

# Is education about developing skills or liberating the mind and uplifting the society?

*“...the rhetoric on skills shortage by capital is made with other purposes in mind ...as a convenient smokescreen behind which co-optation of an incipient black petty bourgeoisie can proceed” (Nzimande, 1991)*

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## **Introduction**

The paper briefly sheds some light on national policy intervention for skills development, for instance, through the Employment Equity Act and its impact on redressing past inequalities and injustices, whilst promoting development. It also look at the significant factor that needs to be revisited when assessing the contemporary state of skills in SA, relates to the poor and segregated education and training inherited from apartheid in 1994 (Kraak, 2003:74). The core problem is generally a low level of education, specifically amongst the black African workforce (Vally, 1997a:40).

Therefore, it is worth noting that when one speaks of the question of skill of which has always been analysed in terms of its relationship to work, performance and the labour market (Adam, 1997). The paper will briefly look at South Africa (SA) in the past, where skill was racialised and reflected in the nature of labour market segmentation. The paper also scrutinise how Black workers were restricted to unskilled and semi-skilled occupations while white workers occupied mainly semi-skilled and skilled jobs. It also looks at the chronic skills shortage that was created amongst the previously disadvantaged black workers as part of the apartheid legacy (Adam, 1997: 232). Today, it presents serious challenges and serves as a constraint to competitiveness in the era of globalisation<sup>1</sup>. The rapid technological changes have aggravated the situation as the demand for a skilled workforce has increased (Hlekiso, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘globalisation’ is a more recent coinage than the phenomena that it purports to proclaim and is distinctly un-scholarly in its origin, as at first, it served as something of an embellishment, referring to a rather specific phenomenon in economic history – an observed tendency of the share of cross-border transactions to increase among all economic transactions that normally benefit the Western countries – with a term that radiates a world-historical and all-inclusive, pan-human sense of an epochal shift (Böröcz, 2006).

In order to have a better understanding of the functions of the labour market in South Africa (SA) in relation to the question of skills and control, this paper looks at the earliest forms of control in the labour market and the manner in which it has been shifting over years. This requires an outline of labour process discourse in which issues of skills and control are central.

### **Contemporary educational interventions and developmental strategies**

When one looks at the fundamental elements of the training dispensation as proposed by the reforming apartheid state in 1991 were that it should be market-driven and employer-led with a considerably shrinking role for the state. The rise of this 'free market' framework had its roots in changes to apartheid state macro-economic and industrial policy that took place a few years earlier. This shift from a macro-economic philosophy based on active state intervention in support of import substitution policies and apartheid-defined institutional structures to that of a free market perspective represented a critical watershed in South Africa's political and economic history (Unwin, 2004).

McCord and Borat argue that the racially polarised employment pattern can be explained in two ways: the restructuring of the public sector and the decline in the quality and relevance of tertiary education (2003:115). The country faces the contradictory views about the nature of graduates which suggest they are not adequately equipped for the workplace. This suggests that higher education institutions produce graduates that are not employable. The high rate of illiteracy, estimated at 16 percent of all adults with functional illiteracy, attests to the state of skills training in the country. A study commissioned for the Joint Initiative for Priority Skills Acquisition (Jipsa) shows that South African tertiary graduates have qualifications that are not suited for the working world (Zake, 2006).

Currently, South Africa is experiencing graduate unemployment that is estimated at 9 percent. While 38 percent of the adult population have matriculated, only 8 percent have tertiary qualifications. In terms of employing skilled labour, there is a gap at all levels between the skills required in the workplace and the current skills available amongst the working population. South Africa is still contracting foreign nationals to address the skills shortage problem (Woolard *et al*, 2003:471). This option raised differing views on the development of skills in South Africa. The International Investment Council (IIC) suggested that the skilled workforce from abroad be reduced (South African Press Association, 2006).

