ASECA: EMPOWERING ADULT LEARNERS

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The style of education that is still, unfortunately, the norm in most schools is based on the assumption that the child has a probable learning deficiency and that the gap needs to be filled. This learning deficiency is measured through performance in tests and examinations. Teachers assess the child against a standard, the deficiency is identified and then, through step by step methods of instruction, the deficiency is rectified.

Adults, however, have developed different learning preferences and bring with them a variety of competencies and skills. These skills and competencies cannot be ignored: they need to be taken into account when developing a curriculum for adult learners. According to Freire, adult learners' perceptions about reality are transformed through action and reflection and both the refinement of existing knowledge and the acquisition of new knowledge contribute to the process of evaluation and to the development of critical thinking skills. Education is not necessarily a process of transmission but a facilitatory process.

Sached's work in the field of adult education has always been based on the concept of empowerment. Education for adults should be based on their needs and aspirations rather than on the needs and values of those in positions of power. Learners should not be passive recipients of knowledge who somehow manage to absorb information through a process of osmosis; they should not be prescribed to. Adult learning needs to take into account that the learning and teaching process is an active process, an enriching process and a process that facilitates critical thinking.

The environment needs to be supportive, tutors need to be committed, and they need to be willing to share experiences and need to be flexible. Learning should depend on needs of learners and therefore should depend on self-pacing. Learners should be involved in the selection of courses based on needs and interests. Education and Training need to be integrated; both centred on the principles of adult education.

Sached's role in providing alternative education for disadvantaged youth and adults has its history in key endeavours such as the ESE project which provided education for prisoners primarily in the Eastern Cape, Turret Correspondence College, Upbeat Magazine and Newspaper Educational Supplements. Each endeavour was founded on a need expressed by different communities at different times in Sached's history.

It is out of this history of identifying key areas of provision that A Secondary Educational Curriculum for Adults (ASECA) was born. In 1993, as the country was moving towards a more equal education for all South Africans, it was acknowledged that education policy and curriculum development could not ignore educationally deprived adults. If educational inequalities were to be tackled by only looking at the educational needs of the present generation of school-going children, Sached believed that they would fall to address the needs of those who suffered most as a direct result of apartheid policies. Not only would this past deprivation affect the quality of life of many of our people, but it would also affect their employment potential and their productivity at work.

Adult education needed to reach as wide an audience as possible and probably the most effective Way of reaching this audience is through distance education.
It needs to be stressed that distance education differs from correspondence education. Supportive structures need to be put into place: committed tutorial support, group learning support and resources such as tapes, radio, computer.

Why did Sached focus on provisioning of adult education to those learners at the equivalent of secondary school education? This level was regarded as very important for adults, because it enabled them to acquire those evaluative, cognitive and problem solving skills that are essential for coping with modern life and for coping with work.

A basic education provides the foundation for the acquisition of reading and writing skills; a secondary education builds on these basic skills to ensure that they can be meaningfully applied.

ASECA commissioned CASE to do research into the feasibility of providing adult learners with a distance education programme and the courses learners felt would benefit them most. Based on the feasibility study, ASECA, together with the ANC Education desk, the PAC, unions, academics, teachers and learners embarked on putting together an outcomes-based, modular, additive, distance education programme.

Five courses were envisaged, four courses have, to date, been developed.

Before looking at the ASECA programme in detail it is important to note the kind of impact the research undertaken by SACHED/ASECA had on the work presently being engaged in Adult Basic Education and Training.

Well before the National Qualifications framework came into existence (see Appendix 1), ASECA played a pioneering role in implementing principles inherent within the current OBE context. By providing:

- Materials that are based on Integrated Learning Programmes
- Programmes that are both modular and additive
- Materials that are outcomes-based
- Assessment criteria that are transparent
- Formative and summative assessment
- Recognition of prior learning
- Learners placed according to skills and competencies

On the 5 October 1995 the South African Qualifications Authority Act was passed. This Act restructures education by not restricting recognition of learning to formal settings such as schools, but recognises prior learning that might have taken place in the workplace or through self-study. Since the establishment of SAQA, significant progress has been made with the establishment of the National Qualification framework.

The NQF
This will be used as an instrument to make an outcomes-based, integrated approach to education and training a reality. What does ASECA have to offer?

- A part qualification with all courses approved by the Joint Matriculation Board
- Courses that are modular, additive and outcomes-based and designed for learners using an integrated approach
- Course outcomes that are verified through continuous and end-of-course assessment
- Placement tools to ensure correct placement of learners
- Learning activities that are both formative and diagnostic Learning materials, tapes, assignment

Each course comprises three modules, tapes, assignments and tests
At the General Education and Training Certificate Level:

English Mathematics Combined Sciences (comprising earth and life sciences) Integrated Social Studies (comprising, history, geography, sociology, politics, economics)

At the Further Education and Training Level:-

English
Mathematics; Advanced Mathematics
ASECA Mathematics
Intermediate Mathematics
Natural Sciences
Integrated Social Studies

We offer out courses to adults and youth in different sites of learning: work places, community colleges, community based organisations.

In community colleges, which is a relatively new concept in South Africa, ASECA is faced with the crises of offering the ASECA curriculum to ‘second chance’ learners who have failed grade 12 four or five times and have received little or no learning and teaching in basic language and numeracy skills.

The existing system for the provision of FET is generally fragmented and disorganised. There are numerous programmes being offered with few points of articulation and little equivalence between them. Until there is cohesion within this band, South Africa is going to be faced with learners who d not have the necessary skills and competencies for higher levels of productivity, or the knowledge, skills and values to enter the Higher Education Band.

ASECA offers learners opportunities to come back into formal learning, and to enter the mainstream of further professional development, and employment.