



Through the Eye of a Fly: Action Research as a Support for the South African National Literacy Campaign

Veronica McKay¹ 

Published online: 13 November 2017
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2017

Abstract Globally and across the African continent, the past decade has seen an increase in the commitment to reducing adult illiteracy, inspired among other things by the *Education for All* (EFA) drive to halve the incidence of illiteracy among adults and youth by 2015. While literacy campaigns were less common during the 1990s, the last decade saw a new impetus for mass adult literacy campaigns as a way of improving national literacy levels. This paper examines the South African endeavour to meet its EFA target through the implementation of the South African *Kha Ri Gude* Mass Literacy Campaign, which was launched by the South African government in 2008 with the aim of enliterating 4,7 million adults who had little or no education as a result of the apartheid legacy. The Campaign was deemed successful receiving a number of South African awards for best practice and its work in rural and impoverished communities including the international UNESCO Confucius Prize for Literacy (UNESCO 2016). This article focuses on how the campaign utilised action-oriented processes, specifically the methods of participatory action research (PAR), to enhance the achievement of its goals. The methods of PAR were embedded in the campaign structure, comprising clusters of communities of practice (COPs) which provided fora for educators to voice and address challenges. Moreover, since the Campaign was implemented in post-apartheid South Africa, the article shows how the Campaign operations were guided by the ethos of *ubuntu* as necessary for redress and empowerment.

Keywords *Kha Ri Gude* · Literacy campaign · Adult literacy · Participatory action research · Reflection · *Ubuntu* · Communities of practice · Cascades · Adult education · South Africa

✉ Veronica McKay
mckayvi@gmail.com

¹ College of Education, University of South Africa, Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa

Background on the Establishment of the South African *Kha Ri Gude* Literacy Campaign

In 2008, the South African government launched the *Kha Ri Gude*¹ Literacy Campaign in response to the *Education for All, Goal 4* (UNESCO 2000), which committed South Africa to reducing its adult illiteracy rates by half by 2015. The campaign target was 4.7 million illiterate adults who had been denied schooling during apartheid. The Campaign received a number of national awards² for best practices and, in 2016, it received the international UNESCO Confucius Award, presented in Paris on 8 September 2016.

After two years of preparation and research into literacy campaigns and literacy provision in other developing countries, the Ministerial Committee on Literacy established to develop a campaign strategy, (DOE 2006, p. 34) drew upon the Global Campaign for Education's *International benchmarks on adult literacy* (2005) which defined literacy as: "the acquisition and use of reading, writing and numeracy skills, and thereby the development of active citizenship, improved health and livelihoods, and gender equality" and to enable learners to "to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts and involving a continuum of learning ... to participate fully in community and wider society" (UNESCO 2015, p. 21).

Various models for campaigning for literacy were considered: In particular, the committee considered an earlier South African campaign, the South African National Literacy Initiative and it undertook study visits to Cuba, Venezuela and New Zealand to explore the operations of their campaigns. On its return, Dr. Casius Lubisi, leader of the Committee expressed the committee's commitment:

We came back revitalised and ready to make a contribution to pushing back the frontiers of poverty, despair and indignity – for illiteracy is indeed an affront to human dignity (DOE 2006, p. ix).³

The *Kha Ri Gude* South African Mass Literacy Campaign was launched in 2008 with the intention of addressing the legacy of apartheid and illiteracy among the most marginalised sector of the South African population. Given South Africa's many failed literacy attempts, the large-scale *Kha Ri Gude* Campaign was considered a last chance for adults to develop the skills of reading and writing and numeracy (DoE 2006, p. 18; McKay 2015; McKay and Romm 2014).

¹ *Kha Ri Gude* (pronounced [car-ri-goody]) is Tshivenda for "Let us learn". The decision to use Tshivenda terminology reflects the purpose of accentuating the minority status of the language.

² In addition to the UNESCO award, the *Kha Ri Gude* Campaign has received other national awards for its implementation, including the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) award in 2010, which gave recognition to the excellence of the campaign materials in the 11 official South Africa languages. Other awards include the Government Communication and Information System's *Umbungsweti* Award (in 2009) for the campaign's developmental communication and advocacy strategy reaching adults in the most remote and impoverished sites and its efforts to include deaf and blind learners; and the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) award (in 2012) for its effective delivery to the poor and also for job creation through its volunteers (who received stipendiary compensation). The Campaign was formally evaluated by UNICEF in 2009 (Osman 2009), and its assessment strategy and learner assessments are verified by the South African Qualifications Authority each year.

³ The Campaign strategy and budget were approved by the South African Cabinet (22 August 2007), and Cabinet approved the campaign's detailed operational plan for implementation (29 November 2007). The Campaign was launched in 2008.

The Role of COPs in Empowering Educators

The Campaign's head office was established in the Ministry of Education in Pretoria and the Campaign delivery model was decentralised across 40,000 learning sites in a range of settings across the country many of which were learners' homes, community centres, churches and mud hut or shack structures. This article considers the key role the COPs played in supporting the national intervention aimed at reaching the numerical target of 4,7 million adults and some 40,000 volunteer educators to provide large-scale literacy services for 600,000 to 700,000 adults each year. Because the volunteer educators recruited to operationalise the campaign were largely un-/under-qualified to teach literacy, it was necessary that the campaign had a robust system of support that would empower and capacitate campaign operatives to teach and deal with a host of challenges that they might face both in- and outside their classrooms. To this end, the Campaign utilised a participatory action research (PAR) approach, grouping educators into COP groups of 10, facilitated by a supervisor, to ensure that the teaching cadre of more than 40,000 volunteers were supported for the duration of the semester (McKay 2015, p. 375).

Cascading Communities of Practice Within a Social Nexus

The diagram refers to the four levels involved in each campaign cascade and their various roles in supporting the Campaign: **The supervisor** has a monitoring function includes supporting and motivating the 10 educators for whom he or she is responsible. These groups of ten, form the basis of the educator COP tier, with and **the supervisor** facilitating the ten educators assisting in problem solving and ensuring they are competent in teaching. The supervisors themselves form higher level COP groups, providing guidance and sharing information they obtain from the 4000 educator COPs with their coordinators and the Campaign head office in the Ministry of Education (McKay 2015, p. 381). Figure 1 shows how the cascade is located within a social nexus which provides support and input into the campaign processes – ultimately to the level of Parliament.

