

The Liberative Power of Education: Adult Basic Education as Empowerment Tool for Rural Women in Taung

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ABSTRACT Taung is one of the remote rural areas in the north-west province of South Africa. The socio-economic and political climate such as cultural norms and practices, geographical location and insecurity under the old political dispensation both oppressed and denied most rural African girl children the opportunity for formal education. Without any form of formal education these rural folks who are now adults could be perpetually cut-off from socio-economic and political activities (the development) of their respective communities. They might not enjoy any real freedom, lose their dignity and become vulnerable to all forms of abuses- mental and physical. This paper set out to investigate and report on the power and capacity of basic education to free rural women from socio-economic and political enslavement. The study is underpinned by the Freirean philosophy of critical pedagogy (praxis) which outlines and interprets liberation education. The qualitative approach in the form of interviews was used in exploring the liberative effect of basic education on the selected participants. The study found, among other things, the acquisition of literacy skills for effective communication and self-employment skills for livelihood.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary world of information explosion education is the tool for survival and this is why basic education for adults becomes an important topic for study. At the time South Africa attained political freedom in 1994 about 15 million of its adult Black citizens, men and women, out of its population of 42 million could not read or write even in their home languages (City Press 25/6/95). Most of these adults were rural women who lived in ignorance because of lack of basic education. Many factors including political, cultural and geographical location denied most Black children access to education during the apartheid era. Schools for Blacks were too far away from farms and small rural holdings where most Black families lived and worked as labourers. Most small children had to walk several kilometres in rain or hot sun in order to attend schools for Black children. Moreover in view of the harsh conditions and insecurity in South Africa at the time of apartheid, parents could not allow small children, especially girls, to travel on foot through the bush to attend schools which were too far away from their homes. Many Black children either dropped out or never went to school due to the socio-economic and political climate at the time. The consequence is that millions of economically active women in the countryside now lack basic knowledge and skills to enable them ac-

tively participate in the socio-economic activities of the new South Africa.

Without basic education and training rural Black illiterate women might remain cut-off from the social, economic and political activities of the country. The lack of basic knowledge and skills could keep many rural folks, particularly, women in perpetual poverty, dependency and ultimately make them vulnerable to all sorts of abuses within their families and communities. To get these adults on board the socio-economic activities political intervention became crucial and in line with constitutional provisions (that is, education is a right for all citizens) a policy for adult basic education and training was enacted in 1997. The policy on Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) was in response to the demand for basic knowledge and skills for millions of adults, especially rural women. The policy framework envisaged;

A literate South Africa within which all its citizens have acquired basic education and training that enables them to be effective participants in socio-economic and political processes and to contribute to the reconstruction, development and social transformation. (Department of Education 1997).

Background to the Problem

In line with the above scenario after the demise of apartheid a comprehensive adult literacy

(that is, basic education) programme was introduced for all adults, particularly the rural women. However this noble initiative did not have trained educators to teach adults when it started. It was in this context that the University of South Africa established a department of Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) to train educators for basic education programmes. The aim was to equip individual school leavers who had passion for adult education with the relevant content knowledge and methodology to teach basic education to illiterate adults throughout South Africa. The university still offers courses from the certificate to the diploma level in adult basic education and training to adult educators; mainly literacy teachers who need to acquire knowledge and skills in the teaching of adults. This researcher has been both a tutor and a graduate student of the adult basic education programme for over 12 years.

Problem Statement

The training of adult educators by the University of South Africa has been in existence in the rural community of Taung since 1996. This researcher has been involved in the training of adult educators who teach basic education (that is, literacy, numeracy, small business set up and management skills, HIV/ AIDS awareness) to the rural adults. The desire to find out about the effect of the basic education on the rural women in particular informed the choice of this empirical exploratory investigation.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to explore the value of basic education on the female participants in the rural communities within the Greater Taung Municipality

Theoretical Framework

This research paper is underpinned by Paulo Freire's theory of critical pedagogy. The theory involves and emphasises the objective and unbiased reflection on existing knowledge and practice (Glass 2010). The underlying principle of the theory is that education should be a process and practice of setting people free from socio-economic and political doldrum. Gadotti

(1998) affirms that liberation is the central point of Freire's educational conception. The destination of education would be to liberate oneself from an oppressive and unjust reality. Education aims at liberation. It is the radical transformation of reality in an effort to improve it, make it more human and ensure that men and women are recognised as subjects of their own history rather than as objects (Gadotti 1998).

