

# Again! Bad faith and the educational bureaucracy

## Can adult education be provided in Southern Africa?

*John Aitchison*

### The swamplands of despair

On the way to a recent meeting in Pretoria I picked up a volume at the airport bookstand entitled *Swamplands of the Soul* by psychologist James Hollis. I was taken by its subtitle – *New life in dismal places* – and by its litany of these dismal places listed on the cover: Guilt, Grief, Loss, Betrayal, Doubt, Loneliness, Depression, Despair, Obsessions, Addictions, Anger, Fear, Angst, Anxiety.

I think that we southern African educators and historians of education have all experienced these dismal places, these swamplands that seem to defy all our efforts to get through, our feet held by the mud and the quicksands that prevent, and continue to prevent us, achieving our dream – a society in which all will have the full rights to knowledge and to the glorious expansion of the mind and soul that can be achieved through education.

Amongst the research findings made by the South African Ministerial Committee on Literacy, appointed in January 2006, was the fact that the actual number of adult illiterates had increased since 1994 when South Africa officially shed the shackles of apartheid. What is the appropriate emotion to feel confronted by that fact – Guilt? That we in South Africa have not done enough? Grief? A sense of loss of early hopes? Betrayal? And who by? Doubt – that all our efforts to improve education for young and old is achieving results?

This paper explores the swampland that adult education, and particularly literacy and basic education for adults has become in my own country, South Africa, looks at a case study of the set up of South Africa's new Kha ri gude Literacy Campaign and wonders whether there are any pathways beckoning us out of the miasmal morass towards solid ground.

### A short justification of adult education

Adult educators in Southern Africa generally (in their more positive and assertive moments anyway), tend to subscribe to a simple three point set of demands:

- adult learners must be seen as important
- adult education on a mass scale is a priority
- the broad mass of people who are illiterate, poor and marginalised must be put at the top of the protocol list for a change and providing appropriate adult education is one way in which this can be done that has lasting beneficent effects.

They would generally agree with what was said in 1976 by Julius Nyerere, the first President of independent Tanzania, when he made a ringing call for the importance of adult education in the so-called Dar es Salaam declaration:

All this means that adult education has to be given a priority within the overall development and recurrent revenue allocations of governments or other institutions. What priority it obtains is perhaps one of the most political decisions a government will take. For if adult education is properly carried out, and therefore effective, it is the most potent force there can be for developing a free people who will insist upon determining their own future.

Note those words: priority; most potent force; developing a free people; determining their own future!

Nyerere had long argued that adult education was important, even more important than the education of children, as a means to bring social and economic change to society:

“First we must educate adults. Our children will not have an impact on our economic development for five, ten, or even twenty years. The attitudes of the adults ... on the other hand, have an impact now. The people must understand the plans for development of this country; they must be able to participate in changes which are necessary. Only if they are willing and able to do this will this plan succeed.” (Nyerere 1964, quoted in Bhola, 1984, p. 138)

## From visions to policies to implementation mess – a very short history of literacy and adult education in post-apartheid South Africa

Literacy and ABET as we know it in South Africa started in the 1970s and 1980s with small literacy NGOs who adopted a largely Freirian outlook on the purposes of literacy. Literacy was part of a process of conscientisation in which people learned not only to read the **word** but also the **world** (as a construction of human beings and therefore in principle amenable to change and, indeed, needing revolutionary change). It was not about formal qualifications but about the life world of struggling human beings deprived, in South Africa, of human rights and full access to the means of economic life. Some of these NGOs were brilliant innovators in materials production (one thinks of Learn and Teach, English Literacy Project, Using Written and Spoken English, and so on) – and it is significant that not one of these NGOs remains today.

Adult Basic Education was a concept borrowed from North America (and in particular Canada) where adult basic education was a mix of literacy, numeracy and really useful knowledge by which immigrants and undereducated people could be fast tracked to a higher level of education so that they could work in an increasingly high skill society with rapid technological change. I remember reading case studies of people being moved from basic literacy to their equivalent of grade 12 in a year or two. Initially discussed by universities (I

think my University of Natal was the first in the country to mount an ABE research study) the idea of adult basic education resonated with the feeling as the struggle years of the 1980s drew to a close that the newly literate needed to have, in addition to the skills of alphabetisation, some really useful knowledge – indeed a curriculum and one appropriate to the new non-racial democracy that was about to be born out of the negotiated political settlement of 1987 to 1994.

I would argue that the nature of the political settlement, however beneficial, was to be very problematic for adult education because the old bureaucracy remained in place (with all its bad habits (soon learned by many of the comrades deployed therein)).

