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# “The time is burning”: The right of adults to basic education in South Africa

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## Abstract

The government has neglected the constitutional right of adults to basic education over the last decade. This paper examines the bases for holding the government to account in the constitutional court for its performance. It examines the effectiveness of government responses to adult illiteracy since 1994, drawing on a range of policy documents, statistics, scholarly reviews and other data. It outlines two lines of argument which might be pursued against the government: its underspending on adult basic education, and its failure to cater for adults for whom the formal ABET system is not accessible. On a constructive note, it calls for a comprehensive approach to the challenges of adult basic education, outlining key principles that might inform such an approach as well as alternative models of provision.

### **Education**

29.(1) Everyone has the right –  
to a basic education, including adult basic education; and to further  
education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make  
progressively available and accessible.  
(Chapter 2, Bill of Rights, Constitution of the Republic of South Africa).

The time is burning and the multitudes continue to wait.  
(Professor H.S. Bhola)

## **Introduction**

The words of Professor H. S. Bhola, renowned Indian literacy expert and global campaigner for Adult Basic Education and literacy, were addressed to an international conference on Adult Basic and Literacy Education in Pietermaritzburg. They resonated with delegates from throughout the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, and especially with the large South African contingent. This paper revisits the right of South African adults to basic education, a right which is enshrined in our constitution but so often gets eclipsed in the glare of publicity surrounding Matric results and new intakes of Grade Ones. With the overwhelming emphasis on formal schooling in South Africa, the education of those who are either too young or too old to attend school is scandalously neglected. If Early Childhood Development is the stepdaughter of the education system, Adult Basic Education is the poor sister, and thus far golden slippers have been few and far between.

In an article in the *Journal of Education*, Aitchison (2003, p. 168) posits the close association between adult education and the political transformation of South Africa, and writes of “a pervasive sadness” concerning the failure of “the hoped for adult education renaissance” in the post-apartheid era. In the same volume Baatjes (2003, p. 179) focuses on the “marginalisation and exclusion” of the poor in South Africa and argues that an “instrumentalist tradition” in adult basic education contributes to this marginalisation. This article picks up some of these themes in exploring basic education for adults as a constitutional right in South Africa.

I begin with a brief examination of the state of adult basic education and literacy in South Africa. This provides a context for the discussion that follows. I then focus on the reasons for the neglect of ABE, the legal ramifications of this neglect regarding the constitutional right of adults to basic education, and possible ways forward. I argue in this article that the

government is failing to meet its constitutional obligation in providing adult basic education. I discuss why basic education is a constitutional right in the first place, and why it is imperative for national development in general, and poverty alleviation in particular, that the government deal with adult basic education as a priority. I consider the possible arguments that might be presented in a case against the government regarding its violation of adults' right to basic education. I conclude by arguing for a comprehensive national strategy to deal with adult basic education in all its facets, and provide some models of adult basic education provision that fall outside the conventional format of public adult learning centres.

## Defining Adult Basic Education

What do we mean by Adult Basic Education (ABE)<sup>5</sup>? Who an adult is for the purposes of basic education has been variously described (*Adult Basic Education and Training Act*, 2000; Aitchison, 1999). Since my focus is the constitutional right to adult basic education in South Africa, I take an adult to be fifteen years and older, not engaged in formal schooling or higher education and with an educational level of less than grade 9. "Educational level" should be taken here as qualitative (a standard of education achieved) rather than quantitative (a grade reached): because of the appalling standard on apartheid schooling, and the continuing dysfunction of schools in the democratic era, many adult learners who have nine years of schooling still require basic education.

In the formal context of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), ABE refers to all learning programmes for adults from levels 1 to 4, where level 4 is equivalent to grade 9 in public schools or level 1 on the NQF (*Adult Basic Education and Training Act* No 52 of 2000, p. 6). In other words, ABE is equated with nine years of schooling. It includes the two fundamental learning areas of Language, Literacy and Communications and Numeracy/ Mathematical Literacy, as well as a growing number of core learning areas, including Natural Science, Human and Social Sciences, Economic and Management Science, and Technology; and learning areas in the elective category which include Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMME), Tourism, Agricultural Science and Ancillary Health Care.

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<sup>5</sup> The Constitution of South Africa (1996) uses the term Adult Basic Education and documents in the early 1990s tended to use this formulation. Later documents, reflecting an official preoccupation with linking Education and Training, included a "T" for Training, and ABE became ABET. This article uses the term Adult Basic Education or ABE to refer to the constitutional right, and ABET in contexts where a policy and/or systemic emphasis is appropriate.