As will be showing in this article, the COP groups contributed to the development of the educators' teaching skills and enhance their agency to address problems they encounter in their teaching (McKay 2015, p. 375).

On Cascades and Action Research

Although cascades are often criticised as relying on a top-down process of the knowledge transfer resulting in a loss of information in transmission (Rogers 2005, p. 14), Ison et al. (2014, p. 111) point out that COPs perform best when top-down organisation is limited in favour of self-organising groupings generating knowledge and solutions. The COP structures in the campaign were of necessity guided by the grass-root concerns of individual learners, classes, and local communities, and functioned as self-organising groups. They were responsible for ensuring that teaching venues, times of classes, advocacy and learner recruitment were customised for local contexts.

While the campaign encouraged the COPs to use an action research approach to guide their activities, action research as an approach is often criticised as lacking the ability to extend

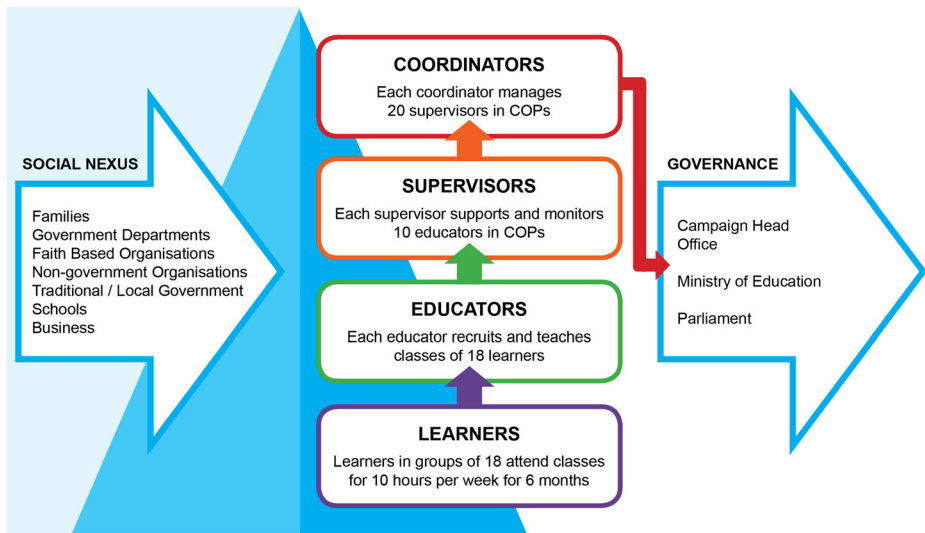


Fig. 1 The Kha Ri Gude Campaign cascade within a social nexus

beyond the local context (Brydon-Miller et al. 2003, p. 25). In the context of the campaign, the COPs were explicitly required to be self-organising, to seek local solutions to local or situational issues. However, through the cascade structure, the COPs were able to impact at the broader, societal level since the COPs formed part of larger-scale networks, in this case within national government, whilst locally they functioned within micro-structures of the community. This paper, draws a various sources to show how the COPs were indeed self-organising and effective agents in the literacy campaign.

Sources of Data Used for this Article

The paper drew on various data sources:

Firstly, the article is based on the data I gathered, over the six years during which I, the author, established and managed the Campaign and in my capacity as the Chief Executive Officer over the period 2007–2012. This study may therefore be regarded as essentially ethnographic, with my personal role being construed as a participant observer, and a *co-“active” researcher*.

Secondly, my role in the campaign provided opportunities to interact with learners and other field operatives, including all 200 coordinators who were responsible for distilling the issues arising from the educators’ journals as discussed at COP meetings.

Thirdly, various and messages, letters, emails, official reports and official data provided important context and background for the article.

Finally, the article draws on the data emanating from an analysis of a sample of 2032 monthly journals that were used as the basis of discussion during the COP group meetings. In

my engagement of the journal reports, various categories were coded according to themes that emerged as prominent in my interaction with the texts. These pertained to events in classrooms – including teaching methods, teaching venues, absenteeism, and learning problems. Themes identified also pertained to a range of social issues outside classrooms. While the educators’ journals were analysed ongoingly through the teaching semesters, this article draws on the “voices” of the educators as they emerged in a random selection of journals which were tabled at the COP action research meetings at one point in time in 2009.

Reflective Journals

This process of recording and analysing events in a structured manner has proven to be a useful strategy to foster reflective thinking in the Campaign. The journaling process in the Campaign is structured in order to guide the educators to focus on significant events or aspects of teaching at the times they are likely to occur. To this end, educators are given mini journals in which they can write down their experiences. Each month, the educator has to answer a series of questions in order to check how effectively he or she is handling the class. The educators write down any problems they encountered during the month, and they are expected to suggest solutions for all the problems, describing how they dealt with them. In addition, they may also write about an achievement, such as a learner who is making excellent progress.

Educators bring their monthly reflection journal with them when they attend the monthly COP meetings with their supervisor so that they can discuss their experiences and share with the other educators. The journal acts as a tool for reflective dialogue between the supervisor and the educators, while also prompting the educator to reflect on matters timeously. Reflection helps them to identify problems and directs the educator to think about possible solutions to these problems. This is based on the idea of *knowing-in-action* through *formalised and directed reflection* at the individual practitioner level and in the COPs.

In the context of the Campaign, the “whys”, “hows” and “what ifs” were built into the COPs monthly meetings where they were required to reflect on events, and to collaborate on designing creative problem-solving strategies. In a literacy campaign involving marginalised learners, reflection has to go beyond the classroom and include what is happening in the lives of learners – in the world outside the classroom – and the COPs provided a valuable space for co-reflecting on problems.