In the early 1990s we saw the beginning of what became a decade of impressive policy development in adult education – and many outside observers have remarked on the scale and quality of the adult education policies developed since 1992 – starting with the National Education Policy Investigation and followed by a range of other documents (all described, analysed and commented on in three of my articles (Aitchison 2003a, 2003b, 2004b)). But the impressive policy developments of the 1990s were not matched by much successful implementation. Adult education “campaigns” or components of more general programmes were dismal failures or at best lacklustre: Ithuteng, South African National Literacy Initiative (SANLI), Ikwelo, Tirisano. There was no large scale delivery. SANLI only reached about 350 000 illiterates because of Department of Education resistance to its innovative plan, and only a rescue by the University of South Africa’s Adult Basic Education and Training Institute produced any gains. Small NGOs serving really poor constituencies went to the wall, starved of funding and ignored by the Department of Education. Higher Education decimated the resources devoted to adult and community education – most adult education departments or centres that were around in the mid-1990s have been closed or their staff redeployed into departments concerned with formal schooling and higher education. The major achievement of the post-apartheid dispensation was the erecting of the ABET system solidly wedded to new standards and outcomes-based educational policies and systems. However, this move did not result in significant output, was more and more controlled by the imperatives of the curriculum of schooling, underfunded, and is now generally recognised to have failed to achieve mass provision on the desired scale. Government statistics on ABET were mendacious and concealed the lack of growth in the sector and South Africa’s Umalusi quality assurance council’s figures on the number of adult learners who had gained a General Education and Training Certificate reveal a scandal of utterly failed delivery (Aitchison and Harley, 2006).

In the Southern African region as a whole we have seen similar evidence of promise rapidly truncated by lack of resources and weak political will. This was exemplified in discussions about the place of lifelong learning in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) since the mid-1990s most notably in Namibia, where, in 1997, a Presidential Commission on Education, Culture and Training recommended that the country should combine three current Ministries into one Ministry of Lifelong learners with three main departments for Schools, Adult Learning, and Higher Education (Government of Namibia, 1997). In November 2001 the first meeting of the Southern African Development Community’s Technical Committee on lifelong education and training met. *Inter alia* it considered some of the theoretical and practical difficulties with the concept of lifelong

education and/or learning and what it is and is not and on whether the massive financial implications of establishing a system of lifelong education (with no necessary immediate economic benefit in return, though increasingly lifelong learning is being seen as a national necessity for economic survival) inevitably leads to talk about lifelong learning for rhetorical, inspirational and propagandist purposes but with a continuation of the old educational order more or less unchanged. Perhaps because lifelong learning was confused with adult education, or in an even more restricted sense, with adult literacy and basic education programmes, rather than seen as something which has to suffuse and transform the whole education and training system, it got short shrift. Though *A Strategic Plan for Lifelong Education and Training: 2002 - 2006* (Technical Committee on Lifelong Education and Training, 2001) was devised, in mid 2002, the Committee, along with the other specialised technical committees, ceased to operate because of a financial crisis in, and restructuring of, the SADC secretariat (Aitchison, 2003c, 2004a).

### A new promise of large scale delivery

Then in 2005 came a new hope of large scale delivery in South Africa. The Minister of Education conceded the failure of the ABET system and promised a literacy campaign and a revamping of the entire adult education system. In 2008 the *Kha ri gude* Literacy Campaign started operations, though, *deja vu*, the same obstruction played by the Department of Education on SANLI was repeated in every detail and the promised scale and funding was less than a third of what had been planned by a Ministerial Committee on Literacy. A green paper review of the adult education system was ordered.

The challenge evoking this new interest in better resourced mass adult education delivery came from the international community. The 1990 *World Conference on Education for All*, held in Jomtien, Thailand, called for broadening the means and scope of basic education for children, youth and adults (UNESCO, 1990) and ten years later, in the review held at Dakar, the World Education Forum's Education for All statement included a firm commitment to "achieving a 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults." These literacy and basic education objectives furthermore coincide with the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2000) and reinforced the idea that adult learning did after all provide a critical way of making local poverty reduction and economic development efforts more participant driven, cost effective and locally self-managed and therefore more sustainable. The development of civil society and progressive democratisation of social institutions all required the means for new skills and broader knowledge. Similarly, public health promotion and in particular the efforts to overcome the HIV/AIDS pandemic are arenas where necessary knowledge and skills and the active participation of adults in eradication efforts are absolutely essential. For South Africa, growing increasingly conscious that its economic stability and low inflation was marred by a signal failure to deliver to the really poor, meeting these internationally set targets was a both a national and foreign affairs necessity. A literacy campaign was one obvious route to go and South Africa's Education For All (EFA) literacy target for the period 2002 to 2015 is to reduce adult functional illiteracy from 33% to 17% by 2015 (this means, using the country's 2001 Census figures, that about 4.8 million illiterate adults need to become functionally literate) (Department of Education, 2002).