## The state of Adult Basic and Literacy Education

While the emphasis on formal schooling is absolutely justified and necessary, the neglect of adult literacy is not. Professor Bhola's striking imagery of the times burning suggests a devastating waste of human potential. While development in the coming decades depends on today's school children, development today depends on today's adults. Of course, the high rate of functional illiteracy among South African adults is a legacy of apartheid and the deliberate policy of inferior educational provision for black people. It is important not to lose sight of the effects of Verwoerd's *Bantu Education Act* (1953) and its later modifications, which stunted the education of generations of learners. In addition, the struggle against Bantu Education and state repression of the student movement seriously disrupted and even curtailed the education of many of today's adults (See French, 1992). Given this legacy, it was imperative that the new democratic government effectively address the issue of functional illiteracy among adults.

Drawing on the 1991 Census, the National Education Policy Report on *Adult Basic Education* (1992, p. 5), intended to inform post-apartheid education policy, stated that there were "about 15 million people without a basic schooling". Of This 15 million, about 4,5 million were illiterate. The vast majority of the 15 million semi-literate and illiterate people were black African, with more living in rural than urban areas. There was little gender variation in rates of illiteracy. A second NEPI report on *Adult Education* (1993, p.10) made a strong link between lack of education and economic position: "Many, perhaps more than half, are school dropouts, unemployed, or underemployed in informal sector activities". Ten years on, how has the government responded to the challenge of adult basic education arising from decades of apartheid neglect? The answer is: not well.

The government's initial Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP) held out great promise for national development in general and adult basic education in particular. The RDP was a redistributive socio-economic policy with five-year targets to *inter alia*: build a million low-cost houses; electrify 2.5 million houses; create 200 000 jobs annually; redistribute 30% of the agricultural land; and drive massive education initiatives. The RDP recognised the role of ABE in achieving its goals, calling for a "coherent human resource development policy" focusing on skills acquisition and ABE (*RDP White Paper, Government Gazette, No. 16085, p.26*).

In retrospect, the RDP was too ambitious in its goals, given the financial resources available and the government's own capacity to deliver. *The National Multi-year implementation plan for Adult Education and Training* (1997) of the Department of Education estimated that it would require R18

billion to bring ABE programmes to 3 million illiterate and under-educated adults (Department of Education, 1997). In reality, ABE received R50 million in international donor-sourced funding for a literacy campaign during the RDP era (Baatjes, 2003, p187). The government fell similarly short in its other development goals, and the RDP was soon replaced by the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy, a neoliberal macroeconomic policy with an emphasis on economic growth and global competitiveness.

Nearly ten years after the NEPI study, the 2001 census data indicates that approximately 48% of the South African adult population (or 14.6 million adults) had less than 9 years of schooling and 16% (4.7million adults) had never been to school (Aitchison, 2005; Baatjes, 2003, p. 191; UNESCO, 1999; United Nations Development Programme, 2000; Statistics South Africa, 2003). Although there is some discrepancy between different statistical sources, the general trend is unmistakable: more or less the same numbers of people are undereducated or illiterate as was the case ten years ago. A close comparison of the 1996 and 2001 census figures indicates that adult education levels are either remaining static or actually declining. The number of adults with no schooling at all increased by 516,833 between 1996 and 2001. This increase was evident in all provinces except the Northern Cape, where there was a slight decrease. The 2001 census also indicates that the differentiation between functionally illiterate adult men and women is increasing. In actual and percentage terms, there are more women with no schooling in 2001 than in 1996 (Harley, 2003; Statistics South Africa, 1999b; Statistics South Africa, 2003). The number of Public Adult Learning Centres operating has dropped from 1440 to 998 over the last 7 years. These figures indicate that there has been no significant progress in reducing adult illiteracy since the end of the apartheid era. Tellingly, ABET receives less than 1% of the education budget.