Some of the prompts for the “guided reflection” journaling are that educators are required to reflect on various aspects of the Campaign and to talk or write down information on any of the following:

- any problem the educator had with the class; say how he or she resolved it
- any good experience the educator had with the class
- any unusual experience with the class
- any positive changes that learning may have made in the learner’s life (community, home, family, work, health, children’s schooling, environment, securing food, etc.)

COPs for Action Research

From the data collected over the campaign period, it was clear that the COP structures provided a space in which educators could collectively tackle some of the many problems

they encountered in- and outside their classrooms, providing an opportunity for collaboration and for educators to share best practices and teaching innovations with their peers. Somehk (2006, p. 77) refers to a teacher's view of his or her role in a PAR project. The teacher stated the following: "We're like the eyes of a fly ... Everybody sees a different facet of things ... The larger picture is perceived as a whole from the combined perceptions of all the individual facets."

The metaphor of the "eye of the fly" is particularly apt in describing the role played by the individual educators in their COP groups and by the clustering of COPs and the consolidation of recommendations and solutions through a "shared reflexivity", resulting in changes to the Campaign practices.

The Thinking Behind the Campaign Strategy

From its inception, the operations of the South Africa Campaign was guided by what the Chief Executive Officer⁴ termed a "critical humanist position", predicated on a dialogical ontology, a voluntarist anthropology and a discursive epistemology (McKay and Romm 1992), to support the Campaign cadre to translate knowledge into action. This 'critical humanist' approach to education and development draws on the seminal work of Freire, the critical theoretical tradition, specifically on the Habermasian "emancipatory interest" with knowledge being constituted as non-McKayitative, discursive and dialogical, but with African humanism leanings, given its location in post-apartheid South Africa.

We have argued elsewhere, as have many others, of the importance of knowledge, reflection and a commitment to action within the parameters of action research (McKay 1990; McKay and Romm 1992, 2008) where action research harbours the potential for action, while at the same time monitoring its effects. In the context of the Literacy Campaign, the COP groups formed the basis of "collective self-reflective query undertaken by participants in order to improve the rationality and its justice of their own social or educational practices" (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988, p. 5). The activities and understandings of the COP groups, as the "eye of the fly" thus played a formative role necessary for sustaining the Campaign activities and for addressing problems and challenges as they were encountered. Kemmis et al. (2014, pp. 5–6) elaborate on the importance of participants doing research for themselves at local sites, with PAR creating the "conditions for practitioners to participate in and develop the communities of practice through which practice is conducted". This enables participants to understand and develop practices from within, to speak the same language and to enable educators to engage in "collective critical self-reflection", interrogating what they do and the conditions under which they do it.

In the context of the Campaign, the COPs were active in what McKay and Romm (2008) term "active action research", which is intentionally aimed at contributing towards large-scale development programmes. According to McKay and Romm (2008, p. 153), programme improvements require the commitment of researchers/research participants, as well as the support of administrators and policy makers for decisions on the planning and resourcing of the implementation of the programme. They (2008) argue that 'active action' research aims to enable decision makers to become more attuned to public considerations around the benefits and limitations of programmes and to provide opportunities for changing the system. In

⁴ The author of this paper was appointed to lead the campaign within the South African Ministry of Education.

making this possible in the Campaign, the 40,000 educators were organised into some 4000 COP groups, and through them, action research was introduced as a collaborative activity, where educators share issues of concern and enhance their practices through reflective conversations which were arranged by their facilitators. In a campaign of this magnitude, the COP groups allowed for collaborative and intersubjective “cognitive” participation in action-guided COPs on a massive scale. Alexander (1999, p. 188) highlights the importance of “the ‘citizens’ of COPs in supporting each others’ growth and learning; participating in group decision-making; sharing responsibilities for the actions of the group; and celebrating individual and collaborative achievements”.

As will be discussed below, participation in the COPs encouraged educators to reflect on different practices, to express ways of improving their own practices, and to “try out new ideas in practice”. The COP groups in the Campaign thus emphasised the participatory and active aspects of PAR relying on collaboration, and the involvement of everyone in the collective, recreating and learning, in what Kemmis et al. (2014, p. 20) refer to as an open communicative space for practitioners to “join one another as co-participants in the struggle to remake the practices in which they interact”.

The knowledge generated in the COPs impacted on project design as the reports from the various COP reports were shared at interprovincial workshops where COP clusters were represented - thus feeding information into the project design of the campaign, via the office in the Ministry of Education. Hanemann (2011, p. 3) refers to the way in which the insights of the educators in the COPs impacted on the National Campaign policy and on strategic planning involving 300 provincial coordinators, which she observed in 2011:

A workshop was organised by the *Kha Ri Gude* management to jointly develop a campaign manual on the basis of good practice and to plan the programme activities for 2011. This participatory process involved a review of what worked well during 2010 and which aspects of the campaign needed improvement. These constituted the building blocks for the [national training] manual. Then the participants worked in teams (per language and province) to develop their Action Plans for 2011.

Here Hanemann refers to the way in which the training manual embodied changes in the way the campaign proceeded – some examples of which are discussed in subsequent sections of this paper where the “affordances of the COP groups” are discussed, and the section dealing with “problems outside the classroom walls” are discussed. These sections refer to how the campaign materials were adjusted, or to the way in which salary changes or areas of expansions requiring increases in budgets, which in turn required submissions to, and approvals from Parliament. The latter mentioned section refers to the way in which various problems were encountered and addressed at local level and these solutions gave rise to expanding the range of possible practices which were incorporated in the training manual thus expanding on the repertoire of practices available to educators. The interconnected COPs played a critical role in the implementation of the campaign, affording participants opportunities to reflect on and recognise their potency for action and to overcome social constraints. As Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, p. 6) posit, the COPS offered “a way of working which links theory and practice into one whole: ideas in action”, or what Torbet (1981, p. 142) terms, “experiments-in-practice”.

Freire (1978, p. 78) in fact points to the methodological interrelationship between theory and praxis as being necessary for an emancipatory approach in which praxis is fundamental and in which the participants assume a more active attitude, which gives rise to dialogue and

self-reflection and which might bring about improvement. He juxtaposes this with education research which studies educational practice “from the outside”, and which creates and maintains a separation of knowledge from participatory action.

