

---

# The new knowledge-rich society: perpetuating marginalisation and exclusion

Ivor Baatjes

---

## Abstract

This paper draws attention to the marginalisation and exclusion of a large and growing sector of the South Africa population who is systematically being excluded from meaningful participation in the social, cultural, political, economic activities of society. It is argued that adult basic education is an important vehicle in overcoming marginalisation and exclusion and that deliberate efforts are required to incorporate large numbers of individuals into active citizenship and the new knowledge-rich society. Both the emancipatory and instrumentalist traditions of adult basic education present possibilities to incorporate individuals into an inclusive and just society. The instrumentalist tradition, which is emerging as the dominant tradition that defines the purpose of education in the country, contributes to the marginalisation and exclusion of under-educated, semi-illiterate and illiterate adults in the country.

Marginalisation is... the silencing of lived experiences in discourses constructed through legislation and policies created by the dominant culture, which either ‘commatizes<sup>1</sup> or negates’ the political, economic, historical and social realities of those living in the margins of society.

*(Vanessa Sheared in Sheared and Sissil, 2001, p. 4)*

---

<sup>1</sup> Sheared uses the term to describe the way in which the realities and issues of those entering into adult literacy programmes are broken out and compartmentalised in society. She uses O’Brien’s neo-Marxist perspective on women that asserts that women’s issues are “commatized” – women (comma) black (comma) children (comma) Green peace (comma) - - by things that might not have anything to do with who they are and what they contribute to their families and society. [See also O’Brien, M. 1984.]

## Background

Adult Basic Education (ABE) in South Africa is often described as a key vehicle in the reconstruction and development of the country. In a society faced with enormous social and economic challenges, technological innovation and transfer, rising unemployment, racial strife, crime, poverty and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, ABE has emerged as an important component of a comprehensive education and training system. It shows great promise of incorporating the historically-disadvantaged and marginalised into a new form of citizenship and democracy. The term 'adult basic education' in South Africa has taken on an extra meaning with the introduction of training as a vital element of the new education and training enterprise. South Africans – government, labour, civil society, business and industry – have adopted the term Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) which purports to reflect the greater integration of education and training. The emphasis on training emanates from organised labour, which argues for the recognition of the existing technical skills of the worker and for these skills to be acknowledged as part of the learning and teaching process. Many workers were exploited in the *apartheid* era in which the education system and the workplace deliberately ignored the skills of workers, paying low wages and denying workers access to further education and training. In the *apartheid* era, ABE was also viewed as the responsibility of government and not industry, and the introduction of the 'T' partly shifts this responsibility to industry. In addition to this, ABET aimed to provide an argument for the introduction of training as part of all ABE programmes in the new education and training system. In terms of the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF), ABET is equated with nine years of schooling. ABE conceptualised in this way has become current policy, and the implementation of this policy is in its seventh year. In this article, I will use the term ABE because the promise of training has not yet materialised.

## Introduction

Marginalisation and exclusion occur when people are systematically excluded from meaningful participation in economic, social, political, cultural and other forms of human activity. People are cut off from the mainstream and do not have access to the fruits of membership of the

wider society. Key concepts within the exclusion and marginalisation paradigms that capture the essence of marginalisation include: 'illiteracy', 'cultural others', 'the underclass', 'ghettos', 'ethnic cleansing', 'race', 'gender', 'class' and, lately, 'being HIV positive'. This article draws attention to the systematic marginalisation and exclusion of a large and growing sector of the South African population from meaningful participation in the social, cultural, political and economic activities.

This article intends to evoke discussion about marginalisation at a time when much attention is drawn to the 'knowledge citizen' in the new knowledge-rich society which demands certain levels of basic education as a prerequisite for further learning and knowledge acquisition (UNESCO, 1997). Those without these thresholds of knowledge would most certainly be excluded from the new knowledge-rich economy. This article also attempts to locate the issues of marginalisation and exclusion within the area of the state, its economic policy and the political context of South Africa. In other words, issues of marginalisation and exclusion need to be understood within their relationship to economic development or the political economy of adult education (Youngman, 2000; Torres, 1990; Collins, 1991). Marginalisation occurs at a number of levels. For the purpose of this article, I focus on two levels where marginalisation is clearly evident: firstly, the marginalisation of the ABE system itself and, secondly, the marginalisation and exclusion of adult learners. It is argued that ABE is an important vehicle in overcoming marginalisation and exclusion, and that deliberate efforts are required to incorporate large numbers of individuals into active citizenship and the new knowledge-rich society. Both the emancipatory and instrumentalist traditions of ABE present possibilities of incorporating individuals into an inclusive and just society. However, the instrumentalist tradition – which is emerging as the dominant tradition that defines the purpose of education in South Africa – contributes to the marginalisation and exclusion of under-educated, semi-illiterate and illiterate adults in the country.

This article introduces a brief history of illiteracy as characteristic of the black working class in South Africa, and discusses how it was reproduced as an essential component of the *apartheid* capitalist state. It will be argued that illiteracy forms part of a set of oppressive mechanisms that should be understood within the historical and structural context of South Africa shaped by the mode of production and its class and race relations.

This is followed by brief descriptions of two post-*apartheid* economic policies, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and the Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy (GEAR), with specific focus on their relationships to the social policy of which ABE is part. While the RDP as a redistributive socio-economic policy provided a foundation for an emancipatory literacy project, and despite its location within a strategy that would simultaneously respond to a range of other oppressive structures, it was displaced by the neoliberal GEAR which rendered such a project impossible. This leads to the conclusion that illiteracy amongst black working-class adults is reproduced within the larger market-driven peripheral capitalist state. Two examples of ABE Projects are used to show not only that the neoliberal macro-economic policy marginalises ABE, but that the instrumentalist tradition that results from it also excludes the illiterate, semi-illiterate and under-educated from participating in it. The new knowledge-rich society relies on an educated citizenry, and yet the marginalisation and exclusion of millions of adults – reproduced by inhumane economic policies – continue to deny people full participation in the social, political, economic and cultural aspects of life.