Regional and class factors also intersect in significant ways with the profile of illiteracy in South Africa. The October Household Survey of 1999 showed that certain provinces had much higher illiteracy rates than others (Statistics South Africa, 1999a). While only about 5% of the population aged 20 or older in Gauteng had no schooling, the figures were 17% for the Eastern Cape, 14% for KwaZulu-Natal, 20% for Mpumalanga and 34% for Limpopo Province. The statistics regarding illiteracy are striking when examined through the lens of economic activity. A 1994 study shows that 32% of formally employed workers had less than 9 years of schooling. On the other hand, the figures were 57% for unemployed adults, 67% for the informally employed and 80% for those employed in the agricultural sector (BMI, 1994). The 1999 October Household Survey confirmed this trend: 90.7% of non-urban people had no training (Statistics South Africa, 1999a). The implication is that there is a strong link between poverty and illiteracy, particularly rural poverty. Those

who are illiterate are likely to be poor, either unemployed or involved in informal or agricultural work. This is not to suggest that illiteracy causes poverty, but that the two phenomena are closely associated: “the maps of illiteracy, poverty and unemployment are beginning to mirror each other” (Baatjes *et al*, 2002, p. 1).

Statistics, by their very nature, are an abstraction of reality. They transform real lives into ciphers. While this is useful for the purposes of broad national profiling and policy development, it loses the existential dimension of lived reality. Since an illiterate adult is likely to be either unemployed or underemployed and to live in poor circumstances, such as an informal settlement or a rural area, and since most adults who attend existing Public Adult Learning Centres are women, a concrete example might help to sharpen our focus. Doris Mthethwa is seventy years old and lives in Ntunjambili, a rural area in the Tugela valley near Kranskop in KwaZulu-Natal (Sunday Times, 2002; Greytown Gazette, 2002). She walks more than a kilometer a day to fetch water, carrying a drum on her head. She does not receive a pension. Four years previously a councillor offered to help her get one; he took a copy of her identity document, but she is still waiting. She lives with her daughter who is the breadwinner, doing menial tasks in the district wherever she can find them. Her two grandchildren, aged five and seven, do not attend crèche or school.

This is by no means an isolated example – “Sadly,” the reporter writes, “this story is repeated time and time again as one wanders up and down the roads and paths of ... Ntunjambili” (Greytown Gazette, 2002, p1). Doris Mthethwa does not have access to a public adult learning centre, even if she wanted to attend formal classes. With unemployment in South Africa estimated at 37% in 2000 and 17% of the population living in absolute poverty, according to the United Nations Human Poverty Index (United Nations Development Programme, 2000), the story is a common one not only in Kranskop but across the country. The poverty indices for the Northern Province (28.34%), Eastern Cape (23.34%), Mpumalanga (21.71%) and KwaZulu-Natal (21.12%) are especially high.

## Reading the times

Why is Adult Basic Education in such a parlous state just at a time in our history when we need to engage all our human resources optimally? South Africa has a strong enabling legislative framework for adult basic education and training. Besides the inclusion of adult basic education as a constitutional right, the *Adult Basic Education and Training Act* (2000) sets out regulations for ABET and provides for the establishment, governance and funding of

public and private adult learning centres, as well as for quality assurance within the centres; the *South African Qualifications Authority Act* (1995) provides for a qualifications framework which includes ABET; and the *Skills Development Act* (1998) provides for a system of levies to fund workplace learning. A *National multi-year implementation plan for adult basic education and training* (1997) spells out in great detail the responsibilities of the government for implementing the right. In addition, the government has an infrastructure of Public Adult Learning Centres run by the provincial departments of education and Sectoral Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) under the jurisdiction of the Department of Labour to effect the implementation of ABET. Whether this infrastructure is adequate for addressing the needs of poor people in rural areas and on the margins of the cities is debatable and will be addressed below.

There is verbal recognition within government of the urgent need to tackle illiteracy and to develop human resources in South Africa. In 1999 the new Minister of Education announced the government's intention to "break the back of illiteracy" and launched a new literacy campaign known as the South African National Literacy Initiative to effect this (Asmal, 1999). At the beginning of 2002, President Thabo Mbeki announced the *Human Resource Development Strategy for South Africa*. The purpose of the strategy is to provide a plan to ensure that people are equipped to participate fully in society and to be able to find and create work, and to benefit fairly from it (Department of Labour, 2004). In 2005 there have been some promising developments in the ABET field at the level of ministerial acknowledgement of the problems and the failures of previous ABET campaigns and initiatives. The National Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, has called for a Task Team to review ABET policy and implementation. At a provincial level, the MEC for Education in KwaZulu-Natal, Ina Cronje, recently held an "ABET Imbizo" and pledged the province to eradicating illiteracy in three years (Macfarlane, 2005). While this kind of attention at a ministerial level is welcome and political will is a key component of any effective initiative to reduce illiteracy, it remains unclear how rhetoric will be translated into practice; in particular, whether and how such initiatives will be funded. Thus South Africa has the legislative framework, the infrastructure and, apparently, the political will to implement an effective adult basic education strategy. However, the record over the last decade raises grave doubts about whether there will be any significant reduction of adult illiteracy in the next ten years – an untenable state of affairs for a country of South Africa's resources, democratic character and leadership profile on the continent and internationally.

