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## Literacy for what? Contradictions in Swazi Adult Education

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of literacy in development in Swaziland. It seeks to identify in the process, contradictions that manifest in Swazi education generally and adult education specifically. It then highlights whose interests a given literacy level – high or low - serves and why.

### Introduction

Literacy is a highly politicised concept and there is no consensus on its desired ends. It at once serves as an instrument for individual empowerment as well as a means for social control and even political domination (Rowling, 2000). Central to this understanding of literacy is Paulo Freire's idea of critical or emancipatory literacy. According to Freire (1987), literacy is vital to what it means to be human and he explores the complexities of this understanding. At core, Freire understands literacy as "a creative act that involves the critical comprehension of reality" (p. 156). His ideas have influenced many scholars, including Elspeth Stuckey, whose conception of literacy as "a social restriction and an individual accomplishment" (1991, p. 64) is particularly telling and might be said to capture the current view of literacy among many researchers in education who promote progressive or 'critical' pedagogies. However, Atchoarena and Hite (2001) argue, "We still need empirical data to resolve vital questions relating to the role education (including literacy) plays in generating or reducing inequalities and how important it acts as a mechanism of differentiation and stratification" (p. 205). Citing Goody (1968) and Downing (1973), Mason and Allen (1986) make the point, "some historical data demonstrate that the literate few in power intentionally restrict literacy, if they feel threatened by low literate factions" (p. 5).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of literacy in Swaziland. The following research questions guide the study: (1) *what* contradictions characterise Swazi adult education? And (2) *whose* interests does literacy serve in Swaziland and *why*?

### Conceptual Framework

The study draws upon Brown's (1999, 2001) route to 'high skills' (formation) model. The central features of this model are an economy in which "there is a wide distribution of workforce skills; where the economy fully utilises these to achieve high productivity across a wide range of sectors, at the same time producing relative income equality" (1999, p. 240). Using Brown's model facilitates locating Swaziland in the low skills – high skills continuum and examining the possibilities and limitations of moving to a high skills society; the culture, economics and country's history being vital factors in determining the pace along the 'route' to high skills. More importantly, it entails identifying the trade-offs that need to be made in moving along as well as the consensus or struggle around reaching one among stakeholders (government, employers and workers' representatives). While I use Brown's model, I substitute high skills for low skills because latter skills conceivably characterise Swaziland more than high skills.

Even as the manner in which countries attempt to maintain a commitment to skills upgrading and narrowing income inequalities remains an open question, however, what emerges is that the way a country reacts to various systemic 'pressure points' will influence the future of skills formation policies. Just as 'pressure point' does not signify 'contradiction' as such, the pressure points may involve contradictions such as between the forces of global capitalism and a commitment to economic nationalism. Pressure point in this model differs from the Marxist interpretation of in-built contradictions of capitalism between, for instance, capital and labour.

However, what the pressure points do unavoidably entail is “conflict and political struggle that nation states attempt to manage” (Brown, 2001, p. 242). Even as nation states do so, one argues that aspects of the conflict and struggle implicate the state too; it does not attempt to manage conflict and political struggle from an isolated, remote position.

In Brown’s model, the pressure points unite around issues of globalisation, skills up-grading in ways that contribute to learning, innovation and productivity (LIP), positional competition for education and employment and changing notions of the worker (1999, p. 241). The finer details of this complex topic are beyond the limits of this paper; however, three pressure points can be noted for Swaziland. First, skills up-grading and over-coming the problem of ‘low skills. Second, tensions in the positional competition for education and jobs. Third, state-market relationship in the face of globalisation. It is argued that technologically-advanced countries and ‘backward’ economies commonly face a series of ‘pressure points’ that they can only address by making a series of policy trade-offs. While the pressure points are common to the economies, the politics, culture and history of a nation’s and socio-economic development will determine the trade-offs (Ball, 1998; Youngman, 2000).

### **Methodology**

Policy documents and interviews form the categories of data for this study. In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from officers in Swaziland involved in educational policy planning with special reference to literacy formation. Twenty six respondents participated in this study, conducted between January and April 2003. While the selection of participants was designed to assure variety, it was not necessarily representative. The selection of participants was purposive and weighted by considerations of access and the opportunity to understand most about the topic under investigation. In the interest of triangulation, official documents corroborated the evidence from other sources (Tellis, 1997), principally, interviews. Transcriptions of interviews comprised the raw data; documentary analysis and evidence, the supplementary data. I draw upon the work of Strauss and Corbin (1990), Miles and Huberman (1994) and Kvale (1996) to organise and analyse the data.