### A brief historical overview (pre-1994)

Illiteracy amongst adults in South Africa remains a deeply-rooted social issue and is inescapably implicated in the political and economic forces of the country. Marxist theory explains the production of social relations that resulted in the division of society into classes and the struggle of these classes against one another (Youngman, 1986). The theory also explains the political economy which originates from this struggle and the consequent division of society, and how the distribution of political power is reflected by an economy in which a minority have ownership of the means of production while the majority are dependent for their subsistence on wage labour. The division between mental and manual labour is a terrain of domination and subordination. The subordinate class in South Africa was, and still is, constituted by a majority of the black illiterate working class, and the reproduction of class/race relations is a result of a combination of ideological state apparatuses and organised violence within the larger context of capital accumulation. The endemic *apartheid* capitalist state required a large black workforce in order to maintain white domination. The political economy of adult literacy was therefore clearly

shaped by the ruling political class whose power was anchored in the economic structure of *apartheid* capitalism.

In 1990, the adult illiteracy rate was estimated at 50%, and some would argue that it could have been as high as 61% depending on how literacy was defined. The black labour force was largely uneducated, unskilled and easily replaceable in occupational structures. The rapid expansion in industrialisation and modernisation of the late 1970s and 80s required a stable, better-trained productive labour force, with the main emphasis being placed on the fragmentation of skilled labour and semi-skilled work. Basic literacy levels became requisite for an efficiently functioning labour market. Ironically, with the high illiteracy rate in the 1970s, the government failed to launch a literacy campaign as a prerequisite to rapid economic growth.<sup>2</sup> Instead, government responded by focusing attention on the education of the smaller urban black population, particularly at the secondary and technical levels, as well as small-scale literacy programmes in the form of night schools. The corporate sector also provided mainly functional literacy programmes which, it believed, would bring immediate economic returns. Adult literacy provision and delivery by the state and corporate sectors show congruency with the *apartheid* capitalist ideology and its investment in racially segregated human resource development. The state's limited commitment to adult literacy and the emphasis on 'training' were ideological measures intended to preserve the status quo, therefore ensuring the reproduction of a majority illiterate black working class as an important component of *apartheid* capitalism. A marginalised adult literacy pseudo-policy of the *apartheid* state is evident in the following:

- the budget for state adult literacy programmes remained less than 1% of the total education budget for black South Africans
- the total number of adult learners in state centres dropped from 104 000 in 1988 to 67 000 in 1990
- less than 1% of illiterates were involved in existing literacy programmes
- the drop-out rate was higher than 60%

---

<sup>2</sup> According to UNESCO, an 80% national adult literacy rate is required for rapid economic development

- between 1988 and 1990, the number of learning centres for adults declined from 390 to 258
- the only route to literacy was through the oppressive and discriminatory schooling system
- literacy education in industry was viewed as a cost and not an investment
- much skilled labour performed by blacks was categorised as unskilled.

The *apartheid* capitalist state was also characterised by a range of other social injustices that cannot be separated from illiteracy because they formed part of the concrete forms of domination and asymmetrical relations of power that functioned to marginalise and exclude people from active participation in the socio-economic and political life of the country. Illiteracy amongst adults, although there is no causal relationship, was connected to:

- a high infant mortality rate amongst the black population
- increase in poverty
- massive unemployment
- homelessness
- illiteracy amongst black children
- violence and death

– all concrete forms of domination and asymmetrical relations of power.

Reflections on the history and analysis of illiteracy amongst adults in South Africa show that it was reproduced through the bureaucratic centralised education system and the political subjugation of blacks that was sustained by repressive mechanisms anchored in the economic structure of *apartheid* capitalism.

## The new era (post-1994)

The new national government of South Africa highlighted ABE as a fundamental vehicle to social, political and economic power. ABE provided great possibilities in the reconstruction and development process (Bengu, 1996; Mkhathswa; 1997). It was regarded as:

- an integral component of building a participatory democracy
- having the potential to incorporate illiterate and under-educated adults into a new form of citizenship
- indispensable in the development of a critical consciousness
- the vehicle to respond to a range of social and economic challenges
- an ideal mechanism to transcend exploitation, manipulation, powerlessness and oppression.

In essence, ABE was viewed within a larger political framework and action plan: literacy as a cornerstone in overcoming social, political and economic domination. ABE therefore linked concretely with the struggle against racial oppression and class exploitation; it was understood to be an emancipatory literacy that would be fought from these theoretical perspectives.

### ABE and the Reconstruction and Development Programme (1994-5)

The role of ABE as a vehicle in the reconstruction and development process has received generous attention over the last seven years. In 1994, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) as economic and social policy became the official African National Congress (ANC) policy supported by the different organisations within the Mass Democratic Movement.<sup>3</sup> The original RDP document contains a substantive set of campaign promises which captured the imagination of most sectors of society (Bond, 2000). The Working Group paper entitled *Rebuilding the MDM for a People-driven RDP* describes the RDP in the following way: ‘Through the RDP we provided the only viable vision for change in our country. It is a vision based on meeting the needs of the impoverished majority of our population through a people-centred, people-driven developmental process’ (Bond, 2000, p. 90). The RDP set a five-year

---

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Bond argues that the RDP has different interpretations – neoliberal, socialist and populist. From his analysis it appears as if the neoliberal orientation within the ANC, linked to the World Bank and IMF, has emerged as the dominant force that moved the RDP towards an economic policy in line with a free-market economy. This neoliberal economic policy emphasises the human capital tradition or instrumentalist view that education and training assumes. Education policy geared towards economic growth dictates the central purpose of education programmes.

target which promised, *inter alia*:

- a million new low-cost houses available to even the poorest South Africans
- the electrification of 2.5-million houses
- the creation of 200 000 jobs annually
- a redistribution of 30% of the agricultural land
- clean water and sanitation for all
- universal health care and social welfare
- massive educational initiatives.