An analysis of the Preamble of the *Adult Basic Education and Training Act* of 2000 is revealing in highlighting some of the contending forces within ABET. The government's discourse around ABET draws on the language of democracy, redress and human rights which is consistent with adult basic education as a constitutional *right*. However, other clauses indicate that ABET is viewed as an instrument in the service of broader needs and interests. Its purpose is, *inter alia*, to:

- RESTRUCTURE AND TRANSFORM programmes and centres to respond better to the human resources, economic and development needs of the Republic;
- ADVANCE strategic priorities determined by national policy directives at all levels of governance and management within the adult basic education and training sector;
- RESPOND to the needs of the Republic and the labour market and of the communities served by the centres;
- COMPLEMENT the Skills Development Strategy in co-operation with the Department of Labour.

Is the purpose of ABET primarily to serve the needs of the poor and their communities or to service the GEAR policy within the context of globalization? The argument that these two purposes are not mutually exclusive is dubious since unemployment and the gap between rich and poor have increased during the GEAR era (Bond, 2002; IDASA 2002). The Act employs both discourses. Phrases such as "human rights", "democracy", "access", "the marginalised", "the needs of communities", "equality" and "freedom" suggest a concept of development which is about building civil society and empowering people within their communities. Other phrases, such as "human resources" and "the labour market" can be linked to a discourse of human resource development with its values of competitiveness, productivity and efficiency within the global market. Since both discourses exist within the Act, what is the relation between them? Are they complementary, or does an instrumental focus on economic "strategic priorities determined by national policy directives" – GEAR, for example – lead to the subjugation of personal and community development needs?

I argue that, in practice, despite the human rights discourse within the ABET Act and numerous other policy statements and plans, the government focuses on formal and instrumental conceptions of basic education. The government, with its GEAR policy, has placed the emphasis on global competitiveness and on an effective workforce. This is evidenced by the availability of resources



for adult basic education within the formal sector of the economy as part of Skills Development Plans: funding comes through the Skills Development Levy and infrastructure through the Sectoral Education and Training Authorities. The benefit of this is that those adults who need basic education and happen to have employment in the formal sector are well positioned to advance. As the *Skills Development Act* (1998) begins to take off, many workers stand to improve their education.

However, most illiterate and semi-literate adults are unemployed or informally employed. The danger of the *Skills Development Act* is that it could reinforce the gulf between an elite workforce and the mass of the unemployed, while allowing the government to claim that it is addressing the issue. The challenge for those involved in the ABE sector is to effect a re-channelling of unclaimed funds that are damming up in SETA coffers and the National Skills Fund to create and sustain worthwhile ABE initiatives among the poor, particularly in rural communities and informal settlements.

The government and the private sector are not the only role-players in the ABE field. The NGO sector, which carried the torch for literacy work during the era of apartheid, has been decimated by the funding squeeze over the last ten years. Of the 150 NGOs that operated in the ABE sector in 1997, only 38 were functional in 2000 (Baatjes, 2003, p.191). Those NGOs that remain are often primarily occupied with surviving: the innovative and creative work which characterised literacy NGOs in the 1980s has been replaced by tender-chasing and side-swiping in the race for the chequed flag. Despite this, the NGO sector retains a core of highly capable ABE practitioners and invaluable funds of experience which should be properly utilised. In addition, a very wide range of cash-strapped but committed community-based organisations exists which could play a role in integrating literacy and development at a local level.

How do we move forward? Literacy campaigns have not worked effectively in South Africa over the last seven years. Multi-year Implementation Plans with detailed targets have been drawn up but never implemented. Provincial ABET Councils have faded away. The number of Public Adult Learning Centres has diminished over the last seven years. Many NGOs working in the literacy field have closed down. These setbacks in the literacy field appear to be related to intersecting factors such as lack of capacity in the field, inadequate funding and poor vision. Determined adult learners continue to attend classes and dedicated educators to teach them, but learner numbers are far below what the development of our country and our people requires.

