

# **RESEARCH REPORT**

## **REIGNITING THE POPULAR EDUCATION TRADITION IN SOUTH AFRICA: RESEARCH AND LAUNCH OF A WEBSITE ([www.populareducation.co.za](http://www.populareducation.co.za))**

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### **The Research**

Popular Education initiatives in working class communities have been an integral part of people's efforts to respond to the lack of education and cultural facilities under apartheid. In South Africa, in the eighties, 'People's Education' was one response to deep economic, political and social crises reflected in and impacting on the education crisis. People's Education was both an educational and a political programme. Remarkably, a wide range of concerned parties from within civil society, the private sector, academia, and trade unions got together and debated vigorously about both how to address the crisis, and how to imagine and forge an alternative education, for the future, together. A 1985 Soweto Parents Crisis Committee Conference passed a resolution on the conditional return to school to use schools as the beginnings of People's Education. People's Education can be described as:

a deliberate attempt to move away from reactive protests around education to develop a counter-hegemonic education strategy, to contribute to laying a basis for a future, post-apartheid South Africa. (Kruss, 1988, p. 8)

What has happened to this counter-hegemonic strategy? What initiatives are assisting the process of building a vibrant, critically productive democratic society? Steele (1999) asserts:

popular education is a construct which emerges out of particular, cultural and material conditions (p. 95).

Given the current context of increasing inequality in South Africa and conditions under which food insecurity has become a staple of the majority of people who, unemployed, live off social grants and occasional contract work, one might assume popular education would have a heyday. However, while local civil protests about a lack of service delivery (with an estimated 300 incidences a year across the country) or national campaigns for people's health and housing may hit the headlines, there is a disquieting silence about education strategies that challenge the mainstream discourse and provision that announce the importance of shaping 'homo economicus'.

Advocates of popular education recognize how it could be one of the pillars of the new democracy's effort to support people driven development in the struggle against poverty, ill health, violence and mistrust. However, as elsewhere, popular education is poorly understood, operates in often invisible

interstices of society, and activists and practitioners struggle for basic resources to reach those who are most excluded and sidelined. This is the context for the research and action project outlined here.

Re-membering Traditions of Popular Education is an 18 month research project supported by the Ministry of Higher Education and Training, and located within the Division for Lifelong Learning at the University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa. The research undertakes to remember and make connections by uncovering past political activists' stories of struggle, workers' experiences in factories, women's skills in raising new generations, adult basic education facilitators in literacy classes, health workers healing with local wisdom, and connect these with the present. It aims to shed light on processes of activist education that generated knowledge in often imaginative and inventive ways, experimenting with creative tools for the occasions. Few of these interventions have found expression in accessible written or visual documents – some still reside only in the memories and narratives of people who were engaged in popular education, or in boxes of dusty documents under the stairs and rolls of posters in cupboards.

Twenty years after the first democratic elections only those who had been active members of popular movements such as 'People's Education for People's Liberation' and the broad range of functional literacy initiatives, community-based agricultural programmes, cultural organisations and labour education initiatives may have a clear understanding of how they operated, what worked and what failed, and why. This research wants to capture some of these stories and the stories of

organisations that made a difference to people involved in and affected by political struggles.

In this, we were guided by a definition of the following key principles of popular education:

- It is underpinned by the value of social justice both in process and in proposed outcomes;
- It is rooted in the daily experiences of ordinary people: their social, economic, political and cultural reality throws up the questions and contradictions they wish to examine further in order to change them;
- It is dialogical: all participants engage in dialogue and analysis and in the process develop their voice - the ability to 'speak up and out';
- Popular education and learning are clearly tied to action- what Freire called 'praxis': The purpose of learning to 'read the world' is to change it.

## **Methodology**

The research began with an extensive 'mapping the terrain' exercise during which we sought out people and organisations that survived the change to parliamentary democracy, and new organisations (often staffed with people from 'the old days') that still, or again, work with a popular education approach. The guiding question was: what traditions of popular education exist in various sectors of society, such as the labour movement, community development initiatives, political education and the like? The mapping involved interviews, document

reviews and sometimes observation of educational events.

At the same time we conducted extensive literature reviews attempting to collect and gather any writings on popular education, educational materials, publications, posters and pamphlets, music and other cultural artefacts in South Africa. We also interviewed a range of international and local educators about past and present practices, their inspirations, beliefs and insights. In this process, a number of convergences emerged – enough to identify an interwoven network of connections and synergies. We organized a range of workshops, meetings, seminars with peers, mainly from the Western Cape, to discuss conceptual issues and broaden our perspectives. Two three-day national workshops attended by 25 education activists included conceptual work around ‘traditions of popular education’ and activities designed to identify ‘currents’ or ‘connections’ in the ‘river of popular education’.

## **Decisions and actions**

Early on it emerged that the size of this research would require many collaborators in all of the nine provinces: researching the past in terms of practitioners, materials, documents, visual records is an enormous task. Once we began to scratch the surface of past and present we became overwhelmed by the magnitude of the undertaking and the dirge of readily accessible information. Therefore, we had to make some early decisions to delineate the research and create a base for materials collected.