## Back to the swamp

After this necessarily cursory fly over of the field of adult education in this southern part of Africa I want to present a case study of what went wrong in the set up of what is now called the *Kha ri gude* literacy campaign. I believe that it is an instructive case study that sheds light on how policy can disintegrate in implementation practice and that the stumbling block over which much implementation crashes is not at the lower altitudes but in the higher reaches of the educational bureaucracies. Because it is an intensely personal account I ask your indulgence of any biases and tendentiousness that escape my rational censorship.

The question my case study poses arises from the thought that to mess up a mass literacy campaign once might be considered bad luck, to strangle another one a mere seven years later suggests serious effort. How is it that once again the South African Department of Education has managed to subvert the preparations to implement a mass literacy campaign – in this new case one based on a well thought out plan to reach 4.7 million adult illiterates during the period 2008 to 2012 and which received full endorsement from the Cabinet and a promise of over R6 billion in funding?

### The beginnings of a new initiative – 2005

The origins of what I see as a scandal began in the period during which the Adult Basic Education directorate in the national Department of education was receiving increasing public criticism for its abysmal performance and its fiasco of an attempt to run Education Minister Kader Asmal's South African National Literacy Initiative (SANLI).<sup>1</sup> Dr Cassius Lubisi, then Deputy Director General in the Department tried to rectify things but was then transferred to become Superintendent General of the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education. In early 2005 he and the new Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, travelled to an International Literacy Conference in Cuba and were impressed by the enthusiasm displayed by the Venezuelan delegation about their Cuban designed mass literacy campaign. In April 2005 the Minister held a roundtable discussion in which she openly acknowledged that the ABET system had failed and that she would take action (Department of Education, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> The South African National Literacy Initiative (SANLI) began when Minister of Education Kader Asmal promised to break the back of literacy and he appointed a previous Deputy Director General, John Samuel, to develop a plan. A team of experts and literacy practitioners was assembled and an imaginative plan developed. The first ominous sign was when the Director of ABET in the Department, Gugu Nxumalo (now Ndebele) left the planning event after a couple of hours and never came back. After the Plan was given to the Department to implement, Samuel was rapidly dumped, a lacklustre CEO appointed, and more than a year wasted with investigating whether a Section 21 non-profit company was the best way to govern the operation. Eventually the Department's wishes won the day and it was housed in the Department and slowly festered into insignificance until there was a rescue attempt by the University of South Africa's ABET Institute which, with United Kingdom Department for International Development (DfID) funding, showed that you could deliver en mass to over 300,000 learners. But by then it was already too late, the international donors were losing interest, and the ABET Institute was left with a R6 million bill to pay. The literacy campaign had been successfully strangled.

## The Ministerial Committee on Literacy – January to June 2006

In January 2006 a Ministerial Committee on Literacy, chaired by Lubisi, started work (Department of Education, 2006a). Professor John Aitchison, who had been an acerbic critic of the Department's ABET failings (though he had also written substantial parts of the Department's ABET policy and Multi-Year Implementation Plan in the mid-1990s) was included, as was Professor Veronica McKay from the University of South Africa's ABET Institute. The Department of Education link person on the committee was Vernon Jacobs, who had been a minor apparition in the Department's SANLI misadventure and who had now risen to be Acting Director of ABET. Other members were Leonie du Plessis (NGO Representative Project Literacy), Gordon Naidoo (Open Learning Systems Educational Trust), Rodwyn Grewan (Digital Partnership and Bridges to the Future Initiative), Dr Obert Maguvhe (Disability Sector Representative), and Bhekisisa Martin Ngcobo (National Youth Commission). There was also a Cuban literacy expert, Mercedes Zamora.

The Committee was sent to visit Cuba and Venezuela and by mid year had handed in a comprehensive Final report and plan for a mass literacy campaign (Ministerial Committee on Literacy, 2006). (For obscure reasons this report was never published – the only reason articulated was the bizarre one that it was so good that it would show up the previous Minister of Education! This inhibited any public response to the report and a summary of the report was only published in May 2007, eleven months later (Ministerial Committee on Literacy, 2007)).

## The Report is taken to Cabinet – November 2006

Then began a inordinately protracted process, now in the hands of Jacobs and the Department, to take the report to Cabinet. This was finally achieved on 23 November, nearly five wasted months later. The Report was endorsed, a more detailed operational plan was requested and a governance body of an Inter-Ministerial Committee approved.