### **Findings of the Study**

First, government acknowledges that education is “a continuous process with no possible end; therefore, the focus now is not simply education but life-long learning which takes place both formally and informally” (Ministry of Education, MOE 1999, p. 7). Even so, the study found that the same government pays little or no attention to adult and non-formal education (NFE). Second, even with the official rhetoric to the importance of literacy in national development, literacy funding, which is the real indicator of educational priority, remains low compared to formal education funding. Third, while there is a national education policy (NEP) which makes reference (*albeit* vaguely) to adult and NFE, the study found that it is not being implemented. In regard to support to this sub-sector, government is less explicit, as captured by: “The Ministry of Education shall continue to perform its co-ordinating function while relevant ministries continue to run such programmes” (MOE, 1999, p. 7). Fourth, even as the literacy providers recognised that literacy was both an economic and a political issue, some tended to concentrate on the economic ends of literacy arguing they were neither allowed nor fascinated with venturing on the political ends of literacy. Fifth and last, the level of trust between the traditional authorities and western-educated Swazi remained a contentious subject. Suspicion of western forms of education in some quarters is not new. It has created a ‘blind-spot’ towards the phenomenon of ‘low literacy’ for certain people who argue high literacy frequently results in western-educated Swazi questioning of authority and wisdom of the ‘elders’; poor political

influence exacerbating the situation for low literate adults. Nevertheless, aspirations of most parents for their children and the sheer strength in numbers ensure that young people receive education in Swaziland. In contrast, there is less consensus or sufficient numbers to garner support for the education and training of low literate Swazi adults. There is a struggle only few will engage into with neither political will nor adequate resources from the authorities to pursue a worthy course by select adult educators. As will be noted, 'worthy cause' is a relative concept as some but not all revere.

### **Discussion of Findings**

First, evidence gathered from documents and interviews shows that some of the government's claims about education in general and adult education in particular are not sustainable owing to some discrepancy between written policy and strategies used to implement it. Surprisingly, the Ministry of Education still defines its role in this sub-sector as a 'co-ordinating' one while 'relevant' ministries continue to provide adult and NFE programmes (MOE, 1999). If the Ministry of Education does not assume a leading role, which government ministry or department is well-placed to assume that role? Apart from complicating budget allocations, the expertise in this sub-sector remained in the wider education sector. What's more, the Ministry even as it purports to perform a 'co-ordinating' role yet it has no co-ordinating mechanism in place. As one government official conceded: "... so that the Ministry of Education's role could be to ensure what is happening among these various adult education providers. There is also need to know what is happening in the private sector – what programmes are offered and by whom?" (GM1).

Raising a little suspicion about government public statements relating to adult and NFE was the finding that the Adult Education Council, a statutory body established by Act of Parliament, had surprisingly been dormant for some years. This seemed strange given the Council was the legal instrument through which the Ministry of Education requested funds for the sub-sector from the national budget system. In the absence of the Council, how did government articulate the policies, goals and action plans of the sub-sector in parliament? During this study, there were no plans to resuscitate the Council. In its absence, it should be expected that resources were arbitrarily allocated to this sub-sector and the temptation to divert some of these to other sub-sectors cannot be ruled out.

In regard to adult education and literacy, it is rather surprising that a Sub-Saharan African country would neglect this area given the poor enrolment of children in primary school (Dunne & King, 2003). Besides, research indicates that in Sub-Saharan Africa generally and Swaziland specifically among those children who enrol some do not complete the primary school cycle (Atchoarena & Hite, 2000) or take 10 to 12 years to complete a 7-year programme. It is therefore not unreasonable to expect that a government will fully support adult education and literacy training. As well, Swaziland is a signatory to the United Nations and its various organs promoting education generally (UNESCO), child welfare including education (UNICEF) or workers' education (ILO). It has participated and is signatory to a number of world declarations – the Education for All (EFA) Agenda, the Dakar Forum on EFA, the UN Charter of Human Rights (for instance, Article 26 – on education), among others. Also related, weak links between formal and NFE do not augur well for the latter. Indeed, the formal school system pushes its 'low achievers' to the NFE sub-sector but does not welcome the latter system's participants.

Problems abound implementing the adult and NFE policy section as different parties presented different accounts depending on their government or non-government position and location in the hierarchy. So, for example, senior officials were more defensive and less critical

compared to officers in subordinate positions even within government. I was struck by how the government did not seem to find anything strange leaving provision of literacy, for example, to the interests and resources of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), thus freeing itself from the duty. While not suggesting deviating from the official curriculum, it is however to be expected that adult educators will blend ‘technical’ literacy knowledge with critical components at appropriate stages of their classes – the notion of ‘emancipatory, empowering’ literacy. A number of literacy instructors/supervisors interviewed conceded merely teaching the mechanical and less socio-political aspects of literacy. Given that literacy is not a technical neutral skill (Street, 1993); this appeared a contradiction in terms. Thus, the literacy education and training provided merely supports the *status quo*: namely, existing power relations and social inequalities.

