Basic education: a critical innovative strategy to eradicate poverty among rural women in South Africa

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Abstract.

The political situation in South Africa during the apartheid era, coupled with some obsolete African traditions and geographical locations, put most black girl children in rural areas at a disadvantage educationally. Before 1994 schools in the country were not open to all population groups, and most rural children living on the farms had to travel long distances to school. While some parents genuinely feared for the safety of their girl children footing many kilometres to school, there were others who did not see the value and the need for female education. This cultural 'imperialism' and/or discrimination has resulted in many adult females in the rural areas today living in poverty. They are powerless socially and economically; this is a situation that increases their dependence on men and, as well as their vulnerability. Although there is political freedom, most black rural women in the country could hardly enjoy it because they are illiterate, 'uneducated' and 'unskilled'. Without basic education and training, most rural black women are cut off from socio-economic and political activities in their families, communities and the country at large.

This paper argues that, in pursuit of social justice, and in line with their constitutional rights, illiterate, rural women should be targeted and empowered through basic education. The thesis of the paper is that it is only through basic knowledge and skills that rural women would be able to get out of poverty and the dependency syndrome, and be able
to play meaningful roles in the socio-economic and political endeavours of their respective families and communities. The paper, based on the author's experiences and the relevant literature, critically examines the importance of basic education and training in eradicating poverty, helplessness and deprivation among rural black women in South Africa.

Key words: women, rural, poverty, empowerment, knowledge, skills, dependency

Introduction

Many factors; including insecurity, obsolete traditions and the geographical location of Blacks during the era of apartheid, put the black girl child in the rural area at an educational disadvantage. Under the apartheid political dispensation, schools in South Africa were racially specific, and were thus not open to all population groups. For that reason, most rural children who lived on farms had to walk long distances to school. While some parents genuinely feared for the safety of girl their children, walking many kilometres to school, there were others who did not see the value of taking a female child to school. Some black parents thought that a girl child did not need formal education; instead she should assist her mother at home to learn home-making, and to become a good wife and home-maker.

This ignorance led to cultural 'imperialism' and discrimination in the families — where the boy child went to school, and his sisters stayed at home. This has resulted in the thousands of illiterate adult women in the rural areas today living in poverty — largely due to the lack of basic knowledge and skills.

The lack of opportunity to attend school — be this for cultural or political reasons — during their childhood has rendered many rural black women socially and economically powerless. This situation increases their dependence on men, and makes them vulnerable to various abuses. Although there is political freedom for all South Africans since the demise of apartheid in 1994, most rural black women can hardly enjoy or exercise their rights and their freedom because they are illiterate, 'uneducated' and 'unskilled'.

Without basic education and training, rural black women would be perpetually alienated from socio-economic and political activities in the families, communities and the country at large. This paper argues that in pursuit of social justice, and in line with the Constitutional impera-
tives, rural black, illiterate women must be targeted and empowered through basic education. It is argued here that when rural women are equipped with basic knowledge and skills, they might not only become active citizens of their respective communities, but could also get out of poverty and the dependency syndrome.

Thus, through basic education, rural women might be in a better position to play meaningful roles in the socio-economic and political endeavours of their respective families, communities and the nation at large. As Kweggir Aggrey (1875-1927) succinctly put it: 'When you educate a man, you educate a single individual; but when you educate a woman you educate a family'.

The paper, based on the author's experience as an adult educator and development practitioner, and on the relevant literature, critically examines the importance of basic education and training in eradicating poverty, helplessness, vulnerability and deprivation among rural women in South Africa.

The theoretical framework

This paper advocates the use of basic education as a tool to empower rural women for the eradication of poverty. It is grounded in two important theories – Critical Pedagogy and Critical Rationalism; because as Karl Popper (1902-1994) affirmed, when a theory appears to you as the only possible one, take this as a sign that you have neither understood the theory, nor the problem, which it was intended to solve.

Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy emphasises the objective and unbiased reflection on existing knowledge and practice (Glass, 2010:15). The major argument of critical pedagogy is that education should comprise the process and practice of setting people free from socio-economic and political ignorance and slavery. The theory is a call for reflection and action, in order to transform the world (Freire, 1974:36).