Of concern and interest to adult educators were the promises made by the RDP in relation to the empowerment of civil society and the resultant incorporation of illiterate and marginalised adults into a new form of participatory democracy. The RDP as socio-economic policy was clearly promising to break the reproduction of illiteracy amongst the black population and to incorporate the marginalised into mainstream society. This policy provided impetus to the declaration of basic education as a human right as set out in the South African Constitution.<sup>4</sup> This would be achieved through literacy campaigns and other national skills development initiatives, which I discuss later in this article. The RDP became official government policy as the RDP White Paper. This RDP policy emphasises that adult education and its provision at effective sites of learning is integral to the socio-political and economic concerns of the country, and specifically to both the labour market and human resource development.

ABE was viewed as part of the process of meeting the basic needs of the population. These needs are described in the RDP White Paper as follows:

The basic needs of people extend from job-creation, land and agrarian reform to housing, water and sanitation, energy supplies, transport, nutrition, health care, the environment, social welfare and security. In creating the infrastructure to meet these needs the RDP will encourage and support the participation of people in making the key decisions about where the projects should be and how they should be managed.

(Reconstruction and Development Programme White Paper, *Government Gazette*, No. 16085, p. 9)

---

<sup>4</sup> Like the World Declaration of Education for All (UNESCO, 1997), the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa recognises ABE as a basic human right, and the National Education Policy Act (1996) supports the protection of rights such as the right to basic education.

Meeting these basic needs cannot be separated from the varieties of adult learning and training. ABE as captured in the White Paper is viewed as a significant vehicle in social, political and economic transformation:

A coherent human resource development policy will be developed to focus on the skills acquisition and ABE for the incumbent workforce and those who have been deprived of basic schooling.

(Reconstruction and Development Programme White Paper, *Government Gazette*, No. 16085, p.26)

The RDP White Paper describes the education and training system as a tool that will empower people and create the scope for everyone to participate in decision-making processes, as well as a mechanism for the democratisation of the society. Effective learning sites and alternative delivery mechanisms have a critical role to play in the education of the nation and are therefore integral to the overall human resource development strategy of the country (Baatjes, Aitchison and John, 2001). The RDP was often referred to as a long-term strategy, a national strategic vision, a philosophy, a way of life and the ideal redistributive socio-economic policy to address the interrelated problems of basic services, housing, unemployment, education, health and other inequalities (Harley, Baatjes *et al*, 2000). It was viewed as an empowering policy that was inherently progressive and emancipatory, concerned with people-centred development, ecological safeguarding, gender equality, self-reliant economics, inclusivity and empowerment.

The RDP programme was short-lived and was relegated to a project-based programme when government realised that they lacked (or so it appeared) the necessary resources to achieve the unachievable (Harley, Baatjes, *et al*, 2000). For instance, the Multi-year Implementation Plan (1997) of the Department of Education estimated that it would require approximately R18-billion to operationalise its ABE policy to provide a strategy that would bring ABE programmes to three-million illiterate and under-educated adults (Department of Education, 1997). During the RDP era, ABE received R50-million for a government-led literacy campaign as well as generous support from a number of international donors who were keen to support the establishment of a framework for the improved planning, coordination and delivery of programmes for adults, strengthening national capacity to provide ABE, the development of a national curriculum and standards, programme development to enhance the

acquisition of technical skills, family literacy, empowerment of women, and sustainable development. This type of support to government nosedived towards the end of 1998, coinciding with the growth in prominence of a newly adopted macro-economic policy. At the same time, however, we witnessed the calculated demise of civil society organisations which failed to access the resources that the RDP programme was meant to mobilise.

For radical adult educators in South Africa, the RDP was a redistributive socio-economic policy that fostered the development of a participatory democracy, and provided a meaningful and perhaps ideal, foundation for the incorporation of the marginalised adult population into meaningful roles in a society characterised by such great inequalities. It also provided the context within which to grapple with the complex and intertwined issues of poverty, unemployment, racism, sexism, disease, crime, and moral decay – and to map the most suitable route to emancipation from the intricacies of exploitation, oppression, exclusion and marginalisation (Welton, 1992). The RDP provided both the promise of addressing basic needs of the marginalised and, at the same time, the necessary resources to provide millions of adults with access to good-quality learning and training opportunities. Despite this early promise, the RDP has today come to stand for ‘**Rumours, Dreams and Promises**’ (Bond’s metaphor for RDP, 2000).