## Why is adult basic education a constitutional right?

A discussion of why ABE is a constitutional right is in order since ABE is so often subordinated to the right of children to basic education. I will focus on four aspects: first, ABE as a response to the historical legacy of apartheid deprivation; second, ABE as an essential contribution to personal and community development; third, ABE as a component of democratic citizenship and civic participation; and fourth, ABE as an enabling mechanism in poverty alleviation and economic development.

### Adult Basic Education as redress

As argued above, millions of adults were deprived of an adequate education as children because of the poor quality and limited scale of apartheid education. Therefore, the value of redress underpins the constitutional right to adult basic education. It is *just* that uneducated and poorly educated adults should have access to adult basic education because apartheid denied them in the past. The argument that adults are too old to learn and that we should concentrate on educating children for the future, besides being fallacious on educational grounds, glosses over the systematic deprivation of adults in the past and the obligation of the democratic state to correct this situation.

### Adult Basic Education as personal and community development

There is strong evidence that adult basic education has the ability to transform learners' sense of themselves, to build their confidence and to equip them to participate actively in their communities. Lauglo (2001), in his research on ABE in Sub-Saharan Africa, shows the link between adult basic education and improved family nutrition, health, and children's schooling; adult basic education for women in particular has a beneficial effect for the family and children. In addition, adult basic education has spin-offs for local development projects and livelihoods.

### Adult Basic Education and democracy

Land (2001, p. 1) argues that, for many South Africans, the change from apartheid to the present democratic dispensation continues to mean very little. "Constitutional rights are hollow for many of our people who do not know that they have these rights, or how to exercise them, or do not understand the duties that naturally accompany them." Adult basic education which is clearly

linked to civic literacy, not only to the right to, and mechanics of, voting but civic participation more broadly, has a role to play in strengthening democracy in South Africa. Such a focus could include consumer education regarding local government services; as well as accessing pensions, child support grants and disability grants.

## Adult Basic Education and sustainable livelihoods

There is evidence that literacy has a beneficial effect on the ability of people to initiate and develop livelihoods and co-operatives. This is particularly the case with development programmes that incorporate literacy into their activities in an integrated way (Oxenham *et al*, 2002). Such a focus should include context-specific skills, for example: budgeting; costing and pricing; developing a curriculum vita; banking; applying for employment; and keeping records.

## Testing the constitutional right to adult basic education

Given the government's failure to deliver adequately on adult basic education over the last decade, the strategic advantages of taking the government to court over the violation of the constitutional right to adult basic education are potentially compelling. These might include:

- Focussing public attention on, and raising awareness about, the neglected area of adult basic education in South Africa
- Mobilizing various progressive forces in the ABE field, including learners groups, teachers' unions, NGOs, community organizations, universities and social movements, around a single issue.
- Clearing the ground for a more comprehensive and flexible strategy for ABE provision in South Africa.
- Creating a platform from which to lobby for greater resource allocation for ABE.

In this section I examine two arguments which might be presented to support a case against the government for violating the right of adults to basic education. The first argument concerns the allocation for ABE within the education budget. The second argument concerns the form of ABE which the government provides. Both arguments are premised on the assumption that adult basic education is a right in and of itself. As a right, basic education for adults is not primarily a tool for economic growth or for instrumentalist

purposes, but rather a claim for dignity and self-respect. However, the provision of adult basic education can contribute to the advancement of the public good as an aspect of poverty alleviation, the strengthening of democracy, building the self-esteem of citizens and developing communities. While adult basic education may achieve some or all of these benefits for different groups of adult learners in different contexts, all adults have a right to it in itself.

***Argument 1: Government funding for ABET is inadequate as a proportion of the education budget. This reflects its lack of commitment to meeting its constitutional obligation to provide adult basic education.***

Government funding for adult basic education is less than 1% of the total education budget in a country where four and a half million adults have never been to school. Provincial governments allocate the money they receive from the national education budget. Thus, while the overall amount for ABE might increase at a national level (Asmal, 2002), this does not necessarily translate into increased provincial spending for ABET, especially in percentage terms. In fact, IDASA's review of provincial education budgets starkly indicates the neglect and actual decline of ABET as a priority in government spending. Seven of the provinces consistently allocate well below 1% for Adult Basic Education and Training: Eastern Cape and Free State, for example, provide provincial estimates of 0.2% for ABET in their 2003/2004 and 2004/2005 budgets, declining from 1% (Eastern Cape) and 1.5% (Free State) in 2001/2002. Only Mpumalanga (1.1%) and North West (1.2%) exceed 1% in their estimates for the period 2003-2005. Overall, provincial estimates of expenditure for ABET decline from 0.8% in 2002/2003 to 0.5% in 2004/2005 (IDASA, 2002).

