s 1993 report, Participatory Research Project. Consolidated recommendations adult basic education and training
6. The South African Committee on Adult Basic Education (SACABE) report on its November 1993 Conference.

The National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) reports were deliberately general in nature, providing only the broadest “policy options” and definitely no implementation plans. However, the reports do indicate what the authors considered to be the key resources needed for the development of ABE, namely:

♦ a strong (indeed possibly separate and independent) adult education department
♦ a national qualifications framework
♦ a national certification system
♦ a national curriculum
♦ state training of ABE teachers
♦ structures and courses for teacher training
♦ a compulsory ABE component in school teacher training
♦ a national stakeholders forum
♦ an interim (NGO) funding body
♦ mechanism to get money from several ministries
♦ a larger proportion of the national education budget for ABE (the Adult Education report suggested 5% of the national education budget plus corporate sector funding should make up the sum of one billion rands)
♦ research capacity for system design
♦ research capacity for curriculum development
♦ regional research capacity
♦ an enhanced state night school system

The Joint Education Trust’s 1992 commissioned report Adult Basic Education focus on a priority field for funding saw the need for:

♦ interim funding before new state funding kicks in
♦ regional support agencies
Human resource development

The Independent Development Trust’s 1992 commissioned report Developmental strategy in adult basic education is notable for its dismissive attitude towards the NGO sector which the authors considered justified by the incoherence and factionalism in that sector.

COSATU’s Participatory Research Projects’s 1993 report, Participatory Research Project, consolidated recommendations on adult basic education and training had a number of proposals with respect to ABET which were simply part of their more general proposals about a thorough reconstruction of the training system in South Africa. They argued for:

- A national integrated framework for education and training
- Creation of statutory bodies to develop overall policy frameworks, standards setting, accreditation and certification
- Restructuring of training and grading systems and their integration with labour market planning
- Creating career path opportunities based on skills/training
- Ensuring that fair competency based assessments methods based on skills are used for promoting people and providing access to training national competency standards to be developed in each industry or sector and generic core standards across sectors
- All curricula to be rewritten in terms of competency outcomes
- Training course curricula at all levels need to include core educational skills such as literacy, numeracy, communication, problem solving, planning and the ability to undertake further learning
- Accreditation of providers to ensure consistency in the quality and content of education/training courses
- National certificates of competence at all levels of learning
- Credit transfers and recognition of prior learning
- The right to paid education and training leave and other changes to facilitate access to provision
- Upgrading and expansion of trainer/educator workforce.

During this period COSATU had profoundly influenced two of the major policy initiatives of the early 1990s - the NEPI report, and the National Training Board’s National Training Strategy Initiative - as well as policy developed by its alliance partner, the African National Congress (ANC), as in the ANC’s The Reconstruction and development programme (1994) and A policy framework for education and training (1995).

The National Training Board’s National Training Strategy Initiative (NTSI) draft document of 1991 explored the idea of linking education and training, but in the limited context of vocational training. Thus it did not propose the general articulation of "formal" education, and "non-formal" education. COSATU was highly critical of the report, because it had no input from labour, and because it continued what COSATU saw as an apartheid tendency to train and educate workers for lower level skills. COSATU was
arguing for a far greater integration of education and training. The position can be seen in
the preliminary report of 1994 which was in this respect a very different document, since
COSATU had been involved in the task team which drew it up. Clearly, COSATU had a
profound impact through its participation, and its key arguments and ideas are obvious in
the 1994 preliminary report. COSATU was able to influence the process to this degree
because of the common agreement between labour and business by this stage on the
importance of skills upgrading for economic growth. The 1994 report thus contained
most of the ideas integral to COSATU’s proposals that:
♦ adult basic education should be more than just reading and writing, and should
♦ equip people to participate more fully in society
♦ the approach used should be competence based
♦ there should be national standards and a national qualifications framework
♦ there should be a national core curriculum, with core subjects.

The National Training Board said that overall responsibility for the development of a
national framework for ABE should lie with the ABE sub-system of a proposed
integrated Department of Education and Training and the National Education and
Training Council (NETC). These bodies would be responsible for developing a national
curriculum framework; national qualification, accreditation and certification structures
for learners and education, training and development (ETD) practitioners; a financial
framework; and a delivery system.
The South African Committee on Adult Basic Education (SACABE) suggested a number
of policies at its Conference in November 1993, namely:
♦ a national system of ABE
♦ regional governance structures
♦ strong linkage to the Reconstruction and Development Programme
♦ an ABE council or stakeholder body
♦ a national qualifications framework
♦ a national core curriculum
♦ national certification
♦ a skills and infrastructural audit
♦ an advocacy programme.