When using the *radical approach* that espouses views on the workings of the labour market and income inequalities as it argues that neither educational nor training programme, nor even the amalgamation of programmes, changes relative income structures in the labour market. (Barker, 2007). However, it is in the interests of capitalists to have different classes of workers and assurance of their sustenance through government structures that serve as the

instrument of the capitalists (Barker, 2007:210). The broader society in which the labour market functions is identified by features such as highly organised work and educated and trained management, to a higher level of a wide range of performances and is geographical-occupational mobility. The dominant cultural goal is “individual achievement” instead of conservation of traditional socio-cultural forms that encourage societal development or the achievement of collective justice. Economic integration operates on the basis of an open market rather than the local community. Independent employers and courts, instead of government, regulate industrial relations. Industrial conflicts are frequent, but are dealt with according to the normally accepted ‘rules of the game’. Education is broad-based, secular, and liberal, rather than sacred-collectivist or narrowly technical-vocational and access to education is generally open but in reality, it is reserved for the privileged elite. Jobs are obtained in labour markets based on education, experience, or performance. Trade unions are competitive and exclusive instead of being co-operative, as they are fragmented along political, ideological, racial, community or individual lines. Wages are determined through negotiations based on supply and demand, productivity, and other economic variables (Abbott, 1980:21).

Therefore, education helps to create and legitimise conditions for creating inequality and sort people into subordinate (inferior) or dominant (superior) positions. Durkheim and Parson’s (1959) view suggests that education moulds, allocates and restricts individuals based on social veracity (McKay, 1995:31). Schools transmit the societal norms, values and specific skills necessary for the diversity of needed social co-operation. Moreover, the education system conveys basic skills such as literacy and numeracy and other more job related skills. Giroux (1983) argues that through correspondence between the social relations of the workplace and the school, people are prepared for different occupationally stratified positions and various social relations, based on domination and subordination. This confirms the correspondence theory that *meritocratic ideology/equal opportunity* legitimises inequality and promotes the belief that talent determines one’s success. In addition, McKay (1995:39) argues that meritocratic ideology creates an illusion that economic success depends on the belief that the school provides equality of educational opportunity. Blackledge and Hunt (1985) observe that education maintains the capitalist system through class maintenance. They argued that:

“it teaches the skills and techniques appropriate for the child’s future job, it imparts the ‘rules of good behaviour’ or the attitudes suitable for the child’s later economic role; ... fosters ‘modesty’, resignation and submissiveness for future capitalists and managers, instills ‘cynicism, contempt, arrogance, self-importance, even smooth-talk

and cunning' and teaches children the ruling ideology in its pure state (ethic, civic instruction, philosophy)" (McKay, 1995).

This was revealed in the interviews of trade union members as a worker belonging to the South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU) who is also a Workers' Representative/ shop steward said that: *"the Department that I work in still resembles the old apartheid South Africa, because the ratio of skilled workers between races is still more visible as African Horticulturalists are less than five. Despite the fact that the African workers who worked in that category for more than twenty years as Assistants to Horticulturalists still have permanent job and no benefits"* (Interview: 15 December 2006). The Independent Municipal and Allied Workers' Union (IMATU) Workers' Representative noted that, *"the managerial structures still resembles the same old structure that was characterised by the senior management which is still white; middle management consists of the majority of Indians followed by whites and small segment of Africans"*(Interview: 12 December 2006). Furthermore, workers aspirations have been however thwarted by the consistent rejection of their applications. Note this response by one of the workers who is also a SAMWU Worker Representative: *"My job is good, but if I have chance to change to another job I would do so, by becoming Training Officer, as I have a Diploma for being a Motor Mechanic Trainer. To add on that I acquired this Diploma in 1997 and I have been applying for such post as from 1998 but all my applications failed after I went through the interview. I will keep on trying maybe I will succeed someday"* (Interview: 05 January 2007).