## ABE and the GEAR Policy (1996- )

In 1998, the RDP was effectively displaced by the current neoliberal macro-economic policy – the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy.<sup>5</sup> Government insists that GEAR is not a new policy but merely a strategy that operationalises the RDP. Government and business regard GEAR as the most appropriate way of inserting the South African

---

<sup>5</sup> In 1997, when the first draft of the ABET policy first appeared, the Department of Education wrote a letter to all stakeholders informing them that the document bearing its name on the cover was not a departmental document. The reason for this was that the critique of GEAR created difficulties for the department at a time when opposition to GEAR was strongly voiced by organised labour and civil society.

economy competitively into the global economy.<sup>6</sup> GEAR departs from the former RDP in many respects, and emphasis is placed on economic growth that will precipitate employment opportunities for a more equitable distribution of the country's wealth. The intention of this macro-economic policy is to place the primary focus on economic growth and demands that all other policies – education, labour and social – are streamlined according to the economic imperatives of the country. This policy is also congruent with the global economy that demands highly-skilled and competitive labour.<sup>7</sup> In so doing, the GEAR strategy focuses on:

- a competitive and fast-growing economy which creates jobs
- a redistribution of income and opportunities towards the poor
- a society in which sound health, education and other services are available to all
- an environment in which homes are secure and places of work productive.

GEAR targets included an economic growth of 6% per annum and the creation of 400 000 jobs per annum by the year 2000. The capacity building required for global competitiveness is also seen as fundamental. This would be achieved through an integrated strategy at the core of which are the following elements: (1) a fiscal reduction programme; (2) a competitive exchange rate policy; (3) the restructuring of state assets; (4) an expansionary infrastructure programme that addresses service deficiencies; and (5) the expansion of trade and investment flows. GEAR has been implemented in the nine provinces in South Africa through

---

<sup>6</sup> Burbules's and Torres's observations best capture the political forces that shape government's constraints in relation to economic restructuring. They identify transnational capital, global political structures, domestic pressures and demands, and internal needs as the four imperatives that require political response.

<sup>7</sup> GEAR echoed and expanded upon policy recommendations proposed by the World Bank (see Fallon and Pereira de Silva) that South Africa should: (1) encourage rapid growth in skilled labour by upgrading semi-skilled and unskilled labour; (2) re-orientate manufacturing towards exports; (3) promote job creation through small business development and agricultural reform; and (4) restructure government expenditure by raising investment in infrastructure and public service, targeting the poor and under-privileged, and maintaining a prudent fiscal and monetary policy.

provincial Spatial Development Initiatives (SDIs)<sup>8</sup> in a number of Industrial Development Zones (IDZs). The education and training system would provide the human resources necessary to drive this economy. In essence, GEAR can be described as the real education policy that drives the education and training system in the country.

GEAR sets itself ambitious targets. In 1997, it projected that more than 200 000 jobs would be created on an annual basis until the year 2000, and that the unemployment rate would decline to approximately 8% by the year 2020. In addition, the economic growth-rate per annum was set at 6% (Harley, Baatjes *et al*, 2000). GEAR has missed most of its targets. Statistics indicate job losses and thus an increase in the unemployment rate from 33% in 1997 to 37% in 2000.<sup>9</sup> The most common problems linked to GEAR are: an increase in job losses; a decrease in public services, including health and other basic services; privatisation and outsourcing; an increase in structural poverty; and a growing gap between rich and poor.<sup>10</sup> This economic restructuring has also resulted (as in many other peripheral capitalist countries) in a number of other problems that are reinforcing the marginalisation and exclusion of millions of illiterates and unskilled in the South African population. These include, amongst others: (1) the reduction of the welfare state and an increase in the privatisation of social services, health, housing and education; (2) a model of exclusion that leaves out large sectors of the population (the poor, women and the rural population); (3) an increasing proletarianisation and deskilling of jobs; (4)

---

<sup>8</sup> A number of SDIs can be found in each of the nine provinces. These include Coega, the Alrode Industrial Corridor, Richards Bay, the Maputo Corridor, Gariep, Phalaborwa-Maputo, the Platinum Corridor and West Coast SDIs. These SDIs would attract foreign investment and as a result create employment opportunities.

<sup>9</sup> Between 1996 and 1998, 300 000 jobs were lost (Bond. 'Can South Africa shake the Washington Consensus?' In Development Update. Quarterly Journal of the South African National NGO Coalition and INTERFUND, p.49)

<sup>10</sup> This is well-illustrated in recent findings that, though there has been some redistribution of wealth in South Africa since 1991 largely to the advantage of black people, it has taken the form of the gaining of wealth by a small black elite that is part of the wealthy top 10% of the South Africa population, and that for the bottom 40% of predominantly black households the economic situation has in fact deteriorated. During the period 1991 to 1996, the poorest 40% of blacks received only 0.1% of the estimated R55-million of the redistributed wealth gained by blacks – compared with the R24-billion gained by the richest 10% of blacks. The average income of black households at the bottom of the scale declined by 20% (*Sunday Times*, October, 1999: 'Rich man, Poorer man' by C. Jacobson).

a withdrawal of the state's responsibility in administering public resources and the promotion of social justice; (5) drastic cutbacks in social spending; and (6) a deep fiscal reduction affecting the public sector.