The conference report says nothing about money but clearly assumed that state money
would be available. The Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD) Implementation Plan for Education and Training (IPET) had an important section on
ABET. Prepared by a CEPD task group and handed to the new Minister of Education and
Training in May 1994, the Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) implementation
plan reflected both the reduced expectations common to many of the ANC’s
implementation plans as well as the dominance of formal ABE.

The outlines of the plan were as follows:
The major task during the first year (1994/95) was to be systematic planning, including
the setting up of a comprehensive information base for the identification of intervention
areas and for detailed planning. This needed to happen at both national and provincial
levels and planning and provision needed to be closely integrated with that of the Reconstruction and Development Programme.

Though it was foreseen that there would be considerable constraints on any immediate mass delivery (the plan envisaged reaching 3 million learners in the first five years), priority groupings for provision should be identified and all available resources mobilised. A number of well-planned and strategic pilot programmes should be undertaken (including in the South African National Defence Force and the South African Correctional Service). Guidelines for ABE teacher training should be drawn up and the provision of such training at a variety of levels enhanced and galvanised. These would undoubtedly have a major backwash effect on future ABE curriculum development. Partnerships should be entered into between the State and NGOs and the private sector to increase the quality of services.

A campaign should be mounted to popularise ABE and mobilise resources for ABE at national and provincial levels. As far as a system or bureaucracy is concerned, the plan argued that a national Department of Adult Basic and Continuing Education should be constructed out of the existing Department of Education and Training (DET). This should be done speedily, though with modesty. It is important that existing provision through the DET and the ex-"homeland" education departments should not be allowed to collapse but should be improved. A national ABE Council would be set up representing a wide variety of stakeholders and there would be provincial and local analogues. There would be a national curriculum, which would stress generic competencies/outcomes, and funds would be provided for materials development. Resource centres/libraries would be established in under resourced areas. An integrated qualifications framework would help ensure quality assurance, as would considerable human resources development. Some legislation to implement aspects of the plan would be necessary. The financing of all this is expected to come partly from the education budget and partly from the Reconstruction and Development budget. The draft budget for the first year (94/95) was R132 million.

**From policy to implementation - 1995 to 1997**

Subsequent to the April 1994 election and the appointment of cabinet ministers and Directors-General of ministries, literacy and ABE activists were soon disappointed by the seemingly slow pace of development in the ABE sector. ABET did not seem to be a major concern of the new Government of National Unity nor of the national Ministry of Education. New appointments to the Department of Education did not clearly insert any experienced activists for literacy and ABE into positions of power.

As seen in the CEPD’s ABET implementation plan described above, considerable, though modest, activity was to have taken place even in 1994. Reality was more of the nature of a fiasco (Harley et al (1996, pp. 187-209; Aitchison (1996a, 1996b).

Elements of this period of fiasco included the following:

The proposals for a strong adult basic education section within the national department of education were never implemented. Indeed the Department went without a Chief Director with responsibility for ABET for nearly a year due to blocking by the Public Service Commission of the appointment. It took until early in 1996 for a Director of ABET to be appointed.
Although the Centre for Education Policy Development ABET team had produced a motivation in September 1994 that persuaded the Minister of Education to appoint a national ABET Task Team, what was virtually a coup d'etat at a consultation it called in January 1995, saw its experienced policy makers and planners kicked out and replaced by provincial education department representatives. The latter, unfortunately, knew very little about ABET policy and the new Task Team floundered. It was replaced in May 1995 by a National Stakeholders’ Forum (NSF) which continued to be dominated by formal education system representatives. In 1996 it increased in size with representatives from the SANDF, Department of Correctional Services, Business South Africa (B SA) and such like and has grown to unmanageable size. No legislation relating to adult education was tabled.

Attempts at initiating nationally co-ordinated programmes or campaigns were not very successful. The national Department of Education (sometimes speaking through the NSF) has tended to repeatedly engage in last minute attempts to start great leaps forward, the dates for which had been decided months before but about which almost nothing had been planned or even budgeted for. Thus the fiasco of the April 1995 "strategic thrusts" (nothing happened), repeated a year later with the Ten Thousand Learner Units (nothing happened, although this non event was obscured by the Department piggy-backing on the National Literacy Co-operation’s One Thousand Learner Units campaign (which had actually been planned and which did (sort of) start). In 1997 this Ithuteng campaign did achieve some modest successes in some provinces (such as KwaZulu-Natal).

