

TRANSFORMING ITSELF: PEOPLE'S EDUCATION FOR PEOPLE'S POWER AND SOCIETY IN SOUTH AFRICA

The educational struggle in South Africa goes back to well before the cataclysmic effects of the June 1976 riots. That date is useful, however, in marking the sharpening focus upon educational demands by black communities which have developed well beyond claims for parity (of whatever kind) between black and white education in South Africa. The position is now that education is seen as part of the process of liberation – which is the achievement of a single, non-racial and democratic state – and that education should be wholly reconstituted so as to be appropriate to that future South Africa.

People's Education for People's Power¹ took form barely a year ago at the conference called by the Soweto Parents' Crisis Committee in December 1985.² Since then, the March 1986 Education Crisis Conference, public statements by the National Education Crisis Committee executive, articles collected for publication,³ papers at conferences⁴ and discussions at regional and local levels have begun to provide those interested with an increasingly substantial body of material upon which to reflect and act.⁵

It is obvious why there is the present desire to press vehemently for an alternative form of education for the whole country. People's Education for People's Power is but one manifestation of the political, cultural and intellectual ferment of our time. Out of the long-standing convictions about the utter inferiority of Bantu Education has emerged the wider vision of the need to restructure the bases of all education in this country. Furthermore, it is the government which is trapped in the consequences of its policies while the proponents of a non-racial democracy generate radical alternatives as part of the creation of a new society. It has been realized that the forms that the alternatives take are as important as their content, for the processes by which the new is evolved are as much a challenge to dominant concepts as the substance of education can be.

The indigenous nature of the enterprise must also be noted. The limits of exotic traditions can now be defined in relation to the accounts we can give of the realms we live in, accounts which are consonant with our knowledge and experience.

For example, but for the work of radical historiography during the last fifteen years,⁶ we would not have had the materials or the methodology with which to compile the kinds of history courses which are emerging from the People's Education Commission.⁷ Similarly, African and Southern African literature has only recently been studied systematically at colleges of education and universities and there are only now some resources available which make possible coherent thinking about that literature. Combined with these literary developments, current thinking about

language, especially in certain areas of applied linguistics, has opened possibilities for reconsidering the teaching of English in schools and elsewhere.

It would also be erroneous to consider education (of whatever kind in South Africa) without due acknowledgement of the connexions between early childhood and education:

One truth about South Africa . . . is to be found in understanding the relationship between unequal systems of formal learning and its systems of early generational nurturing. A fundamental of this evolution is a teaching and an early learning about human polarization, pain, injury, power and powerlessness.⁸

As Nasson's reminder indicates, formal education is but one aspect of the broader social experience. People's Education for People's Power acknowledges this overtly and deliberately. It redefines the role of the teacher in the community, and it acknowledges the relationships between educational issues and community concerns such as rent and consumer boycotts. By perceiving education in much wider terms than school- and institution-based programmes imply, the community groups developing People's Education for People's Power encourage thinking about the interests of the whole of society. This is in sharp contrast to the educational attitudes contained in the De Lange Committee's Report on the provision of education in a future South Africa, which proposes solutions to narrowly defined problems and needs as determined by the state, the private sector and industry as well as by technological interests.⁹

People's Education for People's Power is intended to apply to all South Africans, and cannot be distinguished from government by all South Africans in a unitary state. It is intended to replace education for exploitation and education for domestication.

Two subject committees have been at work to produce guidelines and materials for People's Education in 1987. The People's History committee has produced initial teaching packages. This material is based upon the view that present History teaching in South African schools "not only distorts the past but maims it. In content it is exclusive, elitist and shallow; it is silent or misleading on the historical experience of the majority of South Africans; it is heavily encrusted with racial, class and gender assumptions."¹⁰ Instead,

History in schools should seek to recover and comprehend the past in full; to recreate the experiences of ordinary men and women and not just the deeds and edicts of those in authority; to identify

the historic sources of dispossession, oppression and exploitation and to examine ways in which these have been resisted. The teaching of history should also encourage a critical, enquiring and participatory approach by students.¹¹

The proposals for People's English for People's Power include assisting all learners to

- understand the evils of apartheid and to think and speak in non-racial, non-sexist and non-elitist ways
- determine their own destinies and to free themselves from oppression
- play a creative role in the achievement of a non-racial, democratic South Africa
- use English effectively for their own purposes
- proceed with their studies.¹²

Discussion, performance and other participatory methods are central to this kind of English teaching and learning which aims at a high degree of flexible competence which is intended to give learners confidence in the context of the broadly transformative curriculum which will characterise the full implementation of People's Education for People's Power.