The marginalisation of a fully-functional ABE system is being entrenched by this macro-economic policy. The great Multi-year Implementation Plan that was meant to bring this system into existence has been shelved. Government still claims it as its official plan for ABE, but it is yet to be implemented (Department of Labour, 2000). Today, 50% of the South African adult population (or 10-million adults) have less than ten years of schooling, and three-million adults have never been to school. A growing number of under-educated, semi-skilled and unskilled adults are unemployed, face retrenchments or are trapped in the informal economy. Over the last five years, the commitment by government to the provision and delivery of ABE as a political project has faded, despite its recognition of illiteracy as a threat to the 'economic order' and as a profound injustice. This waning commitment is evident in its insignificant financial support for ABE, which is still receiving less than 1% of the national education budget. The number of Public Adult Learning Centres (PALCs) has dropped from 1440 to 998. Over the last seven years, three poorly-conceptualised and under-resourced campaigns have been launched and have subsequently failed. The role of civil society in the provision and delivery of ABE programmes has also been undermined. Since 1997, there has been a significant decline in the ABE NGO sector. Of a total of 150 NGOs operating in 1997, only 38 were still partly functional in 2000. The demise of the NGO sector is partly linked to multilateral and bilateral agreements that redirected funds to governments instead of NGOs. Consequently, the role of civil society efforts in the provision and delivery of ABE has declined sharply. Today, millions of South Africans continue to experience deepening social problems – the maps of poverty, unemployment and illiteracy are beginning to mirror one another. Illiterate adults are experiencing deepening socio-economic dilemmas –in health, housing, unemployment, crime, and so on. Their structural position, created by a range of forces, also deters them from participating in ABE programmes. These include structural, situational, psychological and informational barriers (Baatjes, Aitchison and John, 1999, 2001; Baatjes, 2002).

The literacy scenario in the year 2000 almost mirrors the scenarios of the 1970s and '80s. It appears as if the illiteracy amongst the largely black population in the country is still being reproduced. Prior to 1994, the reproductive mechanism was *apartheid* capitalism; today it is neoliberalism. Patrick Bond's metaphor – the South African government is merely 'shining the chains of *apartheid* instead of breaking them' – best captures the reproduction of asymmetrical power relations and the perpetuation of marginalisation and exclusion (Bond, 2001). To further demonstrate how marginalisation and exclusion are advanced, I focus below on ABE projects provided by the two lead ministries concerned with education and training, namely, the Departments of Education and of Labour. There are a number of issues that could be presented as evidence of both the marginal status of ABE and of how the beneficiaries of the system are marginalised but, for the purpose of this article, I highlight only a few in the section below.

## ABE Projects

### Department of Education

In the year 2002, ABE provision and delivery was taking place in three sectors, government, business and industry, and NGOs. In this section of the article, the focus is on a brief overview of ABE provision and delivery by government and by two of the largest economic sectors in the country, mining and manufacturing.

In 1996, during the short-lived RDP era, the new government launched the *Ithuteng* 'Ready to Learn' Campaign with the intention to register 90 000 adult learners in government PALCs, with a budget of R50-million. This campaign lasted for only one year. Whether the campaign reached its target is doubtful (Aitchison, Houghton and Baatjes, 2000) and, while it had a strong political and revolutionary element to it, it was ultimately a disaster. Launched nationally on 11 February 1996 (coinciding with the celebration of five years since Mandela's release from prison), it became known that most of the nine provincial departments had limited or no ABE experience or no ABE staff to co-ordinate the campaign; three provinces did not implement the campaign; it had no publicity and no recruitment strategy; only one provincial plan existed; there were serious problems

with materials for learners; and the funds for the campaign could be accessed only six months into the campaign. These examples clearly suggest some of the key problems of *Ithuteng*. Realising that a one-year campaign was inadequate, the departments abandoned it and embarked on the development of a planning process that resulted in the Multi-year Implementation Plan. Although this plan showed great promise, it received limited political and economic support from politicians, business and even the labour movement.

In 1999, within the first few weeks of his incumbency, the new Minister of Education threatened to 'break the back of illiteracy', and launched a new literacy campaign under what became known as the South African National Literacy Initiative (SANLI) (Asmal, 1999; Castle, 2000). This 'initiative' would depend on adult educators who would volunteer their time teaching the illiterate. Two years later, SANLI has achieved little, and the lack of financial resources to support its implementation has been blamed for its failure. The similarities between SANLI and Ronald Reagan's National Adult Literacy Initiatives of the 1980s are striking (they even have the same name) and include their dismal failures. The real purpose of this campaign, which is meant to target some of the poorest communities in the country, remains unclear. It certainly does not show the revolutionary zeal of *Ithuteng*, and appears to be merely a strategy to control and manage conflict between government and an increasingly impatient third sector. The lack of political will to drive this 'initiative', which requires substantial resources, is congruent with neoliberal tendencies to cut back on social spending. It also shows government's lack of responsibility to the marginalised and its orientation towards maintaining models of exclusion that marginalise large sectors of the population. There is an argument that suggests that government policies would not promote the political participation of its citizens because they might become difficult to control, hence the deliberate lack of literacy provisioning and the strategic destruction of civil society through a process of severing their sources of funding.

A sister campaign to SANLI, called the *Masifunde Sonke* campaign, was also launched in 2000, to develop a culture of reading in the country. This campaign was initially located within SANLI and later established as a separate unit in the Department of Education with a small budget. It suffers the same difficulties as SANLI, and has as yet made little if any

contribution to the culture of reading. What is quite clear is that the Department of Education seems to have no ability whatever to implement any campaign linked to adult literacy. The three campaigns are good examples of this. This inability to provide and deliver literacy education poses a serious problem, as millions of South Africa adults are so poorly educated that they cannot access jobs within the market. Being retrained or schooled for a new job in the elite knowledge sector is painfully out of reach. Millions of adults are being permanently displaced by technology transfer, and a growing underclass is emerging – the illiterate, the semi-illiterate and the under-educated. Jeremy Rifkin characterises the marginalised as millions of able-bodied South Africans who are stranded by a society that no longer needs or wants their labour (Rifkin, 1995).