Only a few provinces set up workable provincial ABET councils or stakeholder forums. Apart from the donor funded Natal ABE Support Agency, no regional support agencies were set up. National capacity to plan remained weak. This was partly a result of the national Department of Education’s Adult Basic Education and Training directorate being so understaffed (three professionals) and partly because there was very little money devoted to ABET. Planning support from ABET came from the National Literacy Co-operation and academics and was paid for (sometimes) by USAID grants. Because of the short-term nature of this support it was difficult for any long term planning to be achieved.

The national Education budget for ABET was derisory and though literacy was proclaimed a Reconstruction and Development Programme Presidential lead project it was the only one that had no money allocated to it at all. It would be totally dependent on foreign donors. The inefficiency of the Reconstruction and Development Programme and its eventual closure exacerbated the situation. In September 1995 the Minister of Education announced that the State had made R50 million available for ABET. In reality this money came from foreign donors. It was apparently, at the behest of the NSF, divided up equally between the nine provinces and the national Department of Education. However due to bureaucratic bottlenecks by mid May 1996 (nine months later) only two provinces had managed to access their R5.4 million grants.

The National Department of Education’s ignoring of an offer by UNESCO to put substantial funding towards developing a national ABET information system that had been initiated by the University of Natal. This offer expired and the information collected is now a wasting asset. At the provincial level progress was erratic and generally slow. In many provinces the NGOs who had led the struggle for literacy in the previous decade
were sidelined. Career education bureaucrats made decisions about ABET (or more accurately, did not make decisions because heads of ABET were often not appointed (in KwaZulu, this situation was to continue until mid-1997)).

Budgets are also erratic. In KwaZulu-Natal the budget for ABET has steadily dropped to below that of the apartheid era and the budget for 1997 has been cut even further to two thirds of the 1996 budget of R15 million! By contrast Gauteng and the Eastern Cape have budgeted considerably more. It was soon realised that the development of ABE would be a much slower process than expected and that the money to pay for it somewhat reduced (at least from the Education budget).

Meanwhile, there was a growing sense of crisis in the NGO field which saw much reduced funding as foreign donors now preferred to work directly though bilateral agreements with government and these agreements were slow to be agreed upon and effected. NGOs began to close and retrench staff, although, ironically, through the National Literacy Co-operation, the field was now better represented nationally than ever before. The National Literacy Co-operation, which had tended in the past to represent politically committed NGOs, had decided opinions about the responsibility of the state to deliver literacy and ABE to the masses. Although the NLC was not itself immune to the loss of staff to election candidates lists or commercial consultancy, it generally managed to maintain its sense of political correctness. Because of the slowness of Government delivery of ABET this was now balanced by a new appreciation of the continuing value of a non-state adult education sector. Though the failure of the state to rapidly reallocate resources to ABE acted to reactivate some NGOs, the real beneficiaries tended to be commercial providers contracted by larger industrial and commercial enterprises. In 1994 certain NGOs had shown signs of reaching a certain critical mass (notably USWE in Cape Town) and had deliberately expanded in anticipation of new largesse from a new government committed to eradicating literacy. This never arrived and organisations such as USWE were forced into traumatic retrenchments of staff and teachers.

In spite of the negative side of the immediate post April 1994 period, there was ongoing policy work. This has increasingly been concerned with implementation plans, assessment issues and the construction of a system of outcomes based education for the ABET field.

The context within which this work was done was very much that of the ongoing formalisation of adult basic education with a heavy stress on assessment issues that, in the field of practice was increasingly dominated by the Independent Examinations Board (French, 1997). Grasping the T in ABET proved more difficult, though moves towards special curriculums and examinations in industry sectors indicated one way in which this issue might be eventually resolved. The National Literacy Co-operation continued its complicated tango in the dark with the national Department of Education with perplexing results, at the same time as the international donors tried to develop mechanisms for dispensing their money via a department that did not appear to have the capacity or at times the will to do so. All this was within the broader complexities of a lacklustre national Department of Education that appeared incapable of tackling the admittedly awesome task of rationalising education provision, resources and teacher deployment. When it came to resources, the voice of ABET learners was drowned out by higher education and schoolteachers demanding the continuation of the lifestyle to which they had become accustomed.
The key documents produced from 1995 to date include the following:

♦ The Education White Paper of March (Department of Education, 1995)
♦ The National Department of Education’s A national adult basic education and training framework: Interim guidelines of September 1995
♦ The research project report of 1996 on Adult Basic Education and Development compiled by a group comprising the Department of Education, Congress of South African Trade Unions, Development Bank of Southern Africa, Centre for Education Policy Development, and National Literacy Co-operation.
♦ The Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology’s Language Plan Task Group’s final report of 1996, Towards a national language plan for South Africa.
♦ The Department of Education draft policy document of April 1997, Adult education and training in South Africa as well as its draft A four year implementation plan for adult education and training: provision and accreditation.

