

From education crisis to organisation: Reflections on the National Education Co- ordinating/Crisis Committee (NECC) (1985- 1995)

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Introduction

The National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) has almost been forgotten. For example, it is not mentioned in the school curriculum, which covers the period between the June 16 Uprising and liberation. Yet it played a central role in providing ‘sustained resistance’ to apartheid education in the decade 1985-1995 and in envisioning a new educational dispensation.

This book is divided into three parts: Part One contains five chapters that provide historical glimpses into the NECC. Part Two contains 20 interviews and Part Three the overall conclusion. There is a very useful timeline that covers the period 1985-1995,

This is a remarkable book. The five chapters are fascinating, covering key aspects of the NECC’s work, but what holds them together are the interviews. The interviews were conducted with people who were once members of the NECC, its affiliates and ‘outsiders’ such as John Samuel of the South African Council for Higher Education (SACHED), who worked closely with the NECC. The chapters capture the vibrant nature of discussions and debates that characterised it.

Chapter One: Situating the NECC within the broader anti-apartheid movement. By Terri Maggot.

In 1984, there was an intense year-long boycott of Black schools. Disruption continued into 1985 when students announced that a similar boycott was planned for 1986. The use of the slogan 'Liberation before Education' was widespread. In October 1985, a group of concerned parents in Soweto formed the Soweto Parents Crisis Committee (SPCC). It called for a national consultative conference of parents, teachers, and students. This took place at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in December. Members of the conference agreed that there was a need for a 'national cross-sector organisation'.

The NECC emerged from this as a trans-sector, intergenerational, loosely organised body, an 'organiser of organisations'. This structure gave the NECC a mass base. The NECC consisted of NECC officials at national and local levels, as well as affiliates. The fact that the NECC was trans-sector and loosely organised stood it in good stead over the next 10 years.

The NECC's first intervention was to organise a Back-to-School campaign for 1986. The NECC was concerned about the use of the slogan 'Liberation before Education' and countered it with the slogan 'Liberation in Education'. At the same time, the ANC in exile called for 1986 to be the year of 'Peoples Power'.

Out of these concerns emerged the concept of *Peoples Education for Peoples Power*.

There were two aspects of Peoples Education: democracy and agency, and linked to this, a new curriculum and pedagogy. This was to be played out in a democratic, non-sexist, non-racist unified system of education. It was a 'vision of future education through participation with the people'.

A concrete way in which Peoples Education was operationalised included the setting up of commissions in History, Maths, and English to produce an alternative curriculum and material to go with it. Education Policy Units were set up in several universities to give content to the notion of Peoples Education, and to conduct research into its meanings and use. They were effectively the policy wing of the NECC.

However, few commentators on the NECC have addressed specific racial and gendered nature of NECC leadership. The leadership was dominated by men, as was also the case with the National Education Policy Initiative.

How did the NECC relate to other sections of the anti-apartheid struggle? The leadership of the NECC had links with organised labour unions (Congress of South African Trade Unions [COSATU], National Union of Metal Workers South Africa [NUMSA]) and faith-based organisations such as the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and the South African Bishops Conference (SABC). It also had close links with youth led Congress of South African Students (COSAS) in high schools. The NECC often worked with students in COSAS, Azanian Students Organisation (AZASO) and National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) together. These three organisations formed a kind of triumvirate. Such links gave the NECC legitimacy.

Another source of legitimacy was the NECC's media presence. It made ample use of faxes and email. The NECC aligned itself with 'progressive media', including newspapers such as *New Nation* and its supplement, *Learning Nation*. I would add publications such as *Staff Rider* (Ravan Press) and *Upbeat* (SACHED Trust).

When I bought this book, I was surprised that it covered the period 1985-1995. I thought that the NECC had closed its doors around 1990. As Maggott points out, the NECC was active during the five years after liberation. However, the crisis in Black education continued well into the 1990s. The NECC was 'able to keep children in schools through interaction between national and local structures' as well as with the ANC and COSATU. During the 1990s, the NECC was at the forefront of mass protests as well as negotiating with the state.

The NECC participated in the National Education and Training Framework (NETF) and in national level discussions about a post-apartheid education system.

A major intervention was the 1992 National Education Policy Initiative (NEPI), which produced 12 documents on suggested policies for the various sectors of education. In this chapter, there is no information about the content of the NEPI documents; hence, it is difficult to know the extent to which the state took them on board.

In 1994, several members of the NECC went to work for the state in education and education-related fields. To differing degrees, the members carried with them the ideas generated in the cauldron of the 1980s and 1990s. It is interesting to note that there was no formal handover of NECC documents to the state.