It offers lessons for the socio-economically and politically downtrodden, such as the illiterate, the unskilled, the marginalised, the dispossessed, the poor and the vulnerable women in society. These (above mentioned) groups of women may find a home in critical pedagogy, because it encourages them to seek immediate practical solutions to transform their circumstances through basic education.
Basic education [such as, literacy and skills learning] could liberate adult rural women from ignorance, poverty and helplessness, because they would then be capable of learning if they were given the opportunity. As Freire (1974) affirmed, every human being, no matter how ignorant or submerged in the culture of silence s/he may be, is capable of learning, or has the right to learn. The theory affords people the opportunity to read, write and learn for themselves, and to engage in a culture of questioning that demands far more competence than mere rote learning and the application of acquired skills (Giroux, 2010:2).

In other words, critical pedagogy calls for adult learners to be given the opportunity to relate learning to their lived experiences, and thereby redeeming themselves in the situatedness of their daily lives.

Adult educators have a lot to learn from critical pedagogy to enhance their practice. Freire’s ideas expressed in this theory (critical pedagogy) have made enormous contributions to educational transformation in our time, because the struggle for the socio-economic and political emancipation of the oppressed still draws on his insights. The ideas and thoughts expressed in his book, The Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1994) are as needed today as they were when first articulated and published.

The dire poverty in which thousands of rural women still find themselves — almost two decades after political freedom in South Africa — might be the direct consequence of the lack of access (or inequality in access) to education during their childhood. Although apartheid has been abolished, the consequence of decades of discrimination is evidenced by the lack of knowledge and skills for employment among most women in the rural communities of South Africa.

The high poverty and unemployment situation in the country today might well be attributed to the denial of the indigenous people their right of access to education during the era of discrimination. This deplorable situation demands a critical reflection, and the provision of basic education to rural illiterate women — not only as compensation or skills for employment — but to bring equality and social justice. The theory encourages adult educators to teach basic knowledge and skills to rural, illiterate black women to enable them to be inspired to transform their situations.

The chief proponent of Critical Rationalism is the Austro-British philosopher, Sir Karl Popper (1902-1994). The theory postulates that humans have to learn how to act and react in their environment, in
order to survive (Zecha, 2002:16). Critical Rationalism is based on the premise that self-criticism is education, and education is problem-solving. The theory sees education as a process of helping humans to learn and become responsible members of their society (Zecha, 2002:61).

Thus, education must be based on the intention to assist individuals to engage in introspection, self-evaluation and development. The concept of education is based on actions and activities through which human beings attempt to produce lasting improvement to their existing, and sometimes deplorable, situations. That is, through education, humans learn to solve problems; and by so doing they are able to adapt to their environment.

To be able to take action to improve their conditions and thus become responsible members of society, humans, as rational beings, must take a critical view of their lives and behaviours through introspection, self-evaluation and self-criticism, hence the name Critical Rationalism.

The theory encourages adults, especially rural women, to appraise their conditions or circumstances, and to enrol in basic education programmes to improve their situation. Without knowledge and skills, rural women cannot adapt to the demands of contemporary society. It is through basic education that rural illiterate women can acquire knowledge and skills for survival and active participation in the socio-economic and political activities of a knowledge-based society.

Brezinka (1992:40-41) affirmed that education involves actions through which human beings attempt to produce lasting improvements in the structure of the psychic dispositions of other people, in order to retain those components they consider positive, or to prevent the formation of dispositions they regard as negative. The intention of education is to assist individuals to develop — by equipping them with the relevant knowledge and skills to take part in the socio-economic advancement of their society. Without these intentions, there can be no education (Zecha, 2002:64).

The feminine face of illiteracy in South Africa

The factors that have contributed to the high levels of illiteracy among Blacks, in general, and rural women in particular, have already been alluded to at the beginning of this paper. Without basic education, thousands of these women would remain in poverty, and would not be
able to contribute to the development of their communities and the country at large, because illiteracy is a stumbling block to development.

It (illiteracy) has several social implications, such as low productivity and lower incomes. These issues are linked to HIV/AIDS; and they, therefore, affect all national development efforts (Alitchison & Alidou, 2008:1).