Reflecting on Practices

As indicated above, the involving the COPs in reflective practice was necessary to deal with all critical incidences that challenged the educators across the country. It was thus necessary for the Campaign to have built-in processes that would encourage self-reflection and action as essential to sustaining the Campaign across the country. It can be argued that reflection + action = praxis⁵: Emancipatory action is termed “praxis”, where praxis refers to informed, committed action accompanied by reflection and action. In the context of the Campaign, this implied a self-critical stance where educators were required to reflect on the possible advantages and disadvantages of possible courses of action or even of the choice of “inaction” (McKay 1990; Kemmis et al. 2014, p. 20; Carr and Kemmis 1986, p. 190; McKay and Romm 2008). Kemmis (2009, p. 468) states that action research happens in sayings, doings and relating – both in conducting the action research itself and in justifying it.

Through their participation in the COP groups, the educators were required to deal locally with problems they faced and to explore alternative possibilities or refreshed patterns of thought and developing their own “reflection + action” encounters through co-reflecting with their peers. Their participation in these groups was beneficial for the Campaign operations and, as discussed in the latter part of the paper, educators found such participation personally empowering as they discovered their own agency.

From an African perspective, Chilisa and Preece (2005, p. 307) highlight the importance of participatory approaches. They argue that local people are best placed to solve their own problems and to demystify processes which no longer reside in the hands of so-called “experts”. Rather, they contend that PAR maximises local, indigenous knowledge and contributes to knowledge generation by and for people, as opposed to “on people” According to them (2005 p. 198), PAR is intended to obtain detailed understandings of specific local contexts that enable locals to prioritise their needs and act.

Chilisa (2012, p. 4) refers to the importation of Afrocentric approaches being used in former colonised and indigenous societies, where the community is required to participate and provide input into projects and plans and implementation. She, as do many African scholars, (Chilisa 2009, 2012; Letseka 2016; Oviawe 2016) highlights the African value system of *Ubuntu*, which shifts from individualism to a recognition of the collective privileging of the “I/we relationship” in contrast to Western individualism. She (2009, p. 407) argues that *Ubuntu* underscores the “I/we relationship”, where there is connectedness with living and non-living things; there is brotherhood, sisterhood and community togetherness. She postulates that through the experience of being “we”, our way of knowing is affected by the way people as a collective see the world. The notion of the collective offers a model for development and for working with communities entailing the sharing of power and averting domination, with the collective being more than the individual Chilisa (2012, p. 4). The “we-ness” prioritises sensitivity to the needs of others, respect, consideration, patience and kindness. It strives for

⁵ In terms of this equation, practice is distinguishable from praxis. The former denotes habitual or customary, while the latter refers to informed committed action.

inclusiveness in the construction of knowledge, and when working with marginalised populations, *Ubuntu* provides an invaluable moral compass because in African culture, the “self” and the “world” are united and are part of a web of interdependent relationships.

The *Kha Ri Gude* Cascade as Clusters of COPs

In establishing the COPs in the South African Literacy Campaign, we attempted to establish a “we relationship” for “we learning” so as arrive at new knowledge through learning together, thinking through complex Campaign issues together, analysing information together and making recommendations in the COP groups for wider dissemination in the Campaign.

Well-functioning COPS, according to Ison et al. (2014, p. 111), have a mutual engagement, a shared enthusiasm for the task at hand, and a common commitment to collaborative work. However, enabling the COP groups to be established and to function in this way was not an uncomplicated process. It took time for educators to mature into groups with a common identity and focus. A number of authors refer to the difficult genesis of establishing “groups that work” (Wenger 2007), and as far back as 1965, Bruce Tuckman referred to the stages team members have to undergo before groups are established that can work together to solve problems.

Bleach (2013, p. 260) describes the lengthy process leading up to the emergence of functioning groups as the “complex, analytical, political and cultural process of challenging and changing the core beliefs, structure and strategy of a community”. Similarly, Somekh (2010) points out that the contradictions that arise in action research endeavours can be ascribed to the existence of political hierarchies and cultural beliefs. She argues, however, that cross-cultural collaboration⁶ also provides opportunities for learning. Wenger (1998, p. 4), points out that collaboration “refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities”. Megowan-Romanowicz (2010) calls this a “cognitive apprenticeship” or “situated learning” – the lived experience of participation in a particular world.

The challenges encountered in establishing functioning COPs in South Africa resonated those described by Wenger (2007), Somekh (2010) and Ison et al. (2014) referred to above. Moreover, the challenges identified by Bradbury (2016, p. 248) in the establishment of groups able to “re-imagine transformation as a collaborative potential, consciously directed toward optimizing our natural and human systems” emerged clearly during the Campaign.

It was clear from our experience that many of the challenges required lengthy engagements and the Campaign did not afford adequate time. Seferiadis et al., cited in Aragón and Glenzer (2017, p. 6) elucidate this by stating that “interventions that address complex issues such as poverty alleviation and unequal gender relations require longer timescales”. They state that participants will require a longer time period to “immerse themselves in local spaces, slow down and think long”, and to “develop trusting relationships and relevant interventions”. This, they point out, happens in social contexts, and the situational space impacts on group

⁶ Many of the COPs established in metropolitan areas comprised of cross cultural groups where language/ethnic differences tended to be dominant of subordinated by the group. Moreover, across the campaign, foreign nationals also brought with them new cultures requiring to be harmonised in the classrooms. The cross cultural learning nevertheless enriched the learning encounter and was incorporated into the core learner materials to optimise on the benefits of diversity.

formation and its possible interventions. This is resonated by Hanemann and McKay (2015, p. 267) argue that “literacy thrives and is sustained when a state of connectedness exists: when there is a social nexus of relations among individuals, households, communities and social institutions”.