The constitution points out that, regarding the right of adults to basic education, the state must, *through reasonable measures, make[it] progressively available and accessible*. What is a reasonable allocation for adult basic education? If one takes as a yardstick for what is reasonable the Dakar Framework's target of improving levels of adult literacy by 50% by 2015 (World Education Forum, 2000) – a target which South Africa accepted by signing the framework – the government's present levels of provision leave it far short. It would need to educate approximately 7 million adults over thirteen years in order to improve the functional literacy of 50% of the illiterate and semi-literate population. At present approximately 260 000 adult learners are enrolled in ABET-level classes. Minimally, the South African government and other ABET providers would need to double the enrolment of adult learners, to about 575,000 per year, and therefore proportionately increase budgetary allocations to adult basic education, to bring the target within reach.

The government might argue that literacy levels will improve naturally as illiterate adults get older and die and as more children pass through the education system. This argument fails to take into account the number of children who are out of school: in 1996 about 16% of children between the ages of 6 and 14 were not in school (Statistics South Africa, 1999a). This amounts to 1.2 million children compared to approximately 7.5 million children in primary school. If this trend continues the rate of adult illiteracy will also continue. The 2001 Census confirms that the actual number of adults who have never been to school has increased since 1996. The state cannot rely solely on the school system to reduce adult illiteracy through attrition, because unschooled children are swelling the ranks of illiterate adults as they grow up.

The enrolment figures for ABE since 1994 indicate that the state is not making ABE progressively available and accessible. If it were, the number of learners and the number of public adult learning centres would be increasing. Instead learner numbers remain static and the number of public adult learning centres has declined (French, 2002).

Potential obstacles to adopting the line of argument that government funding of ABET is inadequate include the quality of statistics available regarding public adult learning centres and learner enrolments. Department of Education reports tend to lump together ABET learners with Further Education and Training learners who are repeating their matric, thus inflating the enrolment figures for ABET (Aitchison, 2002; Department of Education, 2001). There are wide discrepancies between sources regarding the number of PALCs, with Department of Education figures higher than those from the Human Sciences Research Council and the ETDP. An argument regarding whether the government is fulfilling its obligation to provide adult basic education could hinge on which statistics are most credible. Another obstacle could be the constitutional court's possible reluctance to adjudicate on spending priorities and budget proportions in regard to adult basic education, as opposed to the principle of providing adult basic education as a constitutional right.

In addition, there are difficulties in determining actual government spending on ABET. The government states that it has "increased resources for literacy and adult education" and that "the education community" spent R248 million on ABET in 2001, increasing to R822 million in 2002 with a projection of R1.2 billion by 2004 (Asmal, 2002, p. 4). These are sizeable increases in anyone's reckoning. However, it is unclear whether the government is including the SETAs and other government departments within the ambit of "the education community" or whether these increases are allocated to the Department of Education. If the former is the case, the money is directed at those involved in formal employment and not at the poor and unemployed. Again, an argument against the state would need to base itself on accurate and

detailed accounts of state spending on ABET, and these are not easy to compile.

Finally, Argument 1 would need to show that particular learners or communities who require ABET are not receiving it. This is likely given the numbers of adults who have never attended school (approximately 4.5 million) and who have less than Grade 9 (approximately 10 million). However, those who prepare the constitutional case would need to develop case studies of such learners and communities and show that the state is not meeting their educational needs. One source of information would be applications from schools and communities to provincial education departments requesting that PALCs be established.