At this stage some of the first obvious warning signs were evident. Jacobs, who had been at the pre-Cabinet committee meeting at which the Department had presented the Report refused to show the Ministerial Committee his record of the meeting (which he claimed was for the Department alone) (Department of Education, 2006b). On 28 November 2006 Aitchison wrote a formal letter of complaint to Lubisi in which he noted that:

It seems to me that there is a serious confusion as to his role on the Ministerial Committee and to his authority to "represent" the Committee. . . . Yet Jacobs is not simply acting as a liaison between the Department and the Ministerial Committee (to which the Department is obliged to offer certain administrative services) but is actively putting a spin on what is reported to the Department (and in the presentation to Cabinet). In the astounded draft report to the Department ... it is clear that he is proposing a structure for the campaign that is embedded within and controlled by the national and provincial ABET directorates. This is absolutely contrary to the mind of the Committee and of the clear recommendations in the Plan and Report. The presentation to Cabinet was meant to be of the Ministerial Committee yet his report back to the Department is misleading and pushing his own (or his Directorate's ) agenda. What is worse is that it is precisely this agenda and approach that effectively destroyed SANLI and would destroy any attempt to have a mass campaign from the start. It seems directly contradictory of the Minister's purpose in setting up the Ministerial Committee and asking us to prepare a Plan that could actually achieve its objectives.

As became increasingly clear with time, neither Lubisi nor the senior officials in the Department of Education (in line management progression upward from Mzwandile Matthews to Gugu Ndebele and then to Duncan Hindle, the Director General) acted to stop this subversion of the Minister's and her Committee's purposes.

### Preparing for secondments (from mid-2006 to mid-2007)

With nothing having been effected to address this double agendas problem, the situation was now further bedevilled by delays in the secondment of members of the Ministerial Committee to the Department. After the completion of the Committee's report in mid 2006, Lubisi had given many indications that he thought it would be vital to use the expertise on the Committee to help start and run, if not also to lead and head, the proposed campaign. The motive for this was particularly clear in the case of Professor McKay who had run the only successful part of SANLI and had the potential resource of nearly 80,000 graduates of UNISA's Certificate for ABET practitioners. Another strong argument for using secondments as a means of gaining key staff was the speed with which it could be done. Details were solicited on Committee member salaries and availability. Aitchison, McKay, Maguvhe, Grewan and Ngcobo all indicated their interest. In early 2006 there was a response from the Department that initially only the services of Aitchison and McKay would be sought. No rationale was given for this decision and the process of getting the secondments was incredibly slow (in the case of Aitchison partly due to the University of KwaZulu-Natal's tardiness).

### Fulfilling Cabinet's requests – the Operational Plan and the Inter-Ministerial Committee

In early 2007, as per Cabinet's instruction, Aitchison prepared a microscopically detailed Operational plan and a number of action plan schedules and budget revisions (Ministerial Advisory Committee on a mass literacy campaign for South Africa, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d, 2007e, 2007f). (The budget revisions were required because the Department had not gained nearly enough money from Treasury to actually run the campaign on the scale approved by Cabinet – possibly because a business plan prepared by Jacobs's in August 2006 spoke not of a campaign but of a programme run through the Department's Adult Education and Training Directorate with himself as Project Manager).

In spite of Cabinet's decision to appoint an Inter-Ministerial Committee to govern the campaign there seemed to be an inordinate delay in setting it up – again a matter within Jacob's administrative brief.

### What then was Jacobs and/or the Department of Education doing?

Subsequent investigation now reveals what Jacobs was actually doing instead of expediting the start of the campaign implementation. He was working energetically to set up his own

Literacy Unit within the Department of Education to run the campaign, presumably with himself in charge. It needs to be said that this was totally contrary to the Committee's Plan which had been approved by Cabinet and never once was the Ministerial Committee informed that perhaps the Department of Education wished to alter the Report and reject some of its most important recommendations. The Committee had expressly warned that the campaign structures and management should not be within the Department.

## Submissions and documents

On 12 February 2007 Jacobs put a formal submission, **Recommendation for the reconfiguration of the ABET Directorate and establishment of a Literacy Directorate**, to the Department to split the ABET directorate into an ABET Directorate and a new Literacy Directorate (Department of Education, 2007a). He even proposed that four posts (the key literacy campaign national secretariat ones including the Director of the whole campaign) should be approved within his Literacy Directorate. The idea of the Literacy Unit being established as a 'branch' within the Department was mooted with an existing Deputy Director General as its head. The Jacobs submission is also revealing in its inclusion of a series of outright falsehoods about the UNISA ABET Institute's reporting on its SANLI work and scurrilous warnings about the two to be seconded academics as likely to use the campaign for their own personal advancement as service providers. Clearly the secondees were seen as dangerous and requiring careful control.

Another document prepared on 15 February 2007 by Jacobs (Department of Education, 2007b) outlined the purpose and functions of this Literacy Unit – to manage and implement the whole campaign (including all its systems, materials development, advocacy, and expenditure of campaign funds). This document proposed that the campaign be run from within the Department of Education, contrary to the Cabinet approved report. In exactly the same way as had happened with SANLI, an innovative plan that argues forcefully that the campaign would best be run outside the Department was, in the most underhand way, being subverted by Departmental officials. Needless to say, these submissions were never shown to the Ministerial Committee or to the seconded staff nor indeed ever mentioned at any of the many meetings on the campaign set up.