Storming and Norming Before Performing: Challenges in Establishing COPs

Although many of the Campaign COPs had formed part of a previous campaign run on behalf of government through the University of South Africa’s Department of Adult Basic Education⁷, and had already progressed through the initial storming and norming stages identified by Wenger, new entrants to the groups and newly formed COP groups required time, and often struggled before they were able to mature and perform optimally for reasons such as the following:

Ethnic, Language or Political Challenges

Initial challenges in establishing the COPs for *Kha Ri Gude*, included those of an ethnic, linguistic or political origin, as illustrated by complaints and statements such as the following:

Why was X selected as a supervisor over me?

In this province, speakers of language X, dominate and the supervisor has a different mother tongue.

We don’t like it that people from another province come to work in our province.

We belong to political party X, and we do not want a leader from party Y.

In many cases, it was necessary for the campaign head office to issue memoranda to educators and supervisors to explain the inclusivity of the campaign, pointing out that its aims were in line with the South African Constitution, embracing diversity and inclusivity and embodying the practice of *Ubuntu* and reciprocity. Where difficulties continued, external campaign coordinators were requested to visit, explore the situation and mediate and resolve matters. These incidences were considered opportunities for extending learning.

Gender Challenges

Gender issues also affected the optimal performance of the COPs. In many cases, interventions were needed to facilitate the establishment of cordial COP structures along inter-gendered lines.

We want men’s only classes, taught by men and supervised by men.

Our men will not attend classes in public, where their illiteracy will be evident to women, especially young women.

As a man, I can’t have a female supervise me.

I should be the natural leader; I am a leader in the community and I won’t respect a woman leader.

⁷ The author as Director of the Department of Adult Basic Education managed this component of the SANLI campaign and was able to transfer the human infrastructure to the *Kha Ri Gude* campaign.

Person X promised money or jobs if the community selected her for the position of supervisor and now she is my supervisor.

In these cases, the COPs had to work through the various problems and often resorted to drawing in the Campaign head office to dialogue possible solutions. With regard to gender issues, the solutions were mediated – and once again the role of the South African Constitution was used to highlight equality and inclusivity. In some cases the affected woman teacher opted to teach another class, and in some cases the male classes accepted and proceeded well with their female educators.

The Affordances of COP Groups

This next section discusses some of the many affordances of ‘functioning’ COP groups in enhancing the implementation of the Campaign.

As mentioned above, educators were clustered in groups of ten, working under the same supervisor. They would meet with their cluster to share problems and solutions and to discuss issues captured in their journals. At these monthly COP meetings, they had the opportunity to raise issues and to solve organisational and teaching matters (and to submit the documentation required for the payment of the monthly stipends). The knowledge generated *within* and *among* the 4000 COP groups informed the Campaign strategy and salient issues were incorporated in the National Campaign Handbook (McKay and Sekgobela 2015), which guided the policy and practices for the Campaign. Various issues and modes of ensuring quality delivery and commitment through the participative COPs are discussed below.

Training and Motivating Educators

The COP groups are required to support the volunteer educators across their many responsibilities. Educators are made aware that most of the learners they will teach were previously denied schooling for a range of reasons. A core responsibility of the educators is to set this right by giving them another chance – a responsibility that relies on their commitment to providing a meaningful learning experience for them.

Lind (2008) in fact refers to the role of educators as the most critical input for campaigns, underscoring the critical need to consider who is selected, how they are motivated, trained (pre-training and continuously), and how they might meet the diversity of motivations and aspirations of the learners. Similarly, Alidou and Glanz (2015, p. 154) highlight the fact that the provision of good literacy services requires input in terms of human resources, curricula and learning materials development. They cite the educators as being the primary input and stress the importance of the analysis of participatory needs as being essential for determining the training needs of all facilitators and programme staff, and for determining relevant content for learning materials.

The South Africa Campaign data showed that the vast majority of Campaign volunteer educators were un- or under-trained and thus required pre-service and continuous development. The supervisors in the second tier of the cascade therefore played a key role in providing some 40,000 educators with pre-service training and orientation each year. Much of this training took place at their monthly COP meetings, during which they explored new teaching approaches and dealt with the range of problems educators encountered.

In addition, training needs are identified in a participatory way in the COPs – identifying additional local literacy artefacts in order to contextualise learning content. The COP groups also assist educators to deal with learning challenges which are explored collaboratively. The following section outlines some of the issues dealt with in the COPS.

Conducting a Needs Analysis

While the Campaign provides core learning materials customised for the 11 official South African languages and the unique characteristics of the various provinces where the languages are dominant, the educators are required to supplement the core materials with specific materials to address learners' specific local needs. Discussions in the COPs often focused on their learners' social context to determine context-specific topics that are of interest or importance to the learners. This form of needs analysis does not happen by chance – the COPs play a fundamental role in determining learner needs and in supporting educators and training them to use PAR approaches for determining learners' needs through for example, conducting transect walks with learners in their communities in order to determine the kinds of literacy learners encounter in their everyday lives – such as signage, advertisements, bus numbers, road signs and so on. They are required to use these materials as supplementary to the core materials provided to enable learners to use basic reading skills to respond to texts (McKay and Sekgobela 2015). The COPs fulfil a significant role in the contextualisation of learning materials by encouraging educators to obtain examples of real materials for their classes: These include application forms for a birth certificate, a pension or child support, bank forms, medicine instructions, vaccination cards, washing instructions, recipes and any other types of texts that learners encounter in their daily lives. In addition, many government departments and newspapers make materials available for educators to use both for teaching and for decorating their classroom walls (e.g. maps and posters). These are shared at COP meetings where their relevance is discussed. Alidou and Glanz (2015, p. 154) highlight the role of micro-level learning content which can only be relevant where it is context sensitive and needs oriented, and the COPs play an important role in ensuring that this happens. As Kemmis (2009) points out, action research happens in the thinking and saying, in the doing and in the relationships between speakers and hearers. In the literacy campaign, the educators and their supervisors themselves were required to say and do, and to design ways of interacting with the others.