***Argument 2: government provision of adult basic education within the formal system does not cater for a significant proportion of potential adult learners for whom the system is not accessible. This excludes millions of adults from learning and therefore violates clause 29.(1)a. of the Constitution: Everyone has the right to basic education including adult basic education.***

It could be argued that the formal configuration of ABET in relation to the National Qualifications framework, its location predominantly in schools and formal workplaces, its use of school educators or corporate trainers and its focus on instrumental purposes, marginalize those who are outside the formal system: the poor; the unemployed; people with disabilities; the rural population; and their communities. In particular, the location of ABE within Public Adult Learning Centres and workplace venues excludes:

- those who cannot afford to travel to Public Adult Learning Centres;
- those who do not have access to a centre because there are no centres in their areas;
- those who have no interest in a formal ABET qualification;
- those who face physical and psychological barriers to learning, such as adults with disabilities and adults whose school experience was so negative as to be a disincentive to further learning.

Since the constitution states that “*Everyone* has a right to basic education, including adult basic education”, the effective exclusion of a large percentage of people who fall outside the formal frame could be taken as a violation of this right.

One such category of people that is neglected by the ABET system is adults with disabilities (Rule, 2005). With their consent, adult with disabilities might

provide an example in the constitutional court of a social group that is largely excluded in practice from formal ABET provision. The *White Paper on an Integrated National Disability Strategy* (Office of the Deputy President, 1997), provides government departments with guidelines for the development of people with disabilities within inclusive environments, specifying, inter alia, "access to all institutions and services of the community, including education". Draft Guidelines for the implementation of this legislation include a section on Adult Basic Education and Training which urges "all ABET initiatives and programmes ... to take urgent steps to ensure redress and inclusion" of learners with disabilities" (Department of Education, 2002, p.200). There are recommendations regarding the establishment of Full Service ABET Centres accommodated by future Full Service Schools, as well as guidelines concerning needs assessment, inclusive curricula, assistive devices, Braille and South African Sign Language. In reality there are very few Public Adult Learning Centres – the Nduduzweni centre in Umlazi is an exception – which cater for adults with disabilities. Again, we are confronted with the spectre of progressive legislation with only a remote and rhetorical connection to actual implementation.

Neither the provision of ABE through Public Adult Learning Centres nor the running of literacy campaigns nor the inclusion of ABE in workplace skills plans is adequate in themselves to address the problem of functional illiteracy. Although these forms of delivery have a role to play, the strategy for ABE needs to be broader and more inclusive. In particular, it needs to take seriously the situation of poor people, especially in rural and peri-urban areas, and their development contexts.

## Towards a comprehensive strategy for ABE

We need a comprehensive and flexible strategy for adult basic education in South Africa which includes but moves beyond formal provision and mass campaigns. Although space does not permit a thorough consideration of such a strategy in this article, the following principles are pertinent:

- Contextualisation: it should accommodate a variety of modes and purposes of delivery suited to learner's contexts and resources, recognising that one size does not fit all.
- Integration: Literacy and numeracy practices need to be effectively and appropriately integrated with aspects such as income generation, democratic participation, family health and nutrition, and so on.

- Holism: Adults assume multiple and complex roles which might include those of breadwinner, parent, citizen, community member, religious adherent, employee or work-seeker, and so on. All of these roles are relevant to adult basic education and constitute opportunities for learning.
- Dialogue: ABE providers, including the state, business and the NGO sector, need to learn from one another's strengths and be open to constructive criticism at the levels of policy development and implementation.

### Alternative models of adult basic education

I have argued that it is necessary to move beyond an emphasis only on formal ABET provision in Public Adult Learning Centres in order to address adult illiteracy in South Africa. Five alternative models which have been tested in various contexts are outlined below. These models have various strengths and weaknesses; there is also considerable overlap among them. However, they hold the promise of situating adult basic education in relation to the immediate contexts and requirements of diverse adult learning constituencies.

### ABE and social movements

The call for private-public partnerships has become a cliché in South Africa. However, if we are to advance the cause of basic education in South Africa, such partnerships are crucial. Particularly in relation to poor people in rural and peri-urban areas, partnerships between government, social movements, development organisations and community structures could forge programmes that link literacy with development imperatives and have the capacity to generate local support. Social movements, such as the disability movement and the HIV/AIDS movement, are able to mobilize people. Development organisations, including ABET NGOs, could work with these social movements to develop literacy programmes that address their developmental needs. In KwaZulu-Natal, for example, the Enable Education, Training and Development Initiative links disabled people's organisations, welfare organisations and literacy organisations in an effort to provide appropriate ABE programmes for adult learners with disabilities (Natal ABE Support Agency, 2001). This partnership has begun to engage the state with a view to making the programme sustainable through state payment of educators and provision of materials. The state also is able to provide accreditation routes for learners if they choose a formal pathway. In this case, the state would play an enabling role rather than that of provider.