In recognising the debilitating affect of illiteracy on development, the South African government launched the Kha Ri Gude [let us learn] literacy campaign in 2007, to fast-track literacy delivery. At the time of launching the Campaign, there were about 4.7 million illiterates (who have never been to school), and another 4.9 million adults who were to varying degrees functionally illiterate (they had dropped out of school before grade 7) – a total of 9.6 million (McKay, 2011). The majority of these people were women, who now live in rural communities of the country.

Although gender differentiation was not as skewed in 2001, women represented 60% of the unschooled people in South Africa (McKay, 2011).

All the provinces have their share of adult illiteracy; but KwaZulu-Natal has the highest number, with 1.1 million adults who have no schooling, and another 1 million who are functionally illiterate. The illiteracy statistics thus reflect the apartheid-era patterns of "racial" disadvantage. The campaign to eradicate illiteracy was to target both the truly illiterate (the unschooled) and those who had dropped out of school too early to have developed any functional literacy. The plan targeted all of the totally unschooled who were educable, together with many of the functionally illiterate (a potential total pool of about 7.6 million).

To reach the Dakar goal of a 50% reduction in illiteracy amongst 9.6 million people, some 4.7 million people became the immediate target of this plan in the years 2008 to 2012 (McKay, 2011).

As its contribution to adult education in general, and specifically to the eradication of illiteracy, unemployment and poverty, the University of South Africa established an academic department for Adult Basic Education in 1995. The ABE department has since then trained three thousand educators to teach basic education to adults, particularly rural women, in the various communities. The training of basic education facilitators for all adults by the UNISA’s department of adult basic education resonates with UNESCO’s (1990) education for ALL; and it
provides a platform and an impetus for achieving the goals of the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action.

The value of basic education for the lives of rural women

The provision of basic education for rural women coalesces with the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, which supports the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals on poverty reduction, women’s empowerment, HIV and AIDS and Environment Conservation (McKay, 2011), as well as the reduction of illiteracy by 50% by 2015. Thomas et al. (1994:60) affirmed that female education and health are correlated; and female literacy rates have a direct impact on demographic variables, such as fertility and infant mortality in developing countries.

An educated and informed female population, for example, could bring about the lowering of population growth and infant mortality rates. This would assist countries to reach their other developmental goals (Thomas et al., 1994).

Through basic education programmes, thousands of rural women throughout the country are empowered by equipping them with reading, writing, numeracy and job-related skills. Empowered by practical skills, such as reading, writing and numeracy, most rural women are able to create their own jobs, and even to employ others to work for them.

Conversations between this writer and ABET tutors – during workshops conducted for the latter in the provinces – confirm that most rural women graduates of basic education become entrepreneurs who create jobs in their communities and even employ others to work for them. In most rural communities, women with basic education have opened small businesses – ranging from tuck shops, restaurants, childcare centres, hair salons, dress-making, knitting, poultry-keeping to fruit and vegetable sales. Although these initiatives are mostly small businesses, they contribute to poverty alleviation by putting food on the table and assisting single parents to pay their school fees and buy clothes for their children.

Basic education plays a meaningful and enormous role in the socio-economic and political activities of women in the country. Apart from equipping rural women with reading, writing and numeracy skills, literacy enhances HIV & AIDS awareness, prevention and care, family
planning (safe sex and birth control). Basic education also makes women aware of the socio-economic consequences of having too many children; and it enables them to reduce and space the births of their children.

With the acquisition of basic education (i.e. reading and communication skills), women in the rural communities can become confident, knowledgeable and skilful in many ways. They could, for example, operate ATMs, mobile phones, read and write letters, administer medicine to children and sick family members, access contraceptives, plan and space, or reduce child birth, calculate the profit of small businesses, read the Bible, sing in the choir and complete (fill in) forms at various offices, such as the Home Affairs, Bank, clinic and Post Office.

The ability to engage in such activities increases rural women’s independence, freedom, mobility, communication and participation in social and economic activities in their communities.

Adult basic education is a foundation stone for lifelong learning. As the basis for lifelong learning, basic education provides adults with the foundation for further studies in both practical skills training and academic programmes. On a follow-up visit to ABET tutorial centres in the rural communities of Taung in August 2011, this author met with over 30 adult learners who had passed ABET Level 4 and had enrolled for FET courses in basic carpentry, electrical work, brick-laying, building and painting of houses.

