



KZN SOCIETY EDUCATION ROUND TABLE

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Presentation at KZN Society Education Round Table

By: Bawinile A. Mdunyelwa

Programme director, representatives from different organisations, Government department's officials, ladies and gentlemen.

It is my greatest pleasure and honour to make a presentation on one of the aspects that is fundamentally important to accessing our rights and freedoms as enshrined in the South African Constitution and other international and national policy and legislative frameworks.

Ladies and gentlemen. The right to basic education, including Adult Basic Education and Further Education and Training is a constitutional right enshrined in the Bill of Rights, contained in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. It stipulates that the state, through reasonable measures, must progressively make education available and accessible (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996). Former State President of South Africa, Dr Nelson Mandela (2004) had this to say:

"We cannot claim to have reached anywhere near to where a society should be in terms of practical equality of the disabled. We continue to try. We realise that legislation and regulations are not sufficient for the end of the long walk to equality and non-discrimination".

Ladies and Gentleman. It must be remembered that education forms part of the basic rights of which disabled people must enjoy.

The adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) is highly significant, as people with disabilities, including children, often remain victim of discrimination and/or deprived of equal opportunities. It is the only United Nations human rights instrument protecting comprehensively the rights of persons with disabilities, including the right to education.

Programme Director, Ladies and gentlemen, note that Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities guarantees the right to education of persons with disabilities and that they are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability. The Convention seeks to incorporate difference into the education system so that persons with disabilities learn the skills to participate effectively in a free society while enabling learners without disabilities to benefit from the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds. Individual differences should therefore become opportunities to enrich learning rather than problems to be fixed. In order to achieve this, the Convention requires States to employ teachers with the required skills to provide inclusive education and to ensure adequate and effective training of teachers so that they are able to teach persons from different backgrounds. The Convention also requires "reasonable

accommodation" of the individual learners needs which means, amongst other things, that the adult centres environment must be accessible - for example, through constructing ramp access rather than stairs, providing educational material in accessible formats, facilitating the learning of Braille and sign language and so on.

In view of the UNCRPD propositions, the following aspects are critical

- a) Persons with visual impairments can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education, secondary education and adult basic education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live;
- b) Reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements is provided;
- c) Persons with visual impairment receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education;
- d) Effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion.
- e) enable persons with disabilities to learn life and social development skills to facilitate their full and equal participation in education and as members of the community.
- f) Facilitating the learning of Braille, alternative script, augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication and orientation and mobility skills, and facilitating peer support and mentoring.
- g) employ teachers, including teachers with visual impairment, who are qualified in Braille, and to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of education. Such training shall incorporate disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities.

Programme director. Let us turn to the aspect of equality as reflected in the Constitution Act no. 108 of 1996, Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination (PEPUDA) Act no. 4 of 2000, and other policy and legislative frameworks.

Equality is not a single idea. There are many types of equality, and not all types are valuable for the same reasons.

One idea of equality we must reject is that equality requires 'sameness' in all circumstances. Identical treatment can be deeply harmful, particularly for those who have different needs. For instance, forcing all learners to take a written test would exclude partially sighted and blind learners. Treating everyone identically in this way often results in learners being denied access to adult basic education.

When we talk about equality in education, there are at least three valuable forms of equality that we can look at:

- First, equality requires the equal enjoyment and protection of constitutional rights. This idea is endorsed by Section 9(2) of the Constitution. This means that equality requires all learners to receive a basic education.
- Second, equality is about accommodating and valuing difference, rather than treating everyone identically or promoting uniformity. Schools or adult community learning centres that attract learners from diverse backgrounds can promote understanding and tolerance.
- Finally, equality requires us to break down patterns of group disadvantage, and to prevent new patterns of disadvantage from forming. Many learners are not only denied the right to a basic education; they continue to suffer stigma, stereotyping, socioeconomic disadvantage, violence, and powerlessness as a result of their race, gender, disability, sexual orientation or other group membership. Equality in education requires that we end these patterns of disadvantage.

What is the situation in our context to date?

The majority of people in rural areas still believe that people born blind cannot be educated and as such keep them hidden away from the public, resulting in them staying illiterate. By the time they discover that education facilities are available, it is too late, and their only chance of attaining some education is through adult learning centres which are limited, far apart, scarcely funded and under-resourced. In addition, some people acquire loss of sight late in life as a result of health related conditions and accidents. It can be argued that the formal configuration of Adult Education, in relation to the National Qualification Framework, its location predominantly in schools and formal workplaces, its use of school educators or corporate trainers and its focus on instrumental purposes, marginalise those who are outside the formal system, which are the poor; the unemployed; people with disabilities; the rural population; and their communities (Rule 2006).

The majority of blind people in South Africa has a low level of literacy, which cannot be viewed independently of the apartheid policies that were in place prior to democratic dispensation in 1994, inseparable from the developed-developing context of the country. The implications of apartheid were far-reaching and served to entrench inequalities and poverty within the disability sector in general. These inequalities affected the delivery of services such as education, access to health, and so on.

Visually impaired adult learners also deserve quality education to enable them to compete fairly in the open labour market. Access to quality adult education is important throughout

the educational spectrum. The National Qualifications Framework and Quality Assurance (2000) list the following to ensure quality in education:

- Access, mobility and progression: Qualifications and standards would be expected to be designed in such a way to ensure that they allow for continued learning and improved employment opportunities.
- Integration: Qualifications and Standards would be expected to integrate theory and practice, skills, knowledge, values and attitudes.
- Learning outcomes: Qualification and standards would be expected to clearly state the expected skills, knowledge, values and attitudes to be acquired, as well as the level and standards expected of these in order to guide learners and facilitators of learning.
- Redress: Qualifications and standards would be expected to ensure that the potential of citizens that were previously denied education and training opportunities is brought to the fore and recognised so that they can be improved for the individual's development and the country's socio-political economic development.
- Personal and National Development: Qualifications and standards would ensure that learners develop in such a way as to be responsible for their own socio-political-economic development and for the reconstruction and development of the country according to the South African Qualification Act (SAQA 2000).