There is an ongoing debate about whether the new policies reflected NECC principles and practices, especially those associated with People's Education. Some argue that they did not, and that the NECC remained 'a promise unfulfilled'.

Chapter Two: Students of the NECC: SRCs, democratic school governance and ‘Liberation before Education’ by Charissa Shay-Sithole

In 1996, the groundbreaking Schools Act was legislated. It made provision for democratically elected Representative Councils of Learners, whose members would sit on School Governing Bodies (SGBs), as equal stakeholders. Its origins can be traced back to students’ struggles for democratically elected Student Representative Councils (SRCs) during the 1980s.

The NECC recognised that student struggles were linked to broader struggles and that struggles in schools depended on effective Parent Teacher Student Associations (PTSAs 4690 8368 844). They, in turn, depended on effective SRCs. At the December 1985 conference, the NECC passed a resolution that democratic SRCs and PTSAs were ‘organs of people’s power’. In fact, there is a view that the slogan “People’s Education for People’s Power” emerged from student demands for democratically elected SRCs.

The December conference formally denounced the slogan ‘Liberation before Education’, however, getting student buy in was no easy task. A member of AZASO remembered,

So now, slowly, we’re also trying to get the slogan “Liberation before Education” converted to “Education for Liberation.” But as you can imagine, the anger that was there and the tensions, you know, these are some of the areas students would disagree sometimes, some people really feeling that we need to go on to the end and education must come later. So, in a way, the NECC was able to stabilize that....

The intergenerational relationship between adults and youth in the NECC and its affiliates meant that ‘[Y]oung people led action, formed partnerships, delegated power and shared in decision making’.

Chapter Three: Intellectuals, activism and knowledge creation in the NECC: Exploring the tensions. By Shireen Motala and Yogesh Narsing.

The chapter opens with a statement of areas of involvement of the intellectual/activist scholar.

The creation and democratization of new repositories of knowledge by reconceptualising the content of education, democratizing knowledge production, demobilizing civil society and defining the role of the activist scholar.

I am going to look at this debate through the lens of the Wits Education Policy Unit (EPU). (EPUs were also set up in University of the Western Cape and University of Natal). The Wits EPU was the first of its kind. Its brief was to give content to the slogans 'Education for Liberation' and 'People's Education for People's Power'.

The Wits EPU investigated wider issues around knowledge creation and democratisation through community and academic engagement. The democratisation of knowledge involved participatory research with communities (such as the NECC), where communities would lead the process, and academics would provide support.

Jabu Khumalo, COSAS executive secretary in the mid-1980s, argued that the role of the intellectual was to *help* with research capabilities, and clarifying concepts, but would remain guided politically by COSAS.

The Wits EPU was 'a resource and intellectual base in pursuit of a mixture of scholarship and activism' in partnership with the University. The EPU had to balance research requirements of the University and those of the NECC.

In the immediate post-apartheid period, EPUs in general played a crucial role in the development of new legislation and policy advice. They also researched the implementation of policies. In 1994, several significant intellectuals were absorbed into state departments. Sadly, the NECC documents were never officially handed over to the state.

I will now make a detour where I focus on a related aspect of this process, that of the creation of subject commissions in Maths, English, and History, within the NECC. The commission members were tasked with developing an alternative curriculum and material to go with it, thereby reconceptualising the content of education.

I served on the History Commission in 1987. There were about six people serving on the Commission, including Luli Callinicos, author of the seminal *Gold and Workers* and later *Working Life*. The books were originally aimed at workers and communities; however, they circulated among teachers, particularly those at private schools or sympathetic principals in state schools.

The commission was chaired by Melanie Walker, an experienced history teacher and history methodology lecturer. The commission met twice, once in Cape Town and once in Johannesburg. A good deal of our time was spent debating the content of an alternative curriculum and very little on alternative forms of pedagogy, and even less on assessment.

After the second meeting, Melanie, with some help from Luli, produced *What is History? A new approach to history for students, workers and communities*. I have always wondered why she left “teachers” out of the title.

What is History? dealt with topics as diverse as the June 16 Uprising and colonialism. Most importantly, it used a source/evidence-based pedagogy. It laid bare the ways in which history was constructed, based on a variety of sources: newspapers, photographs, diaries, songs, tickets, and more. The teacher would give each student (or group) a set of original sources, from which they could construct a history of an event, person or group. In this scenario, the teacher would be ‘non-directive’ and ‘non-authoritarian’.