Of the 30 adult learners who were informally interviewed, 25 were women who had also acquired communication skills in both English in their home language. This revelation is significant, because all government official documents and those from parastatals are written in English. In a multi-ethnic country in a globalised world, the ability to write and speak English, in addition to one’s own home language, would not only ensure understanding and adaptation to one’s environment, but would, above all, enhance business transactions, such as the buying and selling of essential goods and services.

With the demise of apartheid, all places in South Africa are now open to all people; and both local and foreign tourists visit all corners of the country. English then becomes handy in conducting business transactions (e.g. selling of local products like fruits, pots, beads or artefacts) between visitors and the rural women. The examples above, which illustrate some of the positive impacts of basic education on rural
women, also indicate the crucial role basic education plays – both as a tool for transformation and as a basis for lifelong learning.

The rural women who enrol for basic education have no formal employment, and are mostly engaged in multi-small business activities to ensure their livelihood. With practical skills in scientific agriculture, most of them can now grow cabbage, beetroot, tomatoes, pepper, maize and onions for sale and home consumption. The interaction with the women also revealed that some of the participants in the basic education programme are engaged in sewing (patching of clothes) and small businesses (e.g. restaurant, tuck shops, the selling of fruits, cigarettes, sweets, biscuits and suchlike) at bus stops and taxi ranks.

In the village of Kudutlong (about 50 kilometres from Hartswater, the nearest town) at least three of the educated women were engaged in co-operative poultry-keeping and animal-rearing, in order to generate income. One ABET level-three learner had this to say:

Poultry-keeping does not only provide our children with nutrition, but it also gives us some income.

Indeed, the rural women who participate in basic education lessons have practically applied the knowledge and skills acquired, to improve the lives of their families and communities at large.

Learning experiences that could eradicate poverty among rural women

Wherever formal learning takes place, the activities must be properly organised, in order to achieve the relevant educational outcomes. All formal or organised learning activities are driven by curriculum, a term which refers to all the learning experiences an educational institution organises for its learners. The curriculum for the basic education programme should take into consideration the learning needs and the context of the learners. In basic education programmes, adult learners come to the learning situation with some urgent learning needs to be met.

In order to assist them realise their goals, both the programme provider and the educator must do a needs analysis on prospective learners before the teaching-learning interaction commences. Thus, to ensure that these learning needs are met, both programme planners and
educators should do a needs-analysis in the various communities, to enable them to design integrated learning experiences that could address the learning needs of participants.

In other words, adult learners must be involved in designing the relevant learning experiences they would like to go through. For example, as people who are unemployed, they need to learn skills that could empower them to engage in income-generating activities. In this way, they would not remain in perpetual ignorance, vulnerability and poverty. The advantage of the needs-analysis is that it enables the educator to know and understand what adults want to learn, and why they want to learn any particular skills.

Adults should be given the opportunity to participate in decisions that relate to the skills they want to learn, because such background knowledge or information about learners puts the educator in a better position to assist them in realising their learning goals.

Thus, the learning experiences or the curriculum of basic education programme for rural women, which aims at eradicating poverty, should cover reading, writing in one’s mother-tongue, and English communication, life-orientation, basic scientific agriculture (i.e. crop-production, gardening, poultry-keeping and animal-rearing), dress-making, sewing, cookery, carpentry, joinery, electrical works and painting. Although the above areas might be the curriculum for basic education for rural women, the learning programme should start with the basics, like literacy, numeracy and life-orientation at level one; and as the women acquire basic communication skills and proceed to other levels, more courses could be phased in.

Conclusion

This paper advocates the use of basic education to eradicate extreme poverty, ignorance and vulnerability among black illiterate rural women. It has been argued in this paper that political and socio-economic factors contribute to the denial of many black females in the countryside their right to formal education. These women are now economically active; but many of them live in poverty, because they lack employment skills. The paper concludes that to eradicate extreme poverty among rural black illiterate women, and to enable them to be socially and economically independent, to enjoy political freedom, and
to contribute effectively to community and national development, basic education must be made available to them.

References


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