The paper attempts to shed light on national policy intervention for skills development, for instance, through the Employment Equity Act and its impact on redressing past inequalities and injustices, whilst promoting development. An important factor that needs to be revisited when assessing the contemporary state of skills in SA, relates to the poor and segregated education and training inherited from apartheid in 1994 (Kraak, 2003:74). The core problem is generally a low level of education, specifically amongst the black African workforce (Vally, 1997a:40). In response to these challenges, the South African government has recently introduced the Skills Development Strategy for skills development and the generation of a productive labour force to close the existing skills gaps between black and white South Africans (Hlekiso, 2005: 2). A SAMWU Official indicated during an interview that *"the Municipality offers frivolous skills such as telephone answering, first aid, Batho-Pele but fail to offer meaningful scientific skills that are regarded as scarce i.e. engineering"* (Interview: 15 December 2006).

The government's intervention has also occurred in the context whereby 'high-skills' are seen as being necessary for the successful expansion of human resources development (HRD) (Kraak, 2003:661). The integration of SA into the global economy presented serious challenges in terms of competitiveness. As part of its response to this challenge, the South African government adopted neo-liberal policies centred on the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme, which gave rise to significant changes within the labour market. This occurred at the same time as firms and other industrial enterprises sought not only to survive, but also to become competitive by promoting a flexible and multi-skilled workforce (see Webster and Von Holdt, 2005). The government also adopted the Employment Equity and Skills Development Acts as the means to address skills shortages (Stones, 2006). As Streak and van der Westhuizen (2004) have shown, the 'skills shortage' and restructuring of firms saw an upswing in unemployment that was estimated at 28.6 percent during the period of transition to democracy, and is now estimated at about 41.2 percent (27.8 percent when using the strict definition).

The modern economic system, the definition tends to ignore the limitations of the labour market, industrial employment, and unemployment in favour of the capitalist model of economic organisation. The economic definition of the labour market focuses on the buying and selling of *labour* power and corresponding skills. Durkheim (1956) argued that the labour market operates in a society of high level specialisation of economic activities that are organised on an organic instead on a mechanical basis (Abbot, 1980:15). Standing (1999) and Abbot (1980) illustrate this by highlighting the story of a lemon which cannot speak as an object or improve itself once it is removed from the tree. This type of set-up can only be witnessed in a slave labour market as there are no sober-minded individuals who can be devoted to spending most of their valuable time working for somebody (Standing, 1999 and Abbot, 1980).

Labour market theory occurs in two parts. One relates to the nature of occupational choice whereby every human being will seek better-paying work and this will persuade him/her to move to more advantageous employment. The second concerns the consequences of a behavioral choice system such as the dependency syndrome, moving towards inequality (Standing, 1999). What is common to all is the influence of western capitalism, and the circumstances that different employment has upon the number of workers who avail themselves to be hired. Although the labour market processes are portrayed as free, classical economists argue that world markets are not free (Rottenberg, 1971).

Potts (1990) argued that the labour market is universal and has a long history. In the past, the Latin American, Asian and African populace were brought into forced labour and exposed to extermination, abduction and exploitation. Changes happened since the 1970s in the international labour market in the form of a segmented labour market that affects workers in the developing and industrialised countries. These changes facilitated the production environment that enabled the industrial market to utilise '*cheap labour*' in the home-supplying countries (Baskin, 2000:53 and Barker, 2003:18). Further to be noted within labour market discourse is the view that the market is segmented (McNabb and Ryan, 1990). Segmented labour market (SLM) theory, concerns itself with inequalities in terms of wages, working conditions and employment opportunities amongst different occupational, industrial and demographic groups (see also Callaghan, 1997: 17).

### **Skills, control and development**

It is significant to revisit how segmented labour plays a role in skills discourse, control and development. The question of the skills shortage in South Africa cannot be properly addressed without looking at the historical background that influences the contemporary skills situation in the workplace. Skills shortage problems arise when determining what should be included or left out in classifying the skill and how to measure skills level for various occupations in different sectors (Brown et al, 2001:53). In South Africa it cannot be understood in isolation from the historical proletarianisation<sup>2</sup> process of black workers and the formation of white workers' craft unions, which became a labour aristocracy, protected by job reservation policies. In addition, South Africa became an industrialised country, leading to a demand for a highly skilled labour force (Webster and Leger, 1992:53).