Assisting Inclusivity

While gender equality was a dominant feature of the campaign, the *Kha Ri Gude* Literacy Campaign went beyond this to ensure the inclusion of learners with disabilities and of learners across age groups (intergenerational), as well as the availability of materials in all official languages, especially the less used minority official languages. A multilingual literate environment is characterised by the use of written texts. According to Alidou and Glanz (2015, p. 167), experience with literacy campaigns and programmes over the past decades shows that the quality of the literate environment relies on campaigns catering for the different languages spoken by the learners. In addition to providing materials in all the official languages, the *Kha Ri Gude* Literacy Campaign requires the COPs to determine the suitability and relevance of the materials for learners and to confirm the level and language: often the COPs debated language use, or the use of dialects and directed changes to the national office. The COPs thus played an

essential role in ensuring language inclusivity in line with Alidou and Glanz's (2015, p. 165) plea for widening the scope of participation in language development.

Enabling Learner-Centred Assessments

As a way of measuring and ensuring quality, all *Kha Ri Gude* learners are assessed continuously through a portfolio containing 10 standardised literacy assessment activities in their mother tongue, and 10 numeracy activities. The activities are competency-based and are time-linked to the various stages of their learning. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) has been responsible for verifying the marking of the portfolios and for recording the details of learners onto their National Learner Records Database. The COPs play a fundamental role in enabling the administration of the mass-based assessments under difficult Campaign conditions with a view to assessing *for* learning – identifying factors that hindered achievement encouraging educators to reflect ways of improving learning outcomes. The educators were supported by their COP group to conduct learner assessments and capture each learner's scores per test item which were presented for verification to SAQA. This made it possible for the DBE to certificate successful learners and to upload their records onto SAQA's the National Learner's Records Database.

Problems Outside the Classroom Walls

Another unique feature of the South African *Kha Ri Gude* Literacy Campaign is that it has specifically targeted marginalized groups including the disabled, street children and prisoners. Much of the discourse of the COPs focused on problems associated with vulnerable groups such as women and learners with disabilities (e.g. the blind), and exploring how to accommodate their special needs. The following discussion draws on the voices of educators as drawn from their journals:

Accommodating Learners with Special Needs

Older learners have a problem reading. They were supplied with reading glasses from the local clinic and they can now read their books.

My class is full of old people and they are always out to the toilet which is far from class.

A number of COPs reported on problems with learners' health and how they dealt with health-related problems.

Learners have received medical health for the first time testing for diabetes and blood pressure.

I have HIV positive people in my class and they need to eat when they are on medication. I give them some bread and tea.

Some of the old learners are very slow. Because of that I repeat the lesson if they did not understand and I encourage them to read their books at home.

Groups proved to be innovative in assisting aged learners with a range of age- and health-related problems with educators often paying for meals for learners. Poor eyesight

was a common problem and educators arrived at innovative solutions such as placing their desks at the window for more light, and in some cases, approaching Rotary or the provincial hospital to supply reading glasses. By approaching local authorities, local farmers or local shops some COPs were able to provide meals for aged or ill learners who were particularly disadvantaged and arrived hungry at class. Organising transport also featured as an issue for aged or disabled learners, and more than one of the COPs cited the case of an old or disabled person being brought to class in a wheelbarrow by family members – a problem which necessitated a solution.

Poor attendance as a Result of Child-Care Needs

Learners with children were accommodated in innovative ways. As educators pointed out, “Some learners come to class with their children. They say it is better that they are with them”.

In many cases, site-based childcare was organised alongside the learners’ classes, where one of the learners took charge of the children while the other mothers attended classes. Class times were often changed to coincide with childrearing timetables or with children’s school times.

Gender Issues

Many of the COPs mentioned gender related problems where husbands or partners attempted to restrict women’s attendance at classes for various reasons:

I teach in the rural area where the husbands don’t want their women to come to class.

They want the woman to stay at home. Who can talk to the husbands?

Their husbands don’t want them come to class because there are other men in class.

Husbands don’t want their women to become too clever.

Learners have problems coming to class because the women have duties at their homes.

They make mud bricks to build their rondawel (huts) and have to cut grass (for the roof).

Educators and their supervisors addressed husbands either directly or using community radio stations, attempting to persuade them to cooperate with their wives attending classes.

However, gender issues extended to the men as well. There were also cases where men refused to be in classes with women learners or where men refused to be taught by a female teacher. This usually pertained to the stigma associated with being illiterate and often in relation to the leadership roles they played in communities.

They want men teachers who are old and who don’t know them.

They want men’s only classes so that no one will know they are illiterate.

Problems Associated with Learning Venues

Since the journals analysed were recorded early in the semester, a number of problems centred on the choice of venues to be used as learning sites. Educators of incarcerated learners referred to a range of problems where prisoners are either moved from one prison to another or where they are released mid-way through their literacy programme.

In prisons, our learners change all the time. Some are released from prison and new ones come in. We now try to put them in contact with other *Kha Ri Gude* classes in their communities and those who are transferred take the books so they can join a class in the new prison.

As one educator working in prison reported on the venue situation of learners in prison:

We don't have a class. I teach in a hospital ward and learn around the bed. We must fit in with the prison times because they get locked up after a few hours.

The educators were prompted to think about or discuss problems they encountered and to try to come up with solutions – being aware that there is no single correct answer.

Learner Absenteeism

Educators without exception faced problems of high absenteeism and needed to address this taking into account the range of adult-specific problems their learners have:

Learners don't show up during pension day, so I now have a "catch up day".

Learners have problems attending on pay day [when they receive social grants]. They also have problems attending during funerals. We make up the time by adding extra days.

I arranged Saturday classes for those who work or who are always late. They can also attend lessons after church every Sunday.

Social functions like weddings and a lot of deaths in the community disturbs classes.

Issues pertaining to the lack of infrastructure such as bridges or roads being washed away, also impacted on learner attendance where learners are required to attend to their basic needs before it is possible to attend classes.

Some do not attend class regularly because of the shortage of water.

They don't want to come to class if there is no moonlight in case of snakes.

They struggle because of the lack of transport.

We need to speak to the authorities to rebuild the bridges.

Often the impact of absenteeism affects the progress of the other members in the class. As one educator put it:

When learners miss class they expect me to go back to previous lessons. This demotivates other learners who attend regularly.