It is proposed that the content of People's English should include a broad range of resources and that the texts legitimately available for discussion and study should be drawn from

popular culture, biographies and life histories, oral literature including song, talks by people of the community and elsewhere, written literature from the whole world (including translations) but particularly from our time and place, newsletters, pamphlets, advertisements, public documents, speeches, essays, sermons and orations, cartoons, material from radio, television and film, texts from other subjects in the curriculum and the range of languages and dialects in South Africa.¹³

Thus students at school, for example, could study over say two years some South African poetry, plays, novels and short stories; they could read a nineteenth century British or twentieth century American novel; a Russian novel; they could discuss essays by Cabral, Fanon, Ghandi, Machel, Nkosi, Schreiner and Soyinka; they could examine the Freedom Charter, the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the Communist Manifesto; they could listen to talks by lawyers, health workers, journalists, union officials, clerics, writers and so on.

These are merely examples of the degree of access presupposed by current thinking about People's English. It is very unlikely that setworks will be like those prescribed by the DET in the past.

The NECC is currently setting up committees to generate proposals in two other educational areas. The first is that of political education, and this is intended to become a fully-fledged subject in the curriculum. This has antecedents in a subject like Civics and the idea has also been punted in the form of 'political literacy'.¹⁴ The second area is that of primary education. This is a vast field which needs urgent and intelligent attention paid to it.

At the heart of the conception and the evolution of People's Education lies the process of consultation. Consultation has characterised the method and the style of the National Education Crisis Committee as well as all the structures which have been set up for the implementation of its

programmes. One such structure is the formation of Parent-Teacher-Student associations at each school. These associations are dependent upon organized community/parent groups, teacher unions (preferably one, representing all teachers) and student representative councils. At local and regional level these PTSAs – composed of democratically elected, mandated and accountable representatives – are intended to guide the implementation of People's Education. Where the formation of PTSAs has proved difficult (because of school closures, emergency regulations and the like), the street, block and area committees reflect and represent the educational concerns of communities. Furthermore, student organizations, political movements and trade unions are becoming closely involved in the process of People's Education for People's Power.

Education and educational responsibility is thus neither the prerogative of children nor adults alone, and is not confined to schools and conventional institutions of learning. The engagement of all people and all spheres of activity in continual education is a particularly marked feature of People's Education.

The truism that education, no matter how conservative, is concerned at least partly with change is given sharp re-emphasis in People's Education because of the emerging focus upon **process** as its intrinsic mode. This is a matter of great complexity and its implications are vast. Central to the notion of process within People's Education are consultation and subsequent development. Then there is the understanding by the learner of process – the educational processes and procedures which involve learning and power; there is the understanding by workers of economic and productive processes so that they can contribute to union and industrial decisions as well as to broader community concerns; there is the education of parents – in adult education as well as a sense of the educational experiences of their children – in issues affecting their destinies. These are instances which can be extended. At other levels, process has implications for the following:

- * the role and function of the educator when learners are actively engaged in their own education
- * procedures most appropriate to such learning experiences methods, modes of presentation, learning resources
- * attitudes to knowledge – its origins, purposes, implications and responsibilities
- * the relationships of parts to the whole and the contexts of the whole
- * the interrelationships between the school, the factory, and education centres to the community
- * the relations of subjects to the curriculum
- * subject content and emphasis
- * learner involvement in the actual production of materials
- * the connexions between mental and manual labour
- * the role of the intellectual, the academic and the expert
- * the purpose and function of skills
- * methods of evaluation and means of accreditation.

The implementation of People's Education for People's Power faces daunting difficulties. The first year of People's Education has seen a massive struggle between the state and black communities for the control of schools. This struggle will continue and the state is using extensive powers to inhibit the consolidation of community-generated initiatives.¹⁵ Then there is the question of the

capacity of teachers to cope with the innovative nature of People's Education. Many teachers, whose education, training, experience and organization have not given them the confidence or resources to make radical changes to the patterns of their normal classroom work, will find the implementation of People's Education difficult.

