

Giving meaning to 'people's education'

THE NATIONAL Education Consultative Committee (NECC) has come a long way. No longer forced to operate underground, it seems set to play a significant role in policy generation for the not-quite-new South Africa. No longer under constant threat of detention, its leaders are consulted —

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The silent millions

those undecided voters who seem more likely to support one or other of the black-led organisations than the party which forced apartheid on the country.

The University of Cape Town's Professor Andre du Toit said earlier this year that the ANC could find it did not enjoy as widespread support as it believed.

"The ANC people are very sincere in thinking that they speak for 'the people' but I don't think they realise to what extent those they speak for are insiders. A lot of what they say may not have an appeal to those in rural backwaters, in hostels and on the fringes of society," he said in an interview with *Monitor*, the journal of the Human Rights Trust.

Indeed, no one knows how those people will exercise their right to vote for the first time, but in Du Toit's view an election early in the transitional process is urgently necessary.

"Having an election would sort out the issue of who represents what. Right now people are demonstrating support in the most undemocratic ways, violence. Unless we have an election early in the process, this violence will escalate," he said.

And that may well be a more important issue right now — and then both the NP and the ANC as well as other groups will have to take their chances and, hopefully, accept the verdict of the people, as was demonstrated in December last year, when the general secretary of the SA Communist Party, Chris Hani, said the ANC would accept the outcome of an election even if the Government won, and it expected the same from Mr De Klerk should the ANC win. ●

by
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after a fashion — by both Government and the private sector.

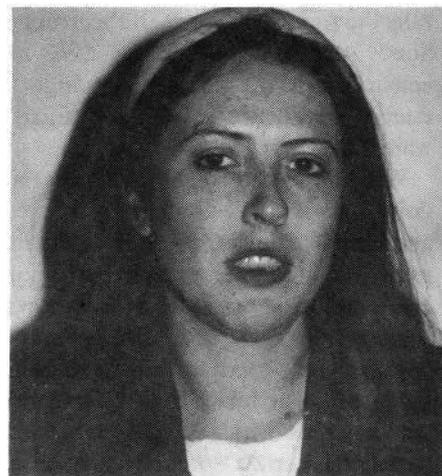
Where does this leave "people's education for people's power" — the rallying cry of the NECC in the dark days of the 1980's? Is "people's education" compatible with the new rhetoric of education for economic growth? Has "people's education" been reduced to a mere slogan?

The NECC, formed in 1985/1986, was most immediately a response to the crisis in black education. Where earlier opposition to Bantu Education had centred on material conditions, "people's education" attacked the very ideological underpinnings of State education.

The most coherent articulations of "people's education" stem from the early days of the NECC's existence: conference resolutions; keynote addresses; interviews with the NECC leadership. The central theme of "people's education" in those days was its rejection of the values of *both* apartheid education and capitalist education. Early conference resolutions set out the tenets of apartheid education, defining the position of the NECC in opposition to them.

Bantu Education was seen as divisive, designed to domesticate, indoctrinate, and to entrench not only apartheid but also capitalism. "People's education", by contrast, was to empower people as workers and citizens, enabling them to understand and resist their oppression. It was to equip them for participation in "the struggle" as well as for their role in a non-racial, democratic and *non-capitalist* system.

Because "people's education" was constructed largely in terms of its opposition to apartheid education, definition remained vague. It was clear enough what "people's education" was *against*; what it was *for* was not always certain. Its terms belonged more to the realm of sloganeering than to rational philosophical discourse. Revolutionary terms-of-trade such as "the people", "democracy", "empowerment" and "equality" are calls to arms, not concepts which are



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easily pinned down — or applied.

This lack of clarity should not be laid exclusively at the door of the NECC. Given the restrictions under which the organization operated, plus its conception of "people's education" as a *process* rather than a theory, little better could have been expected. Since February 2, 1990, however, our expectations have been justifiably higher: we have looked to the NECC to move from a reactive to a pro-active mode, to examine its values, and to provide policy options rather than mere attacks on existing policies.

The NECC has accepted the challenge; whether it has *met* (or can meet) the challenge is uncertain. The NECC's vision of "people's education" is increasingly of a system which will address both the aspirations of "the people" (whoever they may be) and the needs of the economy. Acknowledging that it has neglected the development of "people's education", the NECC has resolved to examine and articulate its values and to translate them into concrete policy options.

THESE TASKS have been addressed mainly under the auspices of the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI), which falls under the political arm of the NECC. While NEPI focusses on the identification of policy options, its researchers are aware that policy cannot be formulated in a value-free vacuum, and questions of value are addressed through its Principles and Frameworks Committee (PFC). The task of the PFC is to formulate a set of principles in the light of which policy options may be analysed: some twelve research groups tackle more practical policy matters.