It is important to note at this juncture that obviously the Department could all along have argued for this. But it never publicly, privately or through its official representative on the Ministerial Committee did so. Indeed, during the whole period there was not a single occasion that the Department formally made a single recommendation or criticism about the Ministerial Committee's Report or later Operational Plan. This point is important because of the obvious truth that plans (even cabinet approved ones) are living things and get changed. But the Department never made the slightest effort to change or revise the officially approved plan. What happened was to be a secret process of subverting it. (Another germane point relating to non-engagement is that the literacy NGO Prolit, which later voiced objections to the campaign plan in private meetings with the Department, had been privileged by having a representative on the Ministerial Committee who had not once opposed or suggested an alternative to the campaign model proposed by the Committee).

In the next submission on 21 May, Jacobs recommended himself as the “Project Director” of the campaign. Whether he was indeed ever officially appointed so is unclear, but this request was never discussed with the Ministerial Committee or with the seconded staff.

### The secondments begin as does overt obstruction– June to August 2007

The secondment process was first completed for McKay in June, Aitchison’s later, and eventually both secondees were appointed at Director level. Their experience was that Jacobs did little or nothing to facilitate their work and indeed was generally obstructive. This led Aitchison, before he had actually accepted the secondment, to complain in writing to the Minister on 27 July 2007:

As I have indicated to you before, the Ministerial Committees to which you appointed me have, I believe, worked exceedingly well – indeed I have never worked with such excellent teams. The plans produced, I believe also, are good, workable and detailed (though they would require good and innovative implementation managers). I believe them to be appropriate and desirable for our developing nation, particularly as they target the most disadvantaged section of the population.

It is therefore with the greatest dismay that, in the period since the report was handed to you and particularly within the last two months, I have come to the conclusion that there is such obstruction, studied inefficiency and delaying tactics within the lower junior levels of the Department of Education to the actual implementation of this plan and to its effective and speedy preparation that I must state emphatically I do not now believe that there is the slightest hope of the campaign preparations progressing so that there could be a launch in the first half of 2008. Furthermore, I cannot with any integrity take up a secondment to the Department of Education when it is clear to me that I will not be allowed to exercise the precise skills, capacities and powers that would facilitate the effective set up of the campaign. I say this with the deepest dismay and despair because I have invested my all in this campaign plan. But I am not prepared to be set up for failure. What I see is simply a bad replay of the same obstruction and petty agendas that brought the South African National Literacy Initiative to its knees.

The Minister did respond promptly and within days a meeting was held with the Minister, the Deputy Minister, the Minister’s Advisor, the Director General, the Deputy Director General and the two Professors. The latter were assured that obstructions would be removed and that they would no longer have to report to Jacobs. Encouraged, they continued their work but after some progress, particularly in the materials development work undertaken by McKay (who, evicted from a temporary office in the Department of Education building, had retreated to the more congenial workspaces of her still empty office at UNISA and her home), they came to realise the obstructions remained. Aitchison for example found that all his formal submissions requesting equipment and staff as per the plan schedules were altered by Jacobs, or ignored or not acted on. There was no feedback to him on why legitimate requests being made in terms of the Operational Plan (finally approved by Cabinet on 24 August) were being thwarted. Essentially, the two secondees (later joined by Dr Obert Maguvhe after a protracted battle to expedite his secondment) were never given the power or authority that they needed if the campaign was to be geared up to start at the beginning of 2008. Even their advice was not sought or when given, ignored and Jacobs engaged in a variety of procurement activities that were at best premature and which, in the case of equipment for the disabled, ignored the expertise on hand in Dr Maguvhe.

## The privatization bombshell

In the second week in October a bombshell was delivered. What happened is well expressed in the contents of a further letter that Aitchison wrote to the Minister on 15 October:

Then on 8<sup>th</sup> October, on Monday this week, I drafted a second letter to you to express the seconded staff's continuing concerns. Since your meeting with us, Dr Obert Maguvhe had joined us, but, what at first had seemed a better situation, had begun to deteriorate again.