Absenteeism Related to Seasonal or Temporary Employment

Much of the absenteeism is caused by learners doing temporary or informal work:

My learners were doing very well in their learning and making good progress. But now we have a problem at this time of the year they have to plough and it means that they don't come to class. They complain about the time of the classes at this time of ploughing.

Where learners have problems attending classes because they work, I have classes during the weekend to make up the time.

Absenteeism as a Community Matter

Educators provide a range of strategies to deal with problems. Often, appeal to traditional or statutory leadership assists in resolving such matters.

I invited the (municipal) ward committee to speak to learners about attendance.

And, as one educator in a rural states, “when learners miss class we asked the headman to call a meeting to resolve the matter.”

Substance Abuse

Adult education textbooks do not as a norm, express the problems of substance abuse amongst adult learners nevertheless, the Campaign needed to find ways of dealing with learners arriving drunk to class. As one educator expressed it:

The people at Ludiwane don’t appreciate missing out on their drinking time. But we tried our best to motivate them.

My learner’s problem with alcohol still not resolved. Motivation continues and the facilitators give good advice but we need a better solution.

Some male learners attend class after they have taken liquor. They use vulgar words.

Learners like to drink beer some like to drink cold drink after the lesson. I don’t allow them to drink at the centre.

Educators and supervisors report of making substance abuse a community matter by calling in community structures, chiefs or councillors to assist with the problems. In some cases these learners dropped out of classes and the educators deliberately did not follow up on them often, this inaction was intended to optimise the learning of other learners in the class.

COPs Generating Solutions

It is clear from the above that educators experimented with ways of preventing learner attrition by determining the causes and then assisting learners by shifting lesson times, changing venues, making up lessons on weekends, and even enabling learners to set up cooperatives for income-generating activities to improve the prospects of learning, or as indicated above, making child-care arrangements where mothers’ attendance was hampered by child-caring roles. The times of classes were often reorganised to specific times in the day – after children had left for school and before cooking the family meal.

Educators are encouraged to help learners with problems they might have and to be especially supportive towards the aged and disabled learners. They are constantly reminded that learners make better progress when their special needs are taken into consideration.

The COPs play a crucial role in considering their learners’ problems from the first day that classes begin. They are prompted to reflect on those problems and are specifically asked to reflect on these questions – a guided reflection to enable educators to think about each of their learners:

- Did I notice learners who were struggling, and if so, did I assist them?
- Are all the learners making progress? If not, what is the problem and how can this be rectified?
- Is the learner attending regularly? If not, what is the reason and how can this be rectified?

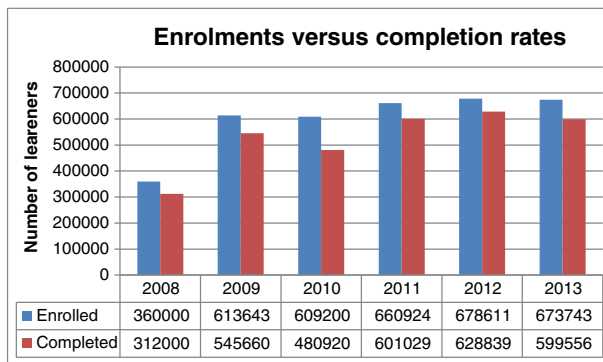


Chart 1 *Kha Ri Gude* enrolments versus completion (Source DBE 2013, p. 13)

As shown below, the role that the COPS played in including ensuring that learners were recruited and retained for the duration of their campaign semester gave rise to very high retention rates which are unusual for adult education in general and specifically for literacy campaigns (Chart 1).

In Conclusion

Action research through the COPs provided a means of generating knowledge about the implementation of the Campaign and using this to keep it on track as far as possible. Somekh (2006, p. i) states the following about PAR: “It is a methodology that focuses on participants’ practical action so that all concerned have a sense of agency rather than constructing themselves as powerless.” This view is also expressed by Hanemann (2011, p. 7), who indicates that agency was supported through the “Campaign’s participatory system of training, monitoring and strategic planning which allows for exchange and mutual learning as well as for continuous improvement of the Campaign structure and practices”. The structured reflection processes improved the quality of the teaching and learning and empowered both the learners and the educators.

The sense of agency among the educators was expressed throughout the monthly reports compiled by the educators. In addition to empowering learners, the COP reports show that the educators themselves report that the experience of the COPs gave meaning to their own lives. The Campaign reports indicate that the educators:

- recognised their own agency as a result of being able to solve problems they faced in the teaching/community context
- felt more empowered to improve their own lives
- believed that they had learnt more about themselves
- felt more confident because they had made a contribution to their community
- identified their own talents while sharing these with those less advantaged
- believed that their volunteering had set an example for their children/grandchildren
- engendered more confidence in themselves
- made educators aware of their vocation with many wanting to study to become teachers
- broadened their résumé

In their article entitled “Narratives of agency”, McKay and Romm (2014) captured narratives of agency as expressed by blind educators who were charged with teaching blind learners. The following two quotations show how the most challenged educators benefited from seeing through the “eye of a fly”, and how this impacted on their own personal lives:

When I started I was very shy: I did not want to talk to people. [My coordinator] told me I should not be shy and I must not be negative because this could discourage people. Then I became far more confident after I started helping people and I realised I could help them.

I feel that I changed their lives by being able to teach them this. I am so glad I joined. I feel that I changed the lives of many people – and after that I met a coordinator and we pushed for *Kha Ri Gude* across the whole province. We also went into old age homes where we introduced the campaign and the programme and we visited the social workers to also come on board. This gave the elders reason to live. They have started reading magazines and bibles.

In addition to enabling learners to read and write, the Campaign engagement gave meaning to their lives. As one learner who had been unemployed for a long time stated “when I wake up in the morning, I know what am going to do on that day – rather than languishing away. The day is no longer long and boring – it means so much and I feel so good about what I am!”