Therefore, for us to have a better understanding of whether education about developing skills or liberating the mind and uplifting the society what we are talking about, it is better to look at the conventional definition of skill, normally skill is composed of two components - manual skill and knowledge skill (Webster and Leger, 1992:53). Webster and Leger (1992) argue that if skill is defined only in terms of manual skill and knowledge skill, it would imply that all workers possess work. The term 'skill' implies that workers overcame certain barriers to gain entry into an occupational category; be it an apprenticeship, an examination or a formal training course. Barriers are regarded as social closure because skills are capable of excluding outsiders and dominate resources that are denied to others. Barriers are artificial social constructs which relate to the skills possessed by certain workers. Therefore, the definition of skill suggests that it is socially constructed and cannot be measured objectively since its construction is the result

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<sup>2</sup> Forced removal of black African people from their land in order for them to sell their labour power for their daily livelihoods as the only option.

of the strength of employers and employees in a particular historical milieu (Webster and Leger, 1992: 55). Despite the failure of segregation policies in 1977 such as job reservation, provision of skills remains a capitalist rhetoric. The SAMWU Workers' Representatives confirmed this: *"old habits remain the same as places such as canteen or change rooms and higher management positions remain favourable to whites in terms of racial division in general"* and in addition SAMWU Official indicated during an interview that *"the Municipality offers frivolous skills such as telephone answering, first aid, Batho-Pele but fail to offer meaningful scientific skills that are regarded as scarce i.e. engineering"* (Interview: 15 December 2006).

Provision of skills training to African workers is regarded as more exaggeration than reality. As Nzimande (1991:157) argued: *"...the rhetoric on skills shortage by capital is made with other purposes in mind ...as a convenient smokescreen behind which co-optation of an incipient black petty bourgeoisie can proceed"*. This argument is borne out by the response of the state as some of the strategies included the importation of skilled labour from overseas and intensification of job dilution.

Manwaring and Wood (1985:175) note that performance of any type of work includes some level of skill. Hence, in their view, skill should be envisaged in relative, as opposed to absolute, terms. These theorists highlight three dimensions that embrace the acquisition of tacit skills. The first dimension involves learning the performance of practice of tasks, i.e. operating a machine by acquiring the necessary skills through practice and experience. The second dimension is tacit skills, which is acquisition of various levels of awareness that are required to perform specific activities which include the appropriate use of routine, semi-aware and "strategic choice" behaviors. The third dimension focuses on workers acquiring "cooperative skills" (i.e. friendliness) due to the "collective nature of the labour process" (Manwaring and Wood, 1985:172-3). Manwaring and Wood (1985:192) thus state that the existence of tacit skills entails that all workers possess "some autonomy" in the workplace because "management can never predict all deviations."

This raises the question of control in the work process and the role that skill plays. There are three types of control i.e. simple control, technical control and bureaucratic control (Abbott, 1980:15). The difference between modern and earlier management control strategies can be highlighted as follows: (a) the differentiation of managerial from proprietorial role-statuses (b) separations between senior, middle, and junior management and (c) the specialisation

of management roles in particular functional areas such as production, marketing, personnel, and finance. In general, a broader social developmental and cross-cultural perspective, modern professional management can be contrasted with “patrimonial”, “political”, “custodial”, and “syndicalist” types (Abbott, 1980:51).

There are four historical epochs that are identifiable in the transformation of labour process: *cottage production*<sup>3</sup>, *co-operation*, *manufacture*, and *machinofacture* (Webster, 1985:2). Before the co-operation era, the creation of surplus value was limited as work was solely controlled in terms of the content to be produced – (handicraft and guild production), the pace of work, and the location of production. This era is referred to as *cottage production*. The cottage era was shattered by the ravenousness of capitalists, as they did not have authoritative power to force workers to work certain hours without adequate supervision (Webster, 1985).