It was never our intention to point fingers at particular people but unfortunately Mr Jacobs, in the unanimous view of Professor McKay, Dr Maguvhe and myself, had not been removed but was continuing to obstruct our work, continuing to fail to provide even the most basic of support services (for example necessary equipment required for the seconded staff and the start of the materials development process, requested by me on the 3<sup>rd</sup> June had still not been procured). If we had not relied on our universities to lend us equipment and resources we could have done virtually nothing – it has in fact come to the pitch that Professor McKay had been paying for basic support services out of her own pocket to enable the materials development work to proceed). Some of the secretarial staff under Jacobs treated us with undisguised hostility. Furthermore, in spite of a carefully prepared detailed Plan, approved by Cabinet, Jacobs appeared to be engaging in all sorts of dubious negotiations with suppliers for equipment that had never been discussed with the preparation team and was, in terms of the campaign preparation process, simply premature. We heard reliable reports of denunciations of us being made at official meetings within a Chief directorate. All in all, we the three seconded staff, were finding ourselves in a disabling environment, so much so that we honestly felt that we would rather stop work than continue.

The letter was not sent to you on Monday as I wished to discuss the situation with Deputy Director General Gugu Ndebele. Then, on Tuesday an event occurred which still leaves us staggered.

We knew that Cabinet had approved the detailed Operational Plan but that the Department of Education was asked to look at a suitable governance/institutional location structure. We had therefore engaged in discussions on four options for the institutional base of the campaign (statutory agency, agency located in a higher education institution, Section 21 company, and a Branch within the Department of Education). The Deputy Minister had in fact asked me for a draft Section 21 company instrument which I had provided him with (on 9 September). However none of these discussions in any way called into question the whole Plan approved by Cabinet.

On mid-Tuesday morning we received an SMS asking us to go to a meeting at 3:30pm. I arrived with Mr Maguvhe just after that time to find that a meeting had been in progress since 3 pm and had already considered a submission and was about to approve it – a submission that proposed the total privatization of the whole campaign, both the management body (the Secretariat of the Plan) and the actual provision of the literacy instruction. All elements of the Campaign would be totally outsourced to consortia and individual providers. Tender documents for both these had been prepared and would be published within a week. Both Dr Maguvhe and myself were stunned. At no stage had any of the Campaign Preparation Team seconded staff been consulted on this submission (I can add that, within the Preparation Team, the matter of institutional location was my agreed upon responsibility). It was clear that this in fact was a counter plan that directly contradicted the whole design, ethos and rationale of the Plan approved by Cabinet (it also makes a total mockery of the Ministerial Committee's efforts to learn from the Cuban and Venezuelan campaigns). I indicated forcefully that this was directly contrary to the approved Plan and that I would resign if it was approved. Dr Maguvhe concurred. At that stage Professor McKay arrived (she had also received the misleading SMS from Jacobs on the starting time of the meeting) and having read the two page submission stated that she too would immediately resign if it was approved.

Deputy Minister Surty, realising that there was a problem, then asked for the submission to be reconsidered and over the next two days a revised document on institutional location was produced. The final outcome of all of this remains uncertain and I am not certain what has happened to this revised document.

However, it is utterly clear to us seconded staff that there has been a major betrayal of the Plan. The three seconded staff who were asked to prepare for the campaign and who have resolutely followed the intentions of the Operational Plan approved by Cabinet have been deliberately kept in the dark by Jacobs and other officials within the Department of Education who have, whether working alone or in alliance with people outside the Department, prepared a submission and tender documents and an entirely new model and plan for the whole campaign (it is true that this so-called plan is a badly written and incoherent two page submission, with not a single reference to the financial implications of this model, but that is beside the point). We find this completely and utterly unacceptable.

In the light of this breach we find it impossible to continue genuine preparations for the campaign until this matter is truly resolved. We have been constantly hampered by not being given the authority, power or resources to actually prepare for this campaign. We know we are not indispensable, but if you wish us to continue this preparation and set up of the Plan as envisaged, we need that authority and obstructions removed entirely from any possibility of interfering in this vital campaign.

Aitchison has still not received a response from the Minister.

Apparently news of these development was received in the Office of the Presidency and on 10 October a letter was sent to the Deputy Minister and the Director General of the Department questioning what had happened, followed up by a number of telephonic communications. However, from subsequent developments, it is clear that the Department carried on regardless.