These guidelines apply also to the education of adults with visually impairment. These kinds of programmes also provide learners with a platform for further learning, should they so choose, and with the capacity to bring this foundation to bear on the improvement and development of their own lives and the lives of those around them. AET provides the foundation of fundamental skills, knowledge, and understanding that gives people a basis from which they can progress along a chosen career and life path (Department of Education, 1997).

Since 1994, the South African government has promulgated a suite of policies and legislative frameworks that support ABE and affirm its role in the process of social change and development. There is acceptance that literacy is essential for human resource development because it contributes to the economic development of people and enables them to expand their life choices. The post-apartheid government regards ABET as critical to addressing the basic needs and developmental imperatives of the majority of South Africa's poor. For this reason, literacy underlies (at least at the policy level) the government's proposals for human resource development, focusing on skills acquisition and ABE for those who have been deprived of basic schooling (ANC, 1994).

A consideration of the legislative framework for ABET is crucial as a backdrop to understanding the gap between legislation and implementation, a gap that exists because of bureaucratic bottlenecks, lack of capacity, inadequate resources for the sector, and general disagreements within the sector. Although South Africa has highly impressive legislation for ABET, the fact that an extremely small amount of the education budget is allocated to ABET makes it inevitable that policy is barely implemented (Aitcheson et al., 2000).

In 1995, the government established the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), which helped develop the South African Qualifications Act (No. 58 of 1995). One of SAQA's key functions was to develop and implement the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which:

- Created a national framework for learning achievements.
- Facilitated access to and mobility and progression within education, training, and career paths.
- Enhanced the quality of education and training.
- Accelerated the redress of past discrimination in education, training, and employment opportunities.
- Contributed to the full personal development of each learner and the social development of the nation at large.

The National Education Policy Act (No. 27 of 1996) protects the right to basic education; in particular, "the right of every person to basic education and equal access to education institutions." The right to a basic education implies, by extension, the right to good-quality learning programmes with high-quality learner support materials and teaching practices, and appropriate learning sites. The Policy observes that as a result of the high attrition rate in schools, a high number of adult visually impaired South Africans are functional illiterate. This presentation thus stresses the need for targeting out of school blind and partially sighted people for basic education.

Although the Constitution defines ABE as a human right, a sentiment also expressed in all education and training legislation, the decline in learners enrolled in basic educational programmes and the decline in resources draw attention to the lack of fit between policy and practice.

Also important to note is the importance of braille literacy in adult basic education. Although studies that have looked at the important role of Braille on the lives of visually impaired people (VIP's) are limited, Braille has been recognized as a valuable and a crucial tool for literacy for people with visual impairment, especially in the course of education. Braille helps VIP's to visualise text through feeling every word of it, learning how these

words are written and most importantly it gives VIP's access to material on an equal level to their peers which simultaneously influences their educational achievement and establishes a platform for them to be on a competitive level with others. Indeed, many VIP's relate their knowledge of Braille to their competence, independence and equality (Schroeder 1998).

it has been noted by some scholars that it is vital for all VIP's to learn Braille as early as possible. This is equally important for blind as well as for partially sighted people who may be able to use low vision aids and rely on their remaining sight to access information. According to these scholars, partially sighted children may be at greater risk of literacy deficiencies than children who are totally blind. This is because partially sighted children are more likely to learn Braille later as their sight deteriorates.

The lack of tactual acuity is a problem faced by people learning to read through Braille and contributes to slow reading times compared to other print readers. However, by experience and training, most visually impaired children can overcome this problem. For those with insensitive tips this will take longer, whilst others may never develop the necessary tactual acuity to read Braille effectively.

Negative attitudes to learning Braille can develop in children who reject being educated in a different medium to their peers. Negative attitudes to Braille could also be found in adults who have first struggled to acquire print literacy before transferring this to the learning of Braille or those who have lost their sight at a later stage of their life. Their frustration may get aggravated by having to "start again" but this time in a different format which they are not familiar with. For others, learning Braille represents the final recognition or realization of going blind and therefore a 'profoundly emotional issue' generating hostility towards it and its proponents (Rogers, 2007).

Another challenge relating to the establishment and management of ABET centres is the objectives of learners. Most learners apply to the ABET centres to join other visually impaired people and to have a place where they are not discriminated against. The intent is not to access education and progress academically. There are some visually impaired adults who would opt not to write examinations in order to delay their exit from the centres. People with disabilities face specific challenges in the pursuit of their right to education resulting in a reduced access to mainstream education. *Everyone has the right to education.* Depriving any person or group of people of access to education of any type or at any level counts as an act of discrimination.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by recommending the following:

- It is vital that teachers interacting with Braille learners understand the procedures by which their learners read and that they are themselves able to assess their phonemic awareness and other language/literacy skills. Without such assessment and required understanding, it is difficult to engage and motivate children in learning processes (Wormsley 2006, 104).
- Assessment tools must be developed to ensure that VIP's are appropriately enrolled.
- Department of Higher Education must develop appropriate norms and standards relevant to adult education for visually impaired learners, including post provisioning norms. For example, one educator equals to five visually impaired learners.
- Education policies should not be based on principles of sameness in terms of equality, rather they must accommodate difference and break barriers to accessing quality education by VI learners.
- The public adult learning centres management must ensure that these centres and the resource or 'special' schools work together in sharing facilities and expertise. The schools are composed of experienced and specialist educators whose expertise could be used in the development and empowerment of BPALC's staff

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