Freire (1974) himself points out that his theory of critical pedagogy is a call for reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. Citing Freire (1974) McKay (2006) asserts that humans are able to think and think critically about their life worlds. As human beings we have the ability to plan and shape our world. This ability to think, plan and transform our world is what separates us (humans) from animals (McKay 2006). The theory has great influence on the socio-economically and politically oppressed people, for example, the unskilled labourer, the unemployed, the dispossessed, the marginalised, the poor and the vulnerable men and women. It gingers them to seek immediate practical solutions to transform their circumstances through education. From the grass root basic education (that is, literacy and skills learning) to a highly advanced programmes education should liberate adult men and women from ignorance, poverty and helplessness. In Freire's (1974) own words every human being, no matter how ignorant or submerged in the culture of silence s/he may be, is capable of learning or has the right to learn. Citing Freire (1974) Giroux (2010) points out that critical pedagogy affords people the opportunity to read, write and learn from themselves that is, to engage in a culture of questioning that demands far more competence than rote learning and application of acquired skills. In other words, critical pedagogy advocates for providing adult learners the opportunity to relate learning to their lived experiences and thereby writing themselves in the concrete conditions of the daily lives.

The theory of critical pedagogy has implications for adult teaching and learning throughout the developing world. Freire's ideas have entered educational discourse from the most cosmopolitan centres to the most remote corners of the earth. He has made enormous contribution to educational transformation in our time because the struggle for socio-economic

and political emancipation of the oppressed still draws from Paulo Freire's insights. The ideas and thoughts expressed in Freire's book, *the Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is as needed today as when it was first articulated and published. The scaring growing income gap between the rich and the poor in our midst today could be the consequence of inequality in access to education (Glass 2010). In South Africa in particular although apartheid or discrimination has been removed from the country's statuses almost all White schools still use language (Afrikaans) as a barrier to deny and exclude non- Afrikaner children, the natives, access to better education. The high poverty and unemployment situation in the country are the results of denying the indigenous people access to better education. The situation demands a critical reflection of the education system by all stakeholders if education is to bring about equality and justice. The theory encourages adult educators to inculcate in their learners knowledge and skills for critical reflection through engaging them in activities that may enable adults to critically appraise their situation and circumstances and take action to improve them.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This ethnographic and phenomenological study aimed at exploring the socio-economic effects of adult basic education study programmes on the rural women in the Greater Taung in the North West Province.

Research Design

A qualitative explorative (Creswell 2007; Meadows 2003) method was employed to explore the effect of the adult basic education activities on the rural women of Taung. In doing so the researcher employed both ethnographic and phenomenological approaches in order to describe the phenomenon (that is, the target group) as it is. Apart from describing the target group the use of the phenomenological approach enabled the researcher to understand the participants' personal meanings they might construct from their daily or 'lived experience' (Johnson and Christenson 2000) as adults who have undergone or are still enrolled for the basic education studies. While ethnographic

study uncovers and explicates the ways a group of people understand their settings and take action to improve it the phenomenological study attempts to experience phenomenon as the individuals involved experience them personally (Welman et al. 2007). To get the relevant information for the study, both educators and adult learners in the Basic Education programmes were selected for in-depth interviews.

Population and Sample

The entire population for the study was 200 adult learners and 50 adult educators. The researcher employed the simple random sampling technique to select 50 learners (30 current and 20 ex- learners). The 30 current learners were selected from 10 learning centres in the Greater Taung Municipality to participate in the investigation. In selecting the participants the researcher requested for the attendance registers from the centre managers from which the accessible population was picked using even numbers. The researcher also used the purposive sampling technique to select 10 educators from neutral learning centres (that is, centres where learners were not selected to participate in the investigation).

Data Collection

After selecting the participants the researcher collected their mobile phone numbers from the centre managers. He called each of them to arrange for interviews. With the 30 participants currently enrolled at the 10 learning centres the researcher used the focus group discussions. That is, at each of the 10 centres 3 learners were interviewed as a group. The researcher visited the learning centres at distances of between 20-45 kilometres during class times for the interviews.

With the aid of contact addresses and mobile phone numbers provided by the educators and the centre managers the researcher traced the ex-learners to their communities, homes and work places where in-depth interviews were held. The 10 educators from the neutral adult centres were also interviewed and their responses used as triangulation for those provided by both current and ex-learners. The interviews for all the 3 set of participants (current, ex-learners and educators) focused on the motivation to

enrol for basic education, the benefit acquired from the programme, the effect of the programme on their lives and what they do for a living. The researcher made copious notes from the responses participants provided as the interviews proceeded. The data gathering took the whole month of February 2011 to complete because the participants lived in scattered rural communities with poor road network.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the participants were analysed manually through the use of open coding approach. The aim of the analysis was to understand the various constitutive elements in the data through an inspection of relationships between concepts, constructs and variables and to see whether there were any patterns or trends (Mouton 2004). To make the analysis simple and manageable the data were broken down into smaller units with each of the units arranged under an appropriate and a specific theme.