Factories were fashioned in response to labour market demands in order for the capitalists to gain more control over workers. Workers were put in one plant and their work was closely supervised (see Webster, 1985:2). This process was made possible by the removal of workers from direct control of the means of production, which has been termed ‘primitive accumulation’. Factories differed within the cottage production era in terms of the number of workers employed, the work directed by supervisor and the environment of control (Webster, 1985:4). This relationship had some confrontational elements, as craft workers challenged management’s new settings that denied them control over their work in terms of design, time and speed. As Callinicos (1990) has pointed out, workers in pottery, woodcarving and ironsmith, had a relationship with their product to some extent, e.g. control over the content and the performance of their work, but this remained confrontational.

The *co-operative period* offered capitalists a special function that is generated from the nature of the social setting through exploitation of social process. The nature of social settings inevitably brought about divergent relationships between capital and workers, and the nature of the contradictory relationship that is characterised by conflicts. The

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<sup>3</sup> I opted to recognise this era – *cottage production* – as the ‘first or the beginning’ (this era functioned under guidance of theocratic principles) of skills formation, emergence of industrialisation and as the part and parcel of the historical skills evolution (see Callinicos, 1990: 2 and Fuze, 1979:10). Theocracy means the rule of people, by people, for the Creator. Therefore, I will argue further that theocratic values are normally documented in ‘totality’ in the Bible. For example, the Zulu people used to practice ceremonies that resemble those documented in the Bible (Jeremiah 2:3) like the ceremony of the First Fruit (See Fuze 1979:9–11 & 90).

SAMWU official said: *“response by trade unions in the offering of skills remain reactionary in the sense that unions do not offer any alternative except to reject whenever the management come up with suggestions or offer. Our shortfall as unions is that we are lazy, as we do not come with proposals except to wait for management suggestions and start reacting. That is not different from the situation whereby we chase our tails, as we do not have clear programme of things we want to achieve for workers in order to redress past injustices in the shop floor”*.

The continuous adversarial relationship between employer and employees over income and working conditions in general led to the adoption of *manufacturing strategies*, as the capitalists' attempted to lessen conflict and gain more control (Webster, 1985). Thereafter, work activities were broken down into a sequence of separate duties that led to the division of labour and job fragmentation. This change led to the emergence of *four major concerns*. i.e. *increase in productivity of labour; the cheapening of value of the labour power, exclusion of the large group of labour from handicraft production and control over land* (the means of production). The introduction of machinery exacerbated the situation, as machinery was seen as the structural solution to the obstruction of handicraft production (Webster, 1985:4).

The development and usage of machinery in the capitalist production world became the standard feature of this period that is termed *machinofacture*. Webster argues that machinery was selected as a replacement for normal tools because the natural mechanisms were to be 'liberated' from the control of human strength, to utilise an independent source of production power. This change led to a worse situation whereby workers become attachments of the machines and became subjective as they become specialised. Under the *machinofacture period*, the exploitation of human labour is rife through the increase in surplus value. It led to an intensified working day - (for real surplus value) and enforced shortening of working hours through a piece-work and a shift system - (increasing the concentration of labour) (Webster,1985:4).

Changes in the modern labour market are characterised by practices that shifted the demands for labour and consequent changes in employment opportunities in order to suit the notion of global demand. Flexibility is significant for getting a common and clear understanding in an attempt to critically discuss whether the rise of flexible and insecure labour markets is an inevitable and necessary part of the current processes of globalisation. The 'flexible firm' refers to a firm that rapidly changes the number, type and working time of employees to meet changing market conditions and capitalise on changing technologies (See Standing, 1999; Barker, 2003:23 ). Flexibility refers to a