#### The submission of 11 October and the CEO advert

At the end of the controversial meeting on the Monday, Deputy Minister Surty, realising that there was a problem, asked for the submission (Department of Education, 2007d) to be reconsidered and over the next two days a revised document on institutional location was produced. The first meeting, on Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> October a meeting was attended by Jacobs, Ndebele, Matthews, Aitchison and McKay, and Minister's advisor Martin Mulcahy. It was made quite clear by Ndebele at this meeting that the outsourcing matter was not being followed up and was in abeyance. Aitchison was asked to summarise the discussions into an Institutional model proposal (which, did contain a majority recommendation to create a branch within the Department to house the national campaign secretariat, but, and this is an important point, kept all the main features of the operational plan related to governance and management). The next day feedback was solicited on this summary and various editorial corrections made. This document (Department of Education, 2007e), which the seconded staff assumed would now form the basis for the final submission to the Minister then disappears from the story, and was obviously ignored. It subsequently transpired that Jacobs was instructed to prepare a submission about the setting up of the Branch and he drafted this on 11 October (Department of Education, 2007f). The submission was poorly constructed and left out a number of warnings and cautions related to the Branch option. It in no real sense reflects the agreed to text drafted by Aitchison after the meeting. However the actual submission sent to the Minister by Chief Finance Officer Benade (as Acting Director General) is only partially based on Jacob's travesty as it has sections lifted out of the original, outsource it all, document of 8<sup>th</sup> October and also includes the proposed Literacy Unit staffing outlined in earlier submissions by Jacobs. The submission (Department of Education, 2007g) was presented as coming from Chief Finance Officer Benade and Ndebele. Benade's

accompanying note to Pandor claims that its contents had been approved by Gugu Ndebele and by Penny Vinjevold (who had been the Acting Deputy Director General just prior to Benadé).

Pandor responded to the submission on the 12<sup>th</sup> approving the model as proposed as well as the staffing. (Interestingly she apparently assumed that the seconded staff were on board as she asks that they prepare detailed workplans and a budget, an injunction that was totally ignored as none of the seconded staff were appraised of this request or even told that the Minister had approved this submission!)

The next Sunday (20 October) an advert appeared in the *Sunday Times* for a Chief Executive Officer at Deputy Director general level which noted that preference would be give to excess Department of Education employees and then Public Service employees (a point that had been specifically cautioned against).

### Ndebele misleads the parliamentary portfolio committee on education

In a briefing to the Education portfolio committee in Parliament on 19 October 2007, Ndebele lied to the committee, telling them that the campaign was to be run through a Section 21 company (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2007). She also assured them that the campaign was to be sufficiently autonomous from Departmental line functions to allow for speedy and flexible implementation.

### Hindle confirms the new, within the Department with outsourcing, model

In informal communications Aitchison and McKay were advised not to apply for the CEO post by both the Director General, Duncan Hindle and Deputy Director General Ndebele. Then on 30 October Aitchison was told by the Director General that a tender would be going out for the running of the campaign and that four posts in the Literacy Unit/Branch within the Department were about to be advertised.

Clearly the seconded staff were still being left totally in the dark and not being consulted on what was meant to be their task – preparing for the campaign. In spite of frequent requests made by the seconded staff for transparent communication it is obvious that they were being deliberate excluded from information, not asked to attend or even told about key presentations such as that to the Department of Arts and Culture on 4 October 2007 and to the Department of Social Development the next day, and in many cases simply lied to. Astoundingly, they were never told that the Minister had approved Benadé's submission on 12 October.

### The secret tender

From mid-October Jacobs had been writing a document, "Delineating the roles of the Literacy Unit" (Department of Education, 2007c) which was the draft for the outsourcing tender

document EDO 381 published in the *Government Tender Bulletin* of 9 and 16 November.

The construction of this submission, formally entitled in the tender document as “Tender proposal for the Kha ri gude mass literacy campaign of the Department of Education” (Department of Education, 2007h), was done in total secrecy without consulting the seconded staff whose precise brief was the campaign set up. In the case of Aitchison this was particularly galling as he had been specifically tasked with preparing the coordination structures and systems for the campaign.

In Jacobs’ documents the control of the campaign would be decidedly within the Department in the Literacy Unit. It would be responsible for all preparations, advocacy, and the overall co-ordination of the campaign, including materials development, identification, appointment and training of coordinators, monitors and volunteers/facilitators, and coordinating and evaluating all processes related to the campaign.

What may be described as the more lucrative work would be outsourced by tender to a service provider who would deliver project, HR and financial management, the procurement of all materials and services required for the campaign, and run databases. The specifications favoured traditional consortia with established financial and accounting links and ex-staff from government departments who knew the ins and outs of the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA) and Treasury regulations. Indeed the document specifies that they would have had to have previously run three large scale projects and to have proven financial capacity.

The more onerous work of actually training the campaign workers to teach the illiterates would be sub-contracted by the project management body to other agencies identified by the Literacy Unit (possible the Higher Education agencies involved in literacy and ABET and the smaller NGOs) who would be given no power to direct the shape of the campaign and its structures.

The actual details in the draft and final tender proposal show a serious confusion about how a campaign’s organisation has to be handled and made a range of mechanical and absurd distinctions in the work to be undertaken by the Literacy unit and the service provider. One fascinating requirement is that the service provider (which is meant to have project management expertise) is to quality assure the materials produced by the existing team of materials developers (drawn from the best expertise in the country) and provide so-called “top-up” materials [Was this clause aimed at satisfying certain organisations who wanted their materials to be prescribed for the campaign?]