## ABE and livelihoods

Other joint initiatives could link up partners around livelihoods. Women's co-operatives with a focus on skills training and income generation could benefit from a partnership with literacy NGOs and small business development agencies, and perhaps the Department of Labour, in developing appropriate ABE strategies for women working in co-operatives. Here an integrated programme might link literacy and numeracy to business skills, craft skills and access to credit facilities. Such a partnership works on the premise that ABE is one piece of the puzzle which does not have much value unless it engages with other social imperatives: employment; income; solidarity; community upliftment, for example. The partnership between Project Literacy and the Department of Education in the Ikhwelo Poverty Relief Project provides a reference point here (Project Literacy, 2003). Research in African countries indicates that "organisations that are more concerned with livelihoods and other aspects of development seem to be better at designing and delivering effective combinations of livelihoods and literacy than organizations that are more focussed on literacy" (Oxenham, et al, 2002).

## ABE and democratic citizenship

Adult basic education has a key role to play in building and sustaining South Africa's new democracy. This role includes not only voter education but a broader focus on participative democracy in order to enhance learners' capacities as active citizens and to strengthen local structures of governance and delivery. Appropriate adult basic education is one of the factors that can enable people to participate on school governing bodies, in local development committees, community organisations and church groups. Such education could include meeting skills, organisational skills, discussion skills and analytical skills. An example of this kind of integrated education for democracy is the Human Rights, Development and Democracy Project in KwaZulu-Natal. This is a co-operative initiative of the Tembalethu Community Education Centre, an NGO which offers adult basic education classes at satellite centres in six rural areas in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, and the Centre for Adult Education of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The project includes adult basic education, democracy education, income generation and tutor development. The integration of these elements is a continuing challenge, but would be worth examining as a model for wider replication (Land, 2001).

### ABE and poverty alleviation

As the case study of the grandmothers from Ntunjambili in this article suggested, adult basic education is not necessarily a priority for people who are hungry. An approach which integrates adult education with poverty

alleviation holds some promise. An example of such an approach was the Working for the Coast project of the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism in the early 2000s (Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, 2003). This project combined the employment of poor people to clean and protect coastal areas with adult basic education, including entrepreneurship, and environmental education. The rationale was to equip participants with literacy, life skills and business skills so that they would no longer require poverty relief. This model requires further resources to test its effectiveness, but initial results were promising.

### ABE and family literacy

International and local research indicates that children have an advantage at school when they grow up in homes where parents are literate and reading materials are available. The Family Literacy Project, which operates literacy projects for caregivers in the Drakensberg region of KwaZulu-Natal, aims to improve the literacy levels of the caregivers while at the same time giving them information and support on how they can help their young children to develop early literacy skills. Research arising from the Family Literacy Project indicates that mothers who attended the programme were able to build the pre-literacy skills of their small children (Desmond, 2001). A wider replication of this model, and other models of family literacy that have been proved effective, could help to develop a culture of literacy within the family and strengthen the educational relation between caregivers and children. It could build on the provision of Early Childhood Development, using ECD sites and drawing on ECD practitioners, thus enhancing both ECD and ABET in local communities and family units.

### Conclusion

I have argued that the government, as the agent constitutionally responsible for the provision of adult basic education in South Africa, should be held to account for its record over the last decade in the constitutional court. ABE is a constitutional right for very good reasons. The legacy of apartheid is that millions of adults never had a chance to attend school, and millions of others did not complete their schooling. It is *just* that they should be given the opportunity; the government has a responsibility to provide it. The principles of redress and equity are crucial in this regard. A variety of statistical sources indicate that the adult literacy rate in South Africa has not improved significantly over the last ten years and that the government is therefore not fulfilling its constitutional obligation to make ABE available and accessible.

Provision of adult basic education through Public Adult Learning Centres should not be viewed as the only or even the best form of delivery. There is a need for a comprehensive strategy that embraces a variety of forms of delivery, both within and beyond state structures. The basic education needs of the urban and rural poor and unemployed, not only those of the formally employed workforce, should be attended to.

While not a panacea, adult basic education can contribute to personal and social development. It has a role to play in the workforce and in communities, and in the development of a strong, inclusive and participatory civil society. The cost of adult basic education amidst competing educational priorities is cited as a reason for its neglect, but the cost of its neglect is incalculable.

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