state whereby the capitalist economy, and its firms and industries move from the old system of large-scale production and redesign it or decentralise their mode of operation to meet global competition. It also suits the emerging mode of operation which is characterised by small scale production and flexible specialisation. This is facilitated by the technological revolution. Employment flexibility focuses on the reduction in a firm's expenditure, through the easy hiring and firing of workers in the context of legislation that weakens employment protection (Standing, 1999:102). Similarly, in the industrialising economies, flexible labour types that emerge are the continuation of migratory labour which is the reserves of workers that always travel around the world. The labour circulants<sup>4</sup>, staying in one place are used as cheap labour, labour contract workers that are mostly employed by a 'middle-man' or agent. The middle-man's responsibility is to employ workers for the firm and this leads to high exploitation as workers are easily discarded and lack a collective voice. They are also denied social security contributions (Abbott, 1980; Barker, 2003:23; Mthembu, 2005:17). Employment flexibility is an old practice within the industrialised economies. The rise of flexible and insecure labour markets is advantageous to the capitalists as it is political in nature (Standing, 1999:86). This view is confirmed by the fact that the globalisation being experienced at present characterises the neo-liberal capitalists' agenda led by the multinationals (Massey, 2004:83). Globalisation is another significant manner of legitimising the idea that there is one set or model of development, as the world is not totally globalised.

### **Concluding remarks**

Government's intervention through legislation such as the EEA and the SDA after 1994, designed to address issues of equity and skills in the SA labour market, have not made difference in reaching desired goals and change. The situation is today exacerbated by the new forms of segmentation such as the core and periphery due to casualisation of work and flexible labour market strategies, which further disadvantage black African workers. I call these new divisions and segmentation *sandwich workplace formation model*<sup>5</sup> (see Webster and Von Holdt, 2005:7; Vally, 1997b: 83).

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<sup>4</sup> Circulants are composed of unemployed people who are unskilled, semi-skilled and unskilled (see Mthembu, 2005: 17).

<sup>5</sup> I prefer to call it sandwich, since the pattern of division of worker (core, non-core and periphery) resembles that of the snack that serves one purpose of food, to sustain life. Therefore, I argue that division of workforce in the workplace serves one purpose - of sustaining the company's' life in terms of profit making with little financial benefits for workers.

In the light of this, it is safe to conclude that the eThekweni Municipality legitimises itself by using the indigenous social values of “*ubuntu*”<sup>6</sup> which, amongst other things, places emphasis on reaching out and caring for others. In addition, one can conclude that education can be both for liberation ( that depends on the individuals background and commitment to change) and subjugation (through teaching individuals society norms) that depends on the individuals background.

There is a need for a trade union movement in general to start revisiting its mandate as the study shows that the current changes are dominated by the aspirations of the capital and workers interests (i.e. liberation from being proletarians – forced selling of labour power in order to meet their daily livelihoods) remain none existed or secondary in the whole saga of the workplace change.

In conclusion, it is clear that the apartheid legacy (divide and rule principle) continues to haunt South Africa despite its highly celebrated democratic transformation. It continues to grapple with issues of redressing past injustices such as unequal provision of skills to its people. Income inequalities and unemployment are still rife, especially amongst black Africans. Pillars of apartheid are still intact, as ‘*ubuntu*’ seems to be co-opted into the westernised economic system to legitimise the current dominant workplace regimes.

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<sup>6</sup> Nkosi concurs by arguing that a growing tendency towards greed and commercialisation of land, even by black Africans and especially in urban areas and that contributes in gradually destruction of the sense of ‘*Ubuntu*’ is the basis of African spirituality within the theocratic settings –(see Tafete, 2003:89). Therefore, I will argue that it will be unrealistic to expect the success of “*ubuntu*” as a philosophy within the spaces of democracy, as this philosophy – democracy – represents something totally different and dismally failed to offer a “holistic approach to offer love and respect for human beings, nature and other living creatures”. In addition, the custom of asking for rain or making rain through the help of the ancestors and God still features strongly in some communities.

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