I see this process, to some extent, as the creation and democratisation of new repositories knowledge and the democratising of knowledge production.

Critics of the book raised questions about whether teachers would be both willing and able to teach in these new ways and argued that training would be necessary for them to do so.

No arrangements made for the distribution of *What is History?* Teachers heard about it by word of mouth. I remember there were hundreds of copies languishing in a warehouse. The publishers eventually had them pulped. Nevertheless, it was extremely popular and not in teaching circles alone.

Chapter Four: Transnational dimensions of the NECC’s funding networks and educational ideas. By Linda Chisholm and Elaine Unterhalter

The NECC has largely been seen as a national body, although it was deeply connected to global networks and ideas from 1985 to 1995. This occurred through global links with anti-apartheid movements, amongst others. These links underscore its transnational character. Chisholm and Unterhalter show how

the national struggle was shaped through a transnationalising process, through ‘movements, flows and circulations of objects, people, ideas and texts.

The study of funding networks has been central to understanding how this came about. Funding made possible travel, and the circulation of ideas, although ideas did not circulate through funding networks alone.

Western donors, particularly Sweden supported NECC, closely followed by the European Union. Sweden, a firm supporter of the ANC, funded the United Democratic

Front (UDF) and by extension the NECC, as a key internal organisation. The United Kingdom was a 'central node' and World University Service played a key role. In general, 'donor priorities varied, but they covered a vast spectrum of educational activities'. Most of the funding came from abroad, though there were some local contributors.

Domestic travel helped to coordinate different groups and eased tensions between students and youth and older members of the NECC and UDF. In neighbouring countries there were meetings with the ANC, 'strengthening the resources of the movement and building an understanding of struggles inside the country'.

Interactions were not one way. They not only 'broadened the vision of the NECC but also widened the perspectives of actors they met with outside South Africa'. The NECC provided guidance to donors as to which organisations should be funded. South Africans strengthened the educational aspects of the anti-apartheid movements.

After 1990, funding was 'brokered by governments with an interest in shaping the future of South Africa'. In 1994, the ANC produced a policy document on education that drew on transnational ideas.

There is mention of 'complex relationships with donors'; however, this issue is not explored.

Because the chapter does not discuss the contents of the 12 NEPI documents, it is not possible to assess how far donor thinking and funding influenced the NEPI policy options.

In 1994, I was part of a small, informal group of historian-educators who served as a sounding board for new members of government. While there, I saw what I can only describe as a parade of experts filling the passages of the building. Soon thereafter, all attendees were told that their services were no longer needed.

Chapter 5: People's Education: Continuities and discontinuities in contemporary Western Cape. By June Bam

As Bam points out, there is an assumption that the Peoples Education movement had died by the time the NECC closed its door in 1995. Instead, she argues, it had 'gone underground'. Bam counters this belief by exploring the relationships between the A/Xarra Restorative Justice Forum and other Khoi-San communities, and students, academics, and support staff at the University of Cape Town (UCT). These dialogues could be seen as a version of People's Education.

In 2015, student discontent centred around the #Rhodes Must Fall (#RMF) movement. The movement's initial action was the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes from the UCT campus. In 2017, the #Fees Must Fall (#FMF) and #RMF joined forces, participating in dialogues on culture and liberation education, with the A/Xarra Restorative Justice Forum and other Khoi-San communities, at the Centre for African Studies (CAS). Students found they shared 'a common language' for education reform. Members of the Forum lectured students in CAS, and attended post and undergraduate classes in land, poverty, and democracy.

The Forum co-designed research commissions on issues like land, language, the Khoi-San genocide of the 1700s, and unmarked grave sites on the UCT campus.

It campaigned for the establishment of bottom-up (coming from the people), co-designed (with academics and students) research commissions.

By now, the Forum was confident enough to approach UCT directly and demand the transformation of colonial education curricula, archives and pedagogies.

Through the Forum, there was now a direct approach to a historically white university to establish a partnership for community activist research and knowledge production through collaboration.

One of the outcomes of these dialogues was the establishment of the San and Khoi Centre at UCT, where inter disciplinary, cross faculty research involving the Forum and other Khoisan communities took place.

Organisations mentioned

COSAS Congress of South African Students
 AZASO Azanian Student's Organisation
 NUSAS National Union of South African Students
 COSATU Congress of South African Trade Unions
 NUMSA National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa
 ANC African National Congress
 UDF United Democratic Front
 SRC Student Representative Council
 PTSA Parent Teacher and Student Association
 RCL Representative Council of Learners