Another key issue that also shows the limited interest in and lack of political will to support ABE is the marginal status of adult educators. Much adult education in South Africa was located within the broader social movement, and adult educators developed their knowledge and skills within the NGO sector. Most universities, with the exception of perhaps Western Cape, Natal and Cape Town, do not provide programmes for adult educators. When ABE was adopted as one of the key focus points of government, there was an expectation that a significant number of adult educator posts would be established and that government would embark on a development project that would increase and multiply the skills base of adult educators who would also find employment in the PALCs, NGOs, business and industry and other government departments. By the year 2000, fewer than one hundred adult educators have been appointed as programme co-ordinators or programme supervisors in PALCs, and others remain employed as part-time educators. Most recently, in the Eastern Cape Province – which has the largest number of under-educated adults after KwaZulu-Natal – the restructuring of its provincial department of education has led to the redundancy of approximately 100 ABE regional officials who are being redeployed into mainstream schooling posts.<sup>11</sup> The number of adult educators enrolled in university-based programmes has also declined due to poor conditions of service and limited support from the main employers of adult educators. The development of skilled adult educators is therefore undermined, a fact which simply reinforces the

---

<sup>11</sup> Griff Foley, in an article entitled 'Adult Education and Capitalist Reorganisation', highlights restructuring as a key element of the crisis with capital, and challenges adult educators to resist it and to articulate alternatives.

marginalisation of a focal area in education that requires government support and leadership.

## Department of Labour

In South Africa, the terms 'ABET', 'Further Education and Training' and 'lifelong learning' are increasingly being used to signal new concepts of adult education that support economic productivity and economic growth. Greater emphasis is being placed on linking adult education more effectively to the needs of the economy, concentrating on clients' needs, effective service delivery, co-ordinating resources, quality management, accreditation, and so on. These developments are indicative of the fact that adult education is becoming less marginal to the mainstream of education, the major preoccupation of the state.<sup>12</sup> The neoliberal tradition dictates that adult education should become more and more relevant to the needs of the economy or corporate capitalism. Business and professional interests often invoke adult education as a means of increasing efficiency and profitability. Adult education in South Africa is decked out in slogans such as 'lifelong learning', 'further education and training', 'outcomes-based education' and 'human resources development'. The human capital theory argues that long-term investment in education leads directly to increased productivity and economic growth. ABE is being made to fit into this neoliberal tradition. At the same time, it is this neoliberal tradition that absorbs adult education into a 'cult of efficiency' (Collins, 1991); alternatively, instrumentalism is failing to create a more just and equitable society, and so perpetuating asymmetrical power relations, marginalisation, exclusion and injustice.

In 2001, the Department of Labour introduced a *National Skills Development Strategy: Skills for Productive Citizenship for All* which

---

<sup>12</sup> It is indicative that government exhibits an inconsistent philosophy in approaching adult learning issues: it adopts a more interventionist attitude towards programmes linked to economic productivity, while having a *laissez-faire* attitude toward emancipatory projects.

operationalises two pieces of legislation,<sup>13</sup> namely, the Skills Development Act and the Skills Development Levies Act that require business and industry and all institutions to invest in the education and training of their employees.<sup>14</sup> The key concepts that show the NSDS allegiance with the instrumentalist tradition include ‘demand-led’, ‘skills development for employability’, ‘productivity’ and ‘productive citizenship’. One of the ‘success indicators’ of the NSDS is that by March 2005, 70% of workers should have at least an NQF level 1 qualification. This would be achieved through the establishment of 25 Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) which need to develop complex frameworks, systems, strategies and procedures to achieve this tall order.<sup>15</sup> The two baseline studies yielded interesting information which show the marginal status of ABE in the workplace, as well as the vulnerability of workers who do not have nine years of schooling.

The Mining and Mineral Sector (MMS) and the Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services Sector (MERSS) are two of the largest and most important economic sectors, employing close to one-million people (Baatjes, Aitchison and John, 2001; Baatjes, 2002) across 40 000 companies.<sup>16</sup> Approximately 60% – or 600 000 workers – have fewer than ten years of schooling, and are the target group of the respective SETAs.

---

<sup>13</sup> These Acts create the National Skills Authority, the National Skills Fund, Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), Skills Development Planning Units, skills development levy-grant schemes and labour centres. In 2001, the National Skills Fund recorded an amount of R1.3-billion which could not be allocated for education and training. The lack of bureaucratic systems in 2001 made it impossible for funds to be allocated to services providers. Only a small percentage of this fund is allocated to programmes for marginalised people in South Africa.

<sup>14</sup> A company or each workplace must develop a workplace skills plan (WSP) and submit it to the SETA under which it is registered. Clearly defined regulations stipulate and outline the format for a WSP. A Skills Development Facilitator helps a company with the development and completion of a WSP. A WSP clearly identifies the learning, education and training that are strategic by linking the skills required to the priorities of the company. Companies pay a levy and receive funding for staff development, but only on submission of a WSP. It loses the funds to the National Skills Authority if no WSP is submitted.

<sup>15</sup> It is unclear how this objective has been set, given the lack of information available about the educational levels of employees. In 2000 and 2001, two of the largest economic sectors embarked on baseline studies to gather data for their own planning purposes.

<sup>16</sup> Companies in these sectors are divided into large, small, medium and micro. Most of the companies are either small or medium, employing up to 100 workers.

The two baseline studies yielded the information set out below.

Firstly, the percentage of MMS and MERSS companies that provided programmes to workers within the General Education and Training Band (ABE is part of this band) was 18% and less than 7%, respectively. These statistics are not surprising, as the history of adult literacy provision and delivery in business and industry in South Africa indicates (Aitchison *et al.*, 2000). What is interesting is the expression of bitter complaints amongst companies about their so-called unskilled workforce and the consequent threat to the economic order, and their simultaneous reluctance to develop the skills of these workers. Information about the education and training levels of workers is almost non-existent.