The other aspect of policy relates to involvement in its formulation. Respondents at various levels of policy-making interpreted this differently – some arguing relevant stakeholders were involved; others challenging the claim. Respondents asserting the policy process involved all those perceived relevant to adult and NFE were then probed. It transpired the disagreement concerned government involving school educators but largely ignoring adult educators including professional their association. Hence, anyone in education but not necessarily in adult and NFE could make an input – whether this interpretation resonates with scholars in this field is still debatable. Thus, while government maintained it extensively consulted on the policy, adult educators contended it oddly enough did not consult the ‘relevant’ adult education stakeholders.

Low literacy of some adults should be read for what it is: an advantage to some powerful few both in the traditional and the modern sector of the Swazi economy. In the traditional sector, low literate adults provide the bulk of the tribute labour to the chiefs in the first instance and then to the monarch. In the modern sector, they provide inexpensive labour particularly for low skilled jobs. The practice, carried out in a subtle manner, points to the dual purposes of literacy – at once liberating through empowerment in appropriate knowledge and skills and dominating through social control made possible by certain forms of socialisation (including education). Workers’ representatives demonstrated great awareness to this mistrust of education by some traditional authorities even as some interviewees from other sectors attempted to dismiss it. Besides, the workers’ representatives knew much as the traditional authorities what education offered its participants, as awakening to the realities of exploitation prompted efforts to challenge it; this threatened the social privilege enjoyed by some while others ‘sacrificed’ their labour.

Mistrust of education in Swaziland dates back to the colonial era when Christian missionaries first introduced education. Some graduates perceived western education as a means to an end - giving power to commoners and the parallel waning of royal dictatorship, during which the education of Africans often concentrated on royalty and the sons of chiefs. In can be observed, then, that education (literacy) for the under-privileged offered an opportunity not only to secure employment but also to escape from the traditional ‘ties’ to chiefs and/or the monarch.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The Swazi government needs to demonstrate the claim that it perceives education in a broad, holistic way and its subsequent assurance that adult literacy is important. Presenting concrete proposals and action plans might show it recognises that adult and NFE in general and literacy specifically supports and is a vital component of education for all (EFA). Given low school enrolment ratios, it is reasonable to argue that without the support of adult and NFE programmes, the attainment of EFA goals remains utopian. In regard to practice, there is need for further research in adult and NFE to ascertain how effective it is, for example, by generating information on who has access to its programmes; who might be excluded based on age, class or

gender and, more importantly, with what consequences. From the data-base, the Swazi government can identify the best practices of adult and NFE and incorporate them into formal education – but cognisant “what... regard as ‘best practice’ is always contingent” (Brown, 2001, p. 237). Much as the need to incorporate ‘best adult and NFE practices’ is noted, the study found that it is sometimes difficult to identify good practices because while adult and NFE reports exist, there is, again, inadequate analytical research. Government needs also a system where learners can easily move from NFE to formal education programmes as articulated in its ‘quality of life enhancement’ strategy (Ministry of Economic Planning & Development, 2002), a position that the Africa Regional EFA Forum supports. In order to improve the status of NFE, teacher education programmes might incorporate training in NFE methods to enable trainees understand the philosophy and approaches of adult and NFE. As well, the findings have implications for incorporating training in adult and NFE in the professional development of all education personnel. In doing so, appropriate NFE programmes might be accredited according to the national qualifications framework (NQF) to enable recognition of alternative routes to equivalent qualifications and thereby facilitate transfer between formal and NFE programmes.

All evidence considered, the manner in which literacy serves interests and needs of the low literate in Swaziland remains a moot point. There is no denying literacy has not served its participants equally. Any foundation laid, however, is a vital step on the path to participate in the labour market and civil society on different, more assertive terms than without it – reason enough why it cannot wait (Bhola, 1981). Differential treatment should be expected given that literacy simultaneously ‘liberates’ and ‘dominates’ depending on *who* uses it, for *what* purpose. By analogy, people will use a certain discourse (literacy) to justify their privileged position; others will use a counter discourse (literacy) to challenge what they perceive a barrier to their ‘empowerment’. This dual quality emphasises its ‘subjective’ character. Central to explicit and implicit contradictions inherent in Swazi adult education is the extent to which public statements translate into literacy strategies that lead to pragmatic adult and NFE programmes complete with resources. To-date, literacy helps low literate adults in terms and to the extent that the political establishment allows them to access it; how it defines the benefits accruing from literacy and the consequences for them and the society. As noted, despite the commitments made in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 and ratified in Dakar, Senegal in 2000, the Swazi government marginalises adult education in terms of both public policy and public funding.

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