The content of the policy documents from 1995 to date

The Education White Paper of March 1995 repeats what the earlier documents suggest, namely:

♦ a national ABE programme
♦ a national qualifications framework
♦ an appropriate common core curriculum
♦ partnerships between government and organised labour and business, women’s and youth organisations, civics, churches, specialist NGOs, learner associations,
♦ all levels of government, media and other stakeholders.
♦ an ABET council as the authoritative voice of the field
♦ a professional directorate for ABET in the Department of Education to undertake or sponsor research on structure and methods, develop norms and standards, and to liaise with the RDP office, the Department of Labour, and provincial departments of education
♦ a national ABET Task Team, including provincial representatives, to plan the RDP Presidential Lead Programme in this field and to help translate proposals into implementable policy
♦ existing education facilities
♦ opportunities for distance education
♦ the idea of community learning centres.

But what is more significant is what it is silent about, such as finance and the actual scale of the "professional directorate for ABET in the Department of Education". The National Department of Education’s A national adult basic education and training framework: Interim guidelines of September 1995 is largely about a formal system of adult basic education linked to the National Qualifications Framework and an outcomes based approach. It stresses formal certification. The key elements in the framework it propounds are:

♦ a National Qualifications Framework
♦ a national system of certification
♦ a South African Qualifications Authority
The Interim Guidelines were drawn up by a working group of the National Stakeholders Forum (NSF) financed by USAID. Much of the substantive work was done or copied from that done by the Independent Examinations Board and earlier by the CEPD. The working group accepted the proposed National Qualifications Framework as a development basis for the guidelines. This meant an acceptance of the concepts of national standards, national certificates, articulation and integration. Thus the Interim guidelines merely reaffirm what had by now become accepted policy - broadly speaking, the National Training Board proposals for ABET. The Interim guidelines confirm the view of ABET as a means of national reconstruction and development and also as the basic foundation for lifelong learning.

Much of the document is concerned with the practical issues necessary for the model to succeed. Thus issues of standard setting, certification and assessment are dealt with at length, with the Interim guidelines detailing definitions, principles and the responsible authorities in each of these areas.

Whilst the Interim guidelines themselves are clear that they are not prescriptive to either providers or learners, it is obviously envisaged that providers at least will adhere to them. They lay down that the primary responsibility for ensuring provision of ABET lies with the State. However, employers, trade unions, providers, NGOs, learners and community structures also have a responsibility in the planning, monitoring and implementing of ABET programmes. The Interim guidelines state that these sectors, together with government departments, will be represented on a National Stakeholder Forum or Council, which will undertake much of the work of setting levels, certificates and qualifications. This structure will be replicated at provincial, district and even local level, where appropriate. However, until these structures are set up, the existing National Stakeholders Forum will act as the interim national standards body for ABET.

As with the White Paper perhaps the most important point about the guidelines is not what they say but what they do not say. They are silent about community empowerment and silent about culture. They say nothing about literacy and basic education being desirable ends in themselves. Basic education is seen largely in instrumental terms.

The report of 1996 on Adult Basic Education and Development compiled by the Department of Education, COSATU, the Development Bank of Southern Africa, the Centre for Education Policy Development, and National Literacy Co-operation tried to explore ways of integrating ABET into developmental programmes and to some extent resists the clear trend evident in the Interim Guidelines of formalising ABET (sending adults back to primary school as some have dismissively spoken of it). This re-looking at the social impact of ABET might have been influential if the Reconstruction and Development Programme had had life in it, but this important document has not had the attention it deserves (in the post RDP environment), though it had some influence on National Literacy Co-operation policy activities (National Literacy Co-operation, 1996; Hamilton, 1997; Bhola, 1997).

The Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology’s Language Plan Task Group’s final report of 1996, *Towards a national language plan for South Africa* also breathes a somewhat different atmosphere to the discourse of the Interim Guidelines. The document had a section on literacy (which contained a number of detailed
recommendations (pp. 150-152) and the report’s general recommendations stated that maximum support should be given for well-planned literacy campaigns and ongoing basic education projects, particularly in the African languages and South African Second Languages, which have as their focus the improvement of literacy acquisition methods.