## **A focus on the present**

We decided to begin with where we are now, and collect information on current popular education practices. This ‘mapping’ of people and organisations active today was guided by questions such as, ‘What claims do organisations make regarding their work as popular education?’, and ‘What understandings of popular education emerge?’ We discovered that currently, there is still a wide range of organisations engaged in practices they term ‘popular education’. By this, some mean accessible education for the people/ derived from the people/building on people’s knowledge and experiences. However, for many, popular education is mainly a technology and set of tools. They have no clearly articulated educational purpose that aims beyond individual / personal change. Few are popular education initiatives in the sense of our definition: consciously organized education that supports or initiates collective action for transformation.

Based on interviews, document reviews and observation we produced ‘organizational snapshots’ hoping that these would allow us to see how key people in organisations build on previous traditions, practices, forms of popular education. By now, we have constructed approximately 37 ‘snapshots’ of organisations mainly in the Western Cape Province of South Africa, involved in popular education. The analysis of these is ongoing.

Beyond organisational ‘snapshots’ we produced more substantial profiles of experienced practitioners and popular education programmes, both local and international. These are offering

insight into working / applied principles and values. Asking practitioners how they came to be activists, how they developed their skills and experience and what motivates them to continue working in popular education has shown that while there is a vast range of roads that brought people to the practice, they all share a deep commitment to social justice, a sense of solidarity and the belief and hope that alternatives are indeed possible.

In terms of the research into 'traditions of popular education in South Africa' what emerges is that:

- there are few common understandings of what constitutes popular education – it is often understood to be synonymous with 'non-formal education', or community education. In particular, the inherent /explicit political dimension of popular education is absent;
- there is no coherent discussion around popular education: no forum, no organization, no events – nothing that somehow holds the dialogue together and advocates or educates around it. There is, however, a keen interest in debating what constitutes or defines popular education;
- the majority of contemporary popular education organisations are not continuing practices from the past (in particular anti-apartheid days), nor are they they consciously building on those past traditions;
- current social movements generally have a single focus and mobilise for a specific action, for example, sanitation or violence against women and children.

Therefore, popular education is less underpinned by values of knowledge production in the context of and for the purpose of social justice, where knowledge is clearly contextualized within larger dynamics of power and interest. Instead, education is focused on particular issues aimed at informing participants about the issue at stake and action(s) around it.

Amongst other groups of experienced practitioners there is a greater reflectivity on pedagogy. The trial-and-error ways of constant experimentation have been replaced by processes of deep reflection on practice and theory with questions of how knowledge is to be co-created and how such knowledge would be socially useful (or not).

It seems that the crucial difference between past and current popular education is the role of praxis: while there is a rhetoric of reflection and action and of theory and practice, these two rarely go hand in hand in a sustained way. The sense of urgency and anger that gives rise to action is often not matched by a depth of understanding, a commitment to values, a sense of accountability to each other and larger ideas inscribed in social justice.

A 'short breath' of immediate action (without reflection!) has replaced the 'long breath' of a comprehensive struggle in which one issue is closely related to another. The model of integration and integrity between educating, learning and doing by being immersed in a simultaneous process of struggling to learn and learning to struggle has given way to a culture of sporadic surges.



## **Creation of a website**

We discovered that many materials such as posters and publications have been digitalized and are held in various (university) archives. We realised that a sustainable base for collecting and creating access to 'hard' copies of materials would benefit mainly those activists in close proximity to the university. Therefore, we decided to construct a website and upload data as they became available. The website [www.populareducation.co.za](http://www.populareducation.co.za) is the only existing website that is clearly identifiable with popular education in South Africa.

It serves a number of purposes:

Firstly, it is to be the beginning of a growing 'living repository' of popular education as we invite participation and contributions to this research from people interested in popular education. A 'contribute' function allows practitioners to send in materials which can be sorted and uploaded in the appropriate place. The link to other popular websites such as South African History-on-line we hope will broaden the base of potential users.

Secondly, beyond functioning as a 'library' or archive for information on popular education the site aims to re-kindle debate on popular education as an important vehicle for deepening and widening democracy in the country. We write features on various aspects of popular education to inspire and invite comments and dialogue, and the 'news' function informs about upcoming events.

Thirdly, for practitioners, it is an archive of information and stories, images and ideas about

popular education, past and present. It offers access to collections of useful materials such as 'codes' and session outlines and in this way seeks to inspire and support current practitioners by offering new ideas and tested tools.

Fourthly, the website is a platform for people across the country to build their own networks and strengthen the provision of popular education. The link to other social networking tools such as Facebook serves as a greater presence and gives us a flexible tool for quick communications around topical issues. The Popular Education Facebook site is also becoming an educational tool as we post links to critical articles and related organisations and events.

## **Conclusion**

This project aims to ignite popular educational optimism and hope. Recognising the potential of activities and movements that inspired and continue to motivate educators and learners in popular education alike, it seeks to cause ripple effects in (adult and youth) education, more generally. Given the limited time-frame proposed activities are designed as 'ignition' actions rather than comprehensive and in-depth undertakings. This first phase of the project ends in December 2014, and its future is still under discussion. However, it is hoped that it will light a spark that leads to future research and direct provision and the forging of new traditions.

If you have experiences or information to contribute please contact us! The growth of this site

and our knowledge about the past, to inform the present and future, lies in the hands of all of us!

## **References**

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