The two major factors inhibiting the introduction of People's Education indicate absolutely the need for consultation, organization and the setting up of supportive structures. Parents, teachers and students will have to work closely together to make their demands inexorable and to produce the resources and attitudes to learning that are central to the process of People's Education. This is happening in certain areas of the country already.

REFERENCES

1. To refer to 'People's Education' only is to give the term and concept an easy assimilability which does not do justice to the notion of education implicit in the full phrase.
2. The resolutions passed at the December 1985 and March 1986 Education Crisis Conferences are important to study. They are conveniently available in **Perspectives in Education** v 9 no 1 July 1986 pp 60-70.
3. The availability of these articles has been retarded by the confiscation of materials by the police from NECC offices in November 1986.
4. Among those who have offered papers on People's Education at conferences are, David Adler, Yusuf Gabru, Michael Gardiner, Ken Hartshorne, Hilary Janks, Vusi Khanyile, Malcolm Mackenzie, Fanyane Mazibuko, Ian Moll, Eric Molobi, Frank Molteno.
5. I am aware of two post-graduate dissertations on People's Education being written at present and at least one college of education offers an elective course in this field. The HSRC is presently conducting an enquiry into People's Education.
6. This work has been carried out by particular Anglo-South African historians. For a clear account of the issues involved in exploring alternative approaches to history, see Belinda Bozzoli ed. 1983. **Town and Countryside in the Transvaal** Johannesburg, Ravan, especially pp 1-8. See too Samuel Raphael ed. 1981. **People's History and Socialist Theory** London.
7. This Commission was set up at the March 1986 Education Crisis Conference to give content to People's Education. It is currently led by Zwelakhe Sisulu, editor of **New Nation**. The Commission functions under the executive of the National Education Crisis Committee. At the time of writing, Mr Sisulu is in detention.
8. Nasson B. Perspectives on education in Burman S and Reynolds P eds. 1986. **Growing Up in a Divided Society** Johannesburg, Ravan p 95.

There is no doubt that the development and the implementation of People's Education for People's Power involves major political issues. But it is worth noting how fundamentally democratic and humane its basic thrust is. The educational systems officially in force in this country have failed utterly. In response to that acknowledged failure has arisen an educational movement which is generating theory, purpose, practical content and new social direction within the context of broad-based campaigns against all manifestations of apartheid. Compared to this, the ventures of corporate finance, the state's pretensions at educational equality, official enquiries and the timorous experiments of almost all private schooling are marginal and irrelevant. People's Education for People's Power is neither a slogan nor a rallying cry. It is a mass-based undertaking by an entire society to transform itself.□

9. See Gardiner M 1984 Redefining education: the White Paper on the provision of education. **Africa Perspective** 24, pp 3-19.
 10. NECC Press Release: 27 November 1986.
 11. Ibid
 12. NECC Press Release: 27 November 1986
 13. Ibid
 14. Professor Andre le Roux, graduation address, Johannesburg College of Education, 1 December 1986.
 15. Since June, with the sweeping powers granted by the emergency proclamation, the Government has begun a counter-offensive aimed at crippling the "alternative" community organizations and reconstructing the official administrative system . . . The news blackout is part of a total war that has been declared on the "alternative" organisations . . .
- Allister Sparks, **The Star** Wednesday December 17 1986 p 20.
- The detention of members of the executive of the NECC (**The Weekly Mail** December 19 1986) on December 11 1986 is clearly part of the state's programme to hamper the implementation of People's Education for People's Power.
- Thus too the regulations proclaimed in terms of the 1953 Public Safety Act on 29 December 1986, whereby the Director-General of Education and Training may prohibit, among many other things, the offering on any school or hostel premises (which include colleges of education) of any syllabus, work programme, class or course which has not been approved in terms of the (1979) Education Act
- No. 235 Public Safety Act (3/1953) : Regulations, Government Gazette no 10563
- The Government Gazette of 9 January 1987 (no 10585) prohibits the discussion or drawing up of alternative courses and syllabi by the NECC.

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