Trustworthiness

In a qualitative research paradigm trustworthiness relates to level of dependability or reliability of the data gathering instruments, the process followed in gathering the data, the quality of data gathered and their validity. To ensure trustworthiness in this research all responses were written down or transcribed verbatim. The researcher kept a journal for the field work in which whatever was heard, seen and observed was recorded. He employed various techniques to achieve and maintain dependability and credibility of the final product of the investigation. For example, throughout the interviews the researcher frequently requested respondents to repeat or clarify their responses to ensure that only the correct answers were captured or recorded. Again triangulation was achieved by comparing the responses of the learners (both present and past) to those of the 10 educators whose learners did not participate in the investigation.

Ethical Consideration

The researcher ensured that the study adhered to important ethical principles and considerations. To this end he did not only seek permis-

sion from the local adult education authorities (that is, chief education specialist, centre managers and educators) but also obtained an informed consent from all the people who participated in the investigation.

Again as a measure to ensure confidentiality and anonymity the researcher did not record names and voices of all the participants in the investigation. Finally he made all the participants aware of the fact that their participation in the study was voluntary and any of them could pull out at any time they wanted to do so.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After collecting the data the researcher arranged and analysed them under the following themes:

a) Demographic Profile of Participants

• Current and Ex-students

The ages of both the current and ex-adult learners ranged from 23-82 years with majority of them that is, 70% (n=35) being in their early 40s. A large number, 56% (n=28) of the participants were either divorced or widowed, 28% (n=14) were never married but single parents, 12% (n=6) married and 4% (n=2) had no children. With the exception of the 2 the majority of the participants that is, 96% (n=48) had 1-3 children who they struggle to care for with very little or no assistance from spouses and relatives. Of the 50 participants 76% (n=38) never went to school and 24% (n=12) dropped out at the first grade. Being illiterate in an emergent society these rural illiterate women have been totally marginalised and find it very hard to survive in a multi-ethnic and racial society without basic education. These marginalised, poor, downtrodden and ignorant rural women might have realised that their lives can only be improved through basic education (Freire 1974) hence the motivation to enrol for ABET levels 1-4 studies.

• Adult Educators

The ages of the 10 educators who participated in the study ranged from 24-45 years of age. The age range indicates that most of the

educators were far younger than their learners. Eight of the participants (80%) were women and 20% (n=2) males. Six of the educators 60% (both male and females) were either divorced or never married with 40% (n=4) of them married. The educators were parents with between 1-3 children each and had all completed the 3 year diploma course in teaching adults through distance learning at the University of South Africa. The teaching experience of the educators in the basic education study programme ranged from 4-8 years, an indication that they have sufficient knowledge and experience to teach adult learners effectively. The knowledge, skills and methodology for adult teaching have enhanced the educators' teaching practice in such a manner that they are able to motivate learners to relate learning to their lived experiences and thus writing themselves in the concrete conditions of their lives (Giroux 2010).

b) Motivation to Enrol for Basic Education Courses

Democracy in South Africa brought in its trail rights, responsibilities and opportunities for people to learn how to exercise their rights in order to lead useful and contended lives. The driving force behind the rural women's enrolment on basic education programmes was the desire to liberate themselves from ignorance, vulnerability and poverty. As the response from one of the participants affirmed;

I attend basic education courses to be able to understand and fit in the world around me. I want to access and disseminate information in my community.

Thus the desire to read and write in order to access information themselves motivate the rural women to attend the basic education courses. This response affirms Freire's (1974) assertion that basic education should liberate adults from ignorance, poverty and helplessness. As Gadotti (1998) asserts education aims at liberation because it is the radical transformation of reality in an effort to improve it, make it more human and ensure that men and women are recognised as subjects of their own history rather than as objects. Thus the desire to be confident, independent, skillful and be in control of their lives in an emergent multi-cultural democratic society motivate rural women to enrol for basic education.

c) Curriculum of the Basic Education Programmes

Regarding the basic education curriculum all the participants that is, learners, educators, centre managers and even the Senior Education Specialist (at the District Education Office) concurred in the elaborate information provided to the researcher. They all informed the researcher that the learning experiences of the basic education programme offered to the rural women ranged from reading, writing in home language and English communication, life orientation, basic scientific agriculture (that is, crop production, gardening, poultry keeping and animal rearing), dress making, sewing, cookery, carpentry, joinery, electrical works and painting. The above response reflects McKay's (2006) view that adult educators must equip learners with skills to solve problems by applying such skills in situations in their lives. The high unemployment and poverty among rural women is an oppressive situation which its victims must reflect and take action to transform it (Friere 1974). By reflecting on their situation and taking action through practical skills training the rural women can be assured of self-employment and livelihood. Our teaching therefore must be directed at enabling adult learners to use the new knowledge they have acquired to re-think their lives (McKay 2006).