Secondly, the baseline study shows that there is a lack of political and economic will amongst the majority of these companies to provide ABE. The statistics speak from themselves, but the response to claiming back a levy shows the lack of interest in ABE and the skills development of unskilled workers. Of the 25 000 levy-paying companies registered with the Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services SETA (MERSETA), only 1 000 submitted Workplace Skills Plans (WSPs) which is the mechanism to fund education and training programmes.

Thirdly, in a small number of companies (mainly larger companies) where ABE programmes are provided, access to programmes is extremely limited. Most of the companies accommodate only 20 to 30 workers in a class over a six-month period. Time, cost and space are presented as key inhibitors to providing ABE. Some companies have long waiting lists of workers keen to attend classes, and in some cases it will take two years before workers will be able to be enrolled. No effort is being made to find alternative venues for classes, while part-time programmes receive very little support.

Fourthly, the types of programmes provided also point to the need for serious evaluation. Despite the arguments for programmes that focus on a combination of basic knowledge and skills, the ABE programmes are limited to English literacy (a language which is foreign, a second, third or fourth language to almost all the workers) and numeracy, with some introduction of science and technology. There was hardly any evidence of any form of skills training for workers at the ABE level. The WSPs, which

should provide some indication of skills development, do not clearly show the number of ABE-level workers that benefit from a combination of English literacy and skills programmes.

Fifth, the curriculum development processes, which are meant to set the general competency statements for skills requirement of workers, lean more towards workers with higher levels of education. This indicates that training is not regarded as a necessary component of the ABE curriculum in the workplace. Curriculum development and its implementation through learnerships are far more advanced for workers with more than ten years of schooling. Development of learning materials to support the implementation of ABE programmes also receives scant attention.

Sixth, learner motivation and participation are key aspects that require attention. Although the participation and motivation in full-time programmes appears to be high, with a very low drop-out rate, the same cannot be said about part-time programmes. Workers face many barriers to participation, and very little is being done to address them. Incentives to workers are limited, and those who do attend the full-time classes can lose wages if they drop out of the programme.

Seventh, workers without ten years of schooling are the most vulnerable in the two economic sectors. During both studies, many of them were retrenched, and it is extremely difficult for them to enter the job market. In addition to this, they receive no support for further learning.

Lastly, ABE programmes in the workplace can easily be interrupted or stopped. If companies fail to produce the required production quotas, workers in full-time classes are called back to production lines. Budgets for ABE in the workplace are also the first to be cut when companies face financial difficulties.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article was to highlight the significance of ABE as a mechanism for incorporating illiterate and under-educated adults as active participants in the socio-economic, political and cultural life of South Africa. ABE is viewed as a prerequisite for participation in a growing

knowledge-rich society and as a necessary vehicle in the reconstruction and development of the country. Failure to recognise the significance of ABE, I have argued, will perpetuate the marginalisation and exclusion of millions of illiterate people. I have presented a brief overview of how illiteracy amongst the black population was reproduced as a necessary element of *apartheid* capitalism. Illiteracy was also part of the multiple forms of oppression – poverty, homelessness, disease, hunger – and asymmetrical relations on which the *apartheid* state depended for its existence. I have also argued that the RDP policy of the first democratic government provided an ideal redistributive mechanism through which ABE could redress the inequalities of past discriminatory policies and create social policies that would map the most suitable route to emancipation from the intricacies of exploitation, oppression, exclusion and marginalisation (a route that incorporates the themes of justice, freedom, care equality, peace, stability and development). I then presented an argument showing that displacement of the RDP by the neoliberal GEAR policy paved the way for a new way of reproducing marginalisation and exclusion. I provided evidence to show that the status of the historically-disadvantaged, marginalised and oppressed has not changed, and that their collective oppression in the *apartheid* era compares well with their collective oppression in the post-*apartheid* era. Adult education is therefore used by the state to advance the interests of capital through its human resource development strategy while, at the same time, undermining the possibilities presented by ABE as an emancipatory project fostering a just social order. I have used examples of failed government projects as well as projects within business and industry to support my argument. I have also tried to show that, although the instrumentalist tradition has grown to become the dominant ideological force in shaping education and training programmes, workers without ten years of schooling remain threatened by a system that demands higher levels of education. If current trends continue, they will ultimately be retrenched. In conclusion, I hope that this perspective on the reproduction of marginalisation and exclusion encourages adult educators to revisit our view of ‘adult education as the stepsister’ and to find the tools of analysis that will advance our understanding of adult education in a dehumanising world.

## References

Aitchison, J.J.W. 1998. *Literacy and ABE and Training in South Africa: a Quick survey*. Paper presented to national meeting, 'Reflect and strategise on the challenges facing the field of Adult Education', held on 13 June 1998 in Johannesburg.

Aitchison, J.J.W. 1999. Literacy and ABE and Training in South Africa: a Quick survey. *Adult education and development*. Vol. 53, pp. 99-120.

Aitchison, J.J.W. 2000. *A concise map of the present situation in ABE*. Paper presented at the Project Literacy/European Union Special Project National Conference, 'ABE on Trial', at Midrand, 28-29 November.

Aitchison, J.J.W., Houghton, T., Baatjes, I. *et al.* 2000. *University of Natal survey of ABE and Training: South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Centre for Adult Education, University of Natal.

Asmal, K. 1999. Statement in the National Assembly by the Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, MP, on the occasion of International Literacy Day, 8 September 1999.

[http://education.pwv.gov.za/Media\\_Statements/Aug99/Illiteracy.html](http://education.pwv.gov.za/Media_Statements/Aug99/Illiteracy.html)

Baatjes, I. 2002. *A baseline study of ABE in the Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services Sector: a Strategy for ABE provision and delivery*. MERSETA. Johannesburg.