Moreover, educators point out that the COP groupings enabled them to form lasting relationships, with many benefits for the communities. Many of the groups doubled up as cooperative businesses or community development projects. Indeed the agency developed through “eye of the fly” within the COP networks made an impact in ways that went way beyond merely teaching reading and writing.

References

- Alexander G (1999) Schools as communities: purveyors of democratic values and the cornerstones of a public philosophy. *Syst Pract Action Res* 12:2 (183–193)
- Alidou H, Glanz C (2015) Action research to improve youth and adult literacy: empowering learners in a multilingual world. UNESCO, Hamburg
- Aragón A, Glenzer K (2017) Untaming aid through action research: seeking transformative reflective action. *Action Res* 15(1):3–14
- Bleach J (2013) Improving educational aspirations and outcomes through community action research. *Educational Action Res* 21(2):253–266. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2013.789726>
- Bradbury H (2016) Enough with Lewin already! *Action Res* 14(3):237–239
- Brydon-Miller M, Greenwood D, Maguire P (2003) Why action research? *Action Res* 1(1):9–28
- Chilisa B (2009) Indigenous African-centered ethics: contesting and complementing dominant models. In: Mertens DM, Ginsberg PE (eds) *The handbook of social research ethics*. Sage, London, pp 407–426
- Chilisa B (2012) *Indigenous research methodologies*. Sage, London
- Chilisa B, Preece J (2005) *Research methods for adult educators in Africa*. Pearson, Cape Town
- Carr W, Kemmis S (1986) *Becoming critical: education, knowledge and action research*. Falmer, Lewes
- DBE (2013) *Kha Ri Gude statistical abstract*. DBE, Pretoria
- DoE (2006) Ministerial committee on literacy. Final report for presentation to Minister GNM Pandor MP, Minister of Education (MCL report). DoE, Pretoria
- Freire P (1978) *Pedagogy in process: the letters to Guinea-Bissau*. Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, London
- Global Campaign for Education (2005) *Writing the wrongs: International benchmarks on adult literacy*. Johannesburg: Global Campaign for Education. <http://www.campaignforeducation.org/resources/Nov2005/1.%20Writing%20Wrongs%20Literacy%20Benchmarks%20Report.pdf>. Retrieved 6 June 2006

- Hanemann U (2011) Report to the Minister of the South African Department of Basic Education. *Kha Ri Gude* literacy campaign, South Africa. (Unpublished document prepared following a UNESCO mission to Pretoria, South Africa)
- Hanemann U, McKay V (2015) Lifelong literacy: towards a new agenda. *Int Rev Educ* 61:265–272. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-015-9497-6>
- Ison R, Blackmore C, Collins K, Holwell S, Iaquinio B (2014) Insights into operationalizing communities of practice from SSM-based inquiry processes. *Syst Pract Action Res* 27:91–113
- Kemmis S, McTaggart R (1988) Action research in education. Deakin University Press, Geelong
- Kemmis S (2009) Action research as a practice-based practice. *Educ Action Res* 17(3):463–474. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790903093284>
- Kemmis S, McTaggart R, Nixon R (2014) The action research planner: doing critical participatory action research. Springer, Singapore
- Letseka M (2016) The amalgamation of traditional African values and liberal democratic values in South Africa: Implications for conceptions of education. Unpublished thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Education. University of South Africa, Pretoria
- Lind A (2008) Literacy for all: making a difference. UNESCO-IIEP, Paris. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001597/159785e.pdf>. Retrieved 31 March 2014
- McKay VI. (1990) A sociological study of people's education in South Africa: a humanist evaluation. D Litt et Phil thesis Pretoria: University of South Africa
- McKay VI (2015) Measuring and monitoring in the South African *Kha Ri Gude* mass literacy campaign. *Int Rev Educ* 61:365–397. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-015-9495-8>.
- McKay VI, Romm NRA (1992) People's education in theoretical perspective. Longman, Cape Town
- McKay VI, Romm NRA (2008) A systemic approach to addressing HIV/AIDS in the informal economy in Zambia: Methodological pluralism revisited. *Int J Appl Syst Stud* 1(4):375–395
- McKay VI, Romm NRA (2014) Narratives of agency: The experiences of Braille literacy practitioners in the *Kha Ri Gude* South African mass literacy campaign. *Int J Incl Educ* 9(4):435–456
- McKay VI, Sekgobela E (2015) Training manual for volunteers in the *Kha Ri Gude* campaign. DBE, Pretoria
- Megowan-Romanowicz C (2010) Inside out: action research from the teacher-researcher perspective. *J Sci Teach Educ* 21:8 993–1011
- Osman A (2009) Evaluation of the *Kha Ri Gude* South African literacy campaign. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), New York
- Oviawe OJ (2016) How to rediscover the *Ubuntu* paradigm in education. *Int Rev Educ* 62:1–10
- Rogers A (2005) Training adult literacy educators in developing countries: background paper prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006, literacy for life. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001461/146107e.pdf>. Retrieved 4 Feb 2017
- Somekh B (2006) Action research: a methodology for change and development. Open University Press, New York
- Somekh B (2010) The Collaborative Action Research Network: 30 years of agency in developing educational action research. *Educ Action Res* 18:1 103–121
- Torbet WR (1981) Why educational research has been so uneducational: the case for a new model of social science based on collaborative inquiry. In: Reason P, Rowan J (eds) *Human inquiry: a source book of a new paradigm research*. Wiley, Chichester, pp 141–152
- UNESCO (2000) The Dakar framework for action. Education for all: Meeting our collective commitments. Adopted by the World Education Forum, Dakar, Senegal, 26 to 28 April 2000. UNESCO, Paris
- UNESCO (2015) Paris Communiqué on literacy and sustainable societies global meeting on literacy and sustainable societies. UNESCO, Paris, France, 8–9 September.
- UNESCO (2016) UNESCO International Literacy Prizes. <http://www.unesco.org/uii/litbase/?menu=1>. Retrieved 2 Feb 2016
- Wenger E (1998) Communities of practice. Learning as a social system, systems thinker, <http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml>
- Wenger E (2007) Communities of practice. A brief introduction. Communities of practice <http://www.ewenger.com/theory/>