The formation of NEPI is indicative of the NECC's increased awareness of the need to formulate a coherent set of values and to translate them into policy options which will address the needs of all sectors of society, including those of the economy.

Through NEPI the NECC is asking vital questions: how can a non-racial, non-sexist system of universal education be constructed? What do different economic strategies imply for education and training? How can adult literacy and numeracy be achieved? What should the balance be between academic and vocational education?

ALL THESE questions (and many more) must be asked if a future education system is to be able to redress past inequities and contribute to economic growth and development. These issues must be addressed within the wider context of economic and socio-political transformation: education policy cannot be formulated without reference to the society it serves, a point of which the NECC is well aware. Indeed, the "people's education" movement is probably *more* aware of this problem than are the Government or the private sector. The NECC is firmly rooted in the radical tradition, which proclaims that education cannot be discussed in isolation from the rest of society. Education cannot be discussed outside the socio-political setting. To understand education one must of necessity understand the nature of society (Mkhatshwa, 1987:5).

The organization's recognition that education must also be understood within an economic context has brought the NECC closer to the private sector, and developments on the political stage have meant that talk of "education for growth" is no longer anathema. There is a growing realization that any country, any economic system requires skilled workers; vocational education does not *simply* provide fodder for the capitalist economic machine. Capitalism has not been embraced with open arms, but a certain softening of the rhetoric is apparent.

At this point we appear to have a glowing picture of "people's education" and the NECC: after unsatisfactory beginnings (due in part to state oppression), the movement has got its act together, examined its values, and shifted into policy-generating gear. Is it greedy to want more?

Greedy, or pessimistic — or both — I

believe that the NECC and NEPI have a long way to go before they can put their feet up on the headmaster's desk. The tasks facing them are enormous, and the NECC's resources (human and otherwise) are being sapped by the organization's role as troubleshooter to a host of practical crises in black education.

The values espoused by the "people's education" movement are still unclear, and tensions between the liberal and radical aspects of the movement persist. Educators from widely different traditions have found a home in the NECC; now that opposition to apartheid education can no longer hold them together positions must be reassessed. Through NEPI the NECC has made the practical transition from resistance movement to policy player, but it is not certain that its value system has caught up.

Tensions are situated across both the liberal/radical and academic/vocational divides. Liberal/radical tensions within the apartheid oppositional discourse go back a long way, and are certainly not specific to "people's education". Rumbblings along the academic/vocational fault line are of more recent origin.

BOTH LIBERAL and radical educators have tended to reject the idea of gearing education towards the needs of the workplace. This rejection (sometimes coupled with a conflation of capitalism and apartheid) has led some people's educators to oppose the trade union approach.

A GARGANTUAN TASK COMPLICATED BY THE FACT THAT SOUTH AFRICA IS A COUNTRY IN A HURRY.

Harold Wolpe, for example, has stated that

Cosatu, in some of its recent papers on the democratically planned economy, deals with education policy purely as 'manpower planning', that is to say fitting education to the needs of the economy. People's education simply goes out the door. (Wolpe, 1990:61).

Andrew Donaldson, on the other hand, sees no contradiction between "people's education" and a concern with economic imperatives. He suggests that for the economist, "people's education" can be understood as shifting the pattern of the economy from a focus on the interests of a wealthy minority to "a pattern which puts people first" (Donaldson, 1990:57). Whether such

arguments will persuade the "old guard" remains to be seen, but the language of instrumentalism is gaining ground in educational circles.

Language is another area to which the NECC will have to pay close attention — the rhetoric of the struggle has a lot to answer for. Although a necessary consciousness-raising tool, it tends to obscure the need for the continuous assessment and re-assessment of values.

Rhetoric can also be a barrier to communication with other stakeholders. The NECC has much ground in common with the private sector, particularly through COSATU, one of its affiliates. Both the NECC and the private sector recognize the need for co-operation in the construction of an equitable and effective education system. Despite this recognition there is much wariness on both sides, due in part to the incompatibility of progressive and business rhetoric.

On one hand similarities may remain hidden under a cloud of people-speak, while on the other the use of the same *words* by the different groupings may obscure differences in their usage: "co-operation" and "consultation" have very different meanings for management and workers.

A PART FROM questions of value and ideology, the magnitude of the practical, policy-oriented tasks facing the NECC should not be underestimated. It is beyond doubt that the present education system must be restructured.

It has perpetuated an inequitable distribution of knowledge, skills and wealth. It has answered the needs of neither the majority of this country's inhabitants nor of its economy. NEPI hopes to identify policy options which will remedy this — equitable policies to assist in the development of this country's human and material resources.

This is a gargantuan task complicated by the fact that South Africa is a country in a hurry. There is a great sense of urgency about replacing unsatisfactory policies, aggravated by an edge of competition: proposals not tabled *now* may lose out.

The size of the task along with the pressing need for solutions means that NEPI's task may at times seem im-

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