Baatjes, I. 1992. Adult literacy: a social policy for the Mass Democratic Movement of South Africa. MA Thesis. Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada.

Baatjes, I., John, V., and Aitchison, J.J.W. 1999. *Volunteerism in ABE: Can it work?* Paper presented at the Kenton Conference, Breakwater Lodge, Ballito.

Baatjes, I., Aitchison, J.J.W. and John, V. 2001. *A baseline study of ABE in the Mining and Minerals Sector: Improving provision and delivery*. Johannesburg: Mining Qualifications Authority.

Baatjes, I., Harley, A. and Land, S., with Aitchison, J.J.W., Thomson, C. and Sader, S. 2002. *Masifunde Sonke: the State of literacy in South Africa*. Pretoria: Department of Education.

Bengu, S. 1996. Speech delivered on International Literacy Day, 8 September 1996, Kimberley.

Bond, P. 2000. *Elite transitions: From Apartheid to neoliberalism in South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.

Bond, P. 2001. *Against global apartheid: South Africa meets the World Bank, IMF and International Finance*. Lansdowne: University of Cape Town Press.

Burbules, N.C. and Torres, C.A. (Eds.). 2000. *Globalisation and education: Critical perspectives*. London: Routledge.

Castle, J. 1999. Priority 2: We must break the back of illiteracy among adults and youth in five years. In: Motala, S., Vally, S. and Modiba, M. (Eds.). 1999. *A call to action. A review of Minister K. Asmal's educational priorities. Quarterly Review of Education and Training in South Africa*. 15 September 1999, 6(3): 8-11

Collins, M. 1991. *Adult Education as vocation: a Critical role for the adult educator*. London: Routledge.

Department of Education. 1995. *A national ABE and training framework: Interim guidelines. September 1995*. Pretoria: Department of Education, Directorate: Adult Basic, Community Education and Training.

Department of Education. 1996. *Policy guidelines 2000: ABE and Training in South Africa*. Pretoria: Department of Education.

Department of Education. 1997. *A national multi-year implementation plan for Adult Education and Training: Provision and accreditation. October 1997*. Pretoria: Department of Education, Directorate Adult Education and Training.

Department of Education. 1997. *Conditions of service for adult educators employed in public adult learning centres*. Pretoria: Department of Education.

Department of Education. 1997. *Policy document on ABE and Training. October 1997*. Pretoria: Department of Education, Directorate: Adult Education and Training.

Department of Labour. 2001. *Implementing the National Skills Development Strategy: the Role of Sector Education and Training Authorities and the Department of Labour's provincial offices*. Department of Labour.

Department of Labour. 2001. *National Skills Development Strategy: Setting the context*. Department of Labour.

Department of Labour. 2001. *An introduction to the Skills Development Strategy*. Department of Labour.

Department of Labour. 2001. *The National Skills Development Strategy*. Department of Labour.

Department of Education. 2000. *Implementation plan for Tirisano*. Department of Education: Pretoria.

Department of Labour. 2001. *Human resource development strategy for South Africa: a Nation at work for a better life for all*. Pretoria: Department of Labour.

Department of Labour. 2001. *The National Skills Development Strategy: Skills for productive citizenship for all*. Pretoria: Department of Labour.

Foley, G. 1994. Adult Education and capitalist reorganisation. *Studies in the Education of Adults* 26(2): 121-124.

Hall, E., van Zyl, E. and Erasmus, J. 2000. *Skills analysis in the Mining and Mineral Sector*. Johannesburg: Mining Qualifications Authority.

Harley, A. and Baatjes, I. *et al.* 2000. Socio-economic needs analysis of the Midlands Region to establish responsive programmes for youth and adults: a Report on research done for the iNdlovu Partnership for Lifelong Learning. Pietermaritzburg: Centre for Adult Education.

Harley, A., Aitchison, J.J.W., Lyster, E. and Land, S. *et al.* 1995. *A survey of ABE in South Africa in the 90s*. Johannesburg: SACHED Books.

Kraak, A., Paterson, A., Visser, M., and Tustin, D. 2000. *Baseline survey of industrial training in South Africa*. Human Science Research Council: Pretoria.

Mkhatshwa, S. 1997. Towards the first illiteracy-free province in South Africa. Paper presented at the North West Province ABE Conference. Mafikeng.

O'Brien, M. 1984. The commatization of women: Patriarchical fetishism in the sociology of education. *Interchange* 15(2): 43-60.

Rifkin, J. 1995. *The end of work*. London: Penguin Books.

Sheared, V. and Sissel, P.A. (Eds.). 2001. *Making space: Merging theory and practice in Adult Education*. London: Bergin and Garvey.

Torres, C.A 1991. *The Politics of Non-formal Education in Latin America*. New York: Prager.

UNESCO. 1997. *Adult Education in a polarised world: Education for all. Status and trends*. Paris: UNESCO.

Welton, M. (Ed.). 1993. *In defence of the lifeworld*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Youngman, F. 1986. *Adult Education as socialist pedagogy*. London: Croom Helm.

Youngman, F. 2000. *The political economy of Adult Education and Development*. London: Zed Books.

## Acts of Parliament

The Constitution of South Africa (Act No. 108 of 1996).

Skills Development Act (Act No. 57 of 1998).

Skills Development Levies Act (Act No. 9 of 1999).

Adult Basic Education and Training Act (Act No. 52 of 2000).

---

Ivor Baatjes  
Centre for Adult Education  
School of Education, Training and Development  
University of Natal  
Pietermaritzburg

[Baatjes@nu.ac](mailto:Baatjes@nu.ac)