The Department of Education draft policy document of April 1997, *Adult education and training in South Africa* was a thorough reworking of the original draft (National Literacy Co-operation, 1997) which had been prepared by the National Literacy Co-operation for the national Department. The NLC draft was heavily influenced by an international consultant, Professor H.S. Bhola, and it stresses the political and social importance of literacy and ABET (Kell, 1997). The NLC draft ran aground for political reasons and two editors then reworked a second draft in time for its presentation to a national conference in April 1997.

This document does not have anything spectacularly new to say, but it condenses and clarifies much of the earlier policy work and presents its in a crisp and understandable way. It is particularly useful in its clear outline of the new curriculum framework and the terminology and processes of the new system.

At the abovementioned national ABET conference hosted by the national Department of Education in April 1997, a four-year implementation plan for adult education and training, provision and accreditation was presented, considered and criticised. The document to some extent was a response to the criticism that the department had not engaged in systematic planning in the past though to some extent it too suffered from a tendency to propose unrealistic programmes and campaign for which planning, resources and time were inadequate. As a result a technical task team was appointed to redraft the document into a Multi year implementation plan. The reworked document, which was only to be finalised later in 1997, paid particular attention to a systematic description of implementation steps.

**ABET - a work in progress**

By mid 1997 there was a feeling that the national Department of Education was now working more effectively and realistically and that, though not without continuing difficulties, partnerships between state and NGOs and even university academics had had some modest successes.

Meanwhile NGOs and university adult education departments continued to work on, precariously surviving on donor funding which was now hedged around with conditions that demanded that NGOs submit learners to examinations run by the Independent Examinations Board. The future of the NGO literacy and ABE providers remains uncertain, largely because of funding uncertainties that exacerbates that fact that they now rely on paid (and often well paid) career professionals and not volunteers. They continue to provide some of the most creative materials, well thought out methods, and a radical ethos concerned with the right to education for all. But they still remain unimpressive at the level of large-scale delivery and costs per learner. In spite of better national and provincial co-ordination of late, the NGO literacy field is in some disarray.

The hopes of a rapid change in provision of literacy and ABET have been severely disappointed. The credibility of Government’s commitment to eradicating illiteracy and providing ABET has been compromised and the capacity of its national Department of Education to change this situation doubted. Literacy NGOs all face funding and staffing
crises. That the discourse of literacy is now dominated by business interests who are committed to a competency based approach that can be quite narrow sits uneasily with often radical NGO activists and to what extent they can creatively challenge the move to present ABET increasingly in formal terms has yet to be seen.

There are some other players who continue to exhibit some enthusiasm about ABET: Firstly, the South African Broadcasting Company, manifested a commitment to publicising and working in the field of ABET that was commendable. This may be a reflection of the extent to which the SABC is still an adherent of edifying public broadcasting (however narrow and perverted this adherence was during the apartheid era). It proved to be a force for the good in respect of literacy. A number of advocacy programmes were shown on television from 1994 to date such as Literacy Alive, The struggle for literacy, and Adult Basic Education in the workplace, as well as Basic skills in English programmes and also duplicated in the various languages on radio. Secondly, libraries and particularly the provincial library services were generally supportive of literacy and the provision of easy reading material. A third grouping, the community college sector, is still trying hard to reach take off point. The success or failure of this attempt will undoubtedly have significant consequences for literacy and adult basic education.

In conclusion: some lessons learned and some never learned
In evaluating the past decades of literacy and adult basic education work it is clear that significant lessons have been learned by the protagonists of the field. There has been enormous intellectual and other effort devoted to getting policy and, to some extent, methodology and materials right. In this, South Africa has developed substantial expertise. Advocates for literacy have learned a keen appreciation of the need to gain the support of the real powers in society if their often ambitious plans are to come to fruition. The lessons that have not been learned are that knowledge and commitment are not enough. The literacy educators have been curiously inept and naive in their attempts to gain footholds in the corridors of power. They seem always to have underestimated the fragility of their organisations and support bases and financial support. These lessons will have to be learned very soon for a viable ABET enterprise to continue with any strength in rapidly changing society.
The literacy and then the ABET field have been very closely associated with the political transformation of South Africa. It is likely, dependent as any enhancement of ABET provision is on political will, that its successes and sometimes dreadful defeats will continue to reflect the South African struggle to be a more democratic and enlightened society.

References


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