The centre managers and the education specialist however pointed out that at the time of this investigation not all levels and centres offered all the courses mentioned in the previous paragraph because of paucity of resources and qualified educators in the courses like electrical works, carpentry and painting. These courses are therefore taught at few centres where there is availability of electricity, resources and qualified educators to handle them. The basic education programmes at all the centres start with literacy, numeracy and life orientation at level one. As the adult learners acquire basic communication skills and proceed to other levels more courses were phased in. The curriculum for the basic education programme took into consideration the learning needs and the context of the learners. The educators concurred with the learners in their answers that the programme planners did some need analysis in the various communities to identify the learning needs of the rural women before designing

the integrated learning experiences for the adult learners. The responses here affirm the fact that the rural illiterate women are capable of learning no matter how ignorant and submerged they might be in the culture of silence (Freire 1974).

d) Knowledge and Skills Acquired Through Basic Education

Regarding the knowledge and skills acquired through the basic education courses participants 100% (n=50) were unanimous in their answers that they have acquired basic communication skills in their home language and English, the main language for official communication and business transactions in the country. This response which was confirmed by all the educators (n=10) is significant because all government official documents and those from parastatals are written in English. In multi-ethnic country in a globalised world the ability to write and speak English would not only ensure understanding and fitting in one's environment but may also enhance business transactions such as buying and selling of essential goods and services. With the demise of apartheid all places in South Africa are open to all people and tourists come to all corners of the country. English then can enhance the (small) business transactions between visitors and the rural women.

In addition to the above 74% (n=37) respondents consisting mainly of women who have completed the course and those in ABE levels 3 and 4 pointed out that they have learnt basic scientific agriculture. These skills have empowered the rural women to engage in self-employment activities which could put food on the table for their children.

e) Participants' Views on the Socio-economic Benefits of Basic Education

As people who are not employed in the formal sector most of the basic education learners are engaged in multi- small business activities at the same time to ensure their livelihood. The responses indicate that the practical skills acquired in scientific agriculture lessons have enabled 78% (n=39) of the participants to grow cabbage, beetroot, tomatoes, pepper, onions for sale and home consumption. Twenty (40%) of them also said they do sewing (patching of clothes) and small business (for example, res-

taurant, tuckshop, selling of fruits, cigarette, sweets, biscuits etc.) at school gates, bus stops and taxi ranks. In addition to this information 74% (n=37) of the participants including even 6 of educators said they were engaged in poultry keeping and animal rearing in their villages to supplement their income. Two of the educators confirmed the responses from the learners in the following words;

Poultry keeping does not only provide our children with nutrition but also supplement the meagre income we receive from the employer.

The experience of poverty by the participants encouraged them to engage in small-scale businesses and agricultural activities to supplement their meagre income. Indeed, education should provide adults with the opportunity to relate learning to their lived experiences. It should also offer them with the opportunity to learn from themselves through the application of skills acquired (Giroux 2010).

Ninety- two percent(n=46) of the participants added that basic education has enabled them to operate mobile phones, withdraw money from ATMs, assist their children in their home work, read the bible, sing in church choir, put the cross on the candidate of their choice during election, read and answer letters without seeking outside help. Again 94% (n=47) of the respondents also indicated that the basic education courses have taught them about HIV/AIDS and family planning. This knowledge, they added, has enabled them to practise safe sex and space child bearing. The indication here is that the rural women have practically put to use the knowledge and skills acquired through basic education to improve the lives of their families and communities at large. The response above also affirms Glass's (2010) assertion that education should be a process and practice of setting people free from socio-economic and political oppression. Once the rural illiterate adults are able to read, write, access written information and engage in socio-economic activities, they would have been liberated from the oppression of poverty, vulnerability and ignorance and that is the essence of basic education.

CONCLUSION

The responses provided by the participants emphasised the socio-economic benefits of adult basic education in the context of the rural poor

and marginalised women. The respondents affirmed the fact that without knowledge and skills they could be cut off from the socio-economic activities of the new democratic South Africa. For example they would not be able to engage in income generating activities thereby remaining in perpetual ignorance, vulnerability and poverty. The responses from the adult learners, educators and the literature study have proved that in reality knowledge is power because once adults acquire basic knowledge and skills they become redeemed from ignorance. The findings from the investigation have therefore vindicated and affirmed adult basic education as a tool to empower and liberate the poor and the marginalised rural women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings the study recommends a serious campaign by the Greater Taung Municipality to emphasise the importance of basic education for illiterate adults and encourage particularly women, to enrol for the basic education courses. Again both provincial and national governments should rethink the use of adult basic education as the most effective tool for rural and community development.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study are based on a qualitative interviews conducted with 50 adult learners and 10 educators within the Municipality of Greater Taung. The experiences of these rural women who have undergone basic education courses cannot be generalised due to the small number of participants involved in the

study and the possible differences in the various rural contexts in the country. The conclusions of the study should therefore be interpreted against the potential limitations as outlined above.

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