So the Department of Education’s plan was successful in aiming to control the campaign from within the department and to privatize the actual operations to the joy and profit of the sellers of equipment, established financial management firms, depositors of funds in banks and other seekers after their percentage rake offs from government largesse.

Now, again, it is important to note that the Operational Plan had naturally allowed for and recommended that various function could be outsourced (notably for obvious things like payrolls and logistics). Intelligent outsourcing is not the issue. The real issue is who determines what needs to be outsourced, who issues intelligible briefs for the outsourcing

functions, and how the outsourcing relationship is handled. Why was the whole planning of the tender kept secret and why was it so rushed (originally prospective candidates had only five working days to prepare their proposals (later extended to ten days)? Why were the people appointed to set up the campaign never consulted?

On 19 November John Aitchison resigned in protest. Providentially, this may have helped focus various spotlights on the appointing of a CEO and the tender awarding process (the latter, in spite of the supposed rush, was only awarded to the chartered accounting and “business innovation” company SAB&T Ubuntu in February 2008).

### Official launch and Chief Executive Officer appointment

On 28 February there was an official launch dinner at which the Ministerial Committee members were given leather scrolls (except for Aitchison who did not receive an invitation to the event). At about the same time Veronica McKay was asked to be the Chief Executive Officer heading the Literacy Unit within the Department and the first training of master trainers and coordinators started soon afterwards. The campaign was scheduled to start its first pilot classes in selected districts in the country in April and so far SAB&T has, according to reports, worked actively though with many teething problems, to provide various form of coordination in terms of its R340 million contract.

### What prospects?

A fair judgement on what Departmental officials did to subvert the governance and management of the campaign seems to me to point to inescapable conclusions. There was bad faith and utter deceit and it is a pertinent question to ask what motives drove this malfeasance – unless one assumes that it is a banal mix of a most petty dog in the manager attitude that did not want any “outsiders” running things allied to officials’ desires for personal advancement within the Department of Education necropolis.

McKay as Chief Executive Officer will undoubtedly bring to the campaign the determination and ability to handle large scale projects that she has shown before and she can draw on a wide network of UNISA trained literacy educators. She may, once again, rescue the Department. However, the campaign as presently constructed lacks many of the coordination structures and processes that were envisaged in the original plan, nor is there any set up yet of a research, monitoring and evaluation capacity. Above all, the way the Literacy Unit in the Department was constructed (and “sown-up”) suggests that it may be the bottleneck or choking point that may undo the best efforts of McKay and others to ensure that this campaign functions as the massive yet coherent and effective intervention that it was envisioned and planned to be. During the Ministerial Committee on Literacy’s deliberations it was regularly said that this was the last chance that South Africa had to dramatically reduce the illiteracy level. One hopes against hope that this is not the lost last chance.

## A reflection on the story

A considered reflection on this story would, I believe require another lengthy paper, but I would suggest that the following might be key findings.

- There is something dreadfully wrong with the South African educational bureaucracy and that this wrongness is a compound of the curious blend of old apartheid technocracy, a more recent but entirely congruent obsession of the new “democratic” intake of deployed comrades to control everything, even if they embrace smothering innovation and implementation, and a paralysis caused by the major psychic energies of most officials being the game of self-promotion and the building of power bases and domains in Directorates and branches within the Department.
- The current bureaucrats have a deep inability to handle academics. They generally despise their criticism and even their expertise. What should be a natural rational coalition of intellectual and political power is simply not functioning (in this respect the old apartheid regime was a model of interaction). The deceit and bad faith shown by officials such as Hindle, Ndebele and others in these events is actually quite extraordinary.
- The extraordinary blindness of the bureaucrats as to how effective organisations and campaigns can be structured and work. Their take on organisation, organisational culture and the so-called “learning organisation” ranges from ignorant to perverse and makes even the worst excesses of current higher education managerialism seem tolerable by comparison.
- The astounding departure of vision and imagination from the educational bureaucracy that officially deals with adult education after a mere 13 years of democracy. Whither its renewal?
- Real concern for delivery to the poor is absent.
- At a more philosophical level, the interaction between general trends in society and human agency (sometimes of a perversely obstructive nature) suggests that understanding of the history of educational development in South Africa and the region is more complicated than ever.

## Is there solid ground?

Education, by its very nature is a hopeful science. And it is about intention. Solid ground to enable us to exit the swamp can only be found, and in some cases built, by pile driving deep into the mud, by energetic searching and work. I believe that work in the field of adult education can only be done by reconnecting with the poor and the deprived. The bizarre tale of the attempted subversion of the Kha ri gude campaign is only bettered by the story that (admittedly in a somewhat reduced and hobbled form) the campaign has started and is working at ground level because dedicated people are working to make it so. People are learning to read and write. May they also help write a new world.

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