

# Much more than reading

By David Screen

AS A teacher for 12 years in "white" education, I assumed a high level of literacy among my students. It was only when I embarked on further study in the early 1980s that I came to realise the frightening level of illiteracy in South Africa and its implications for a sound political and socio-economic future.

It is a stark fact that one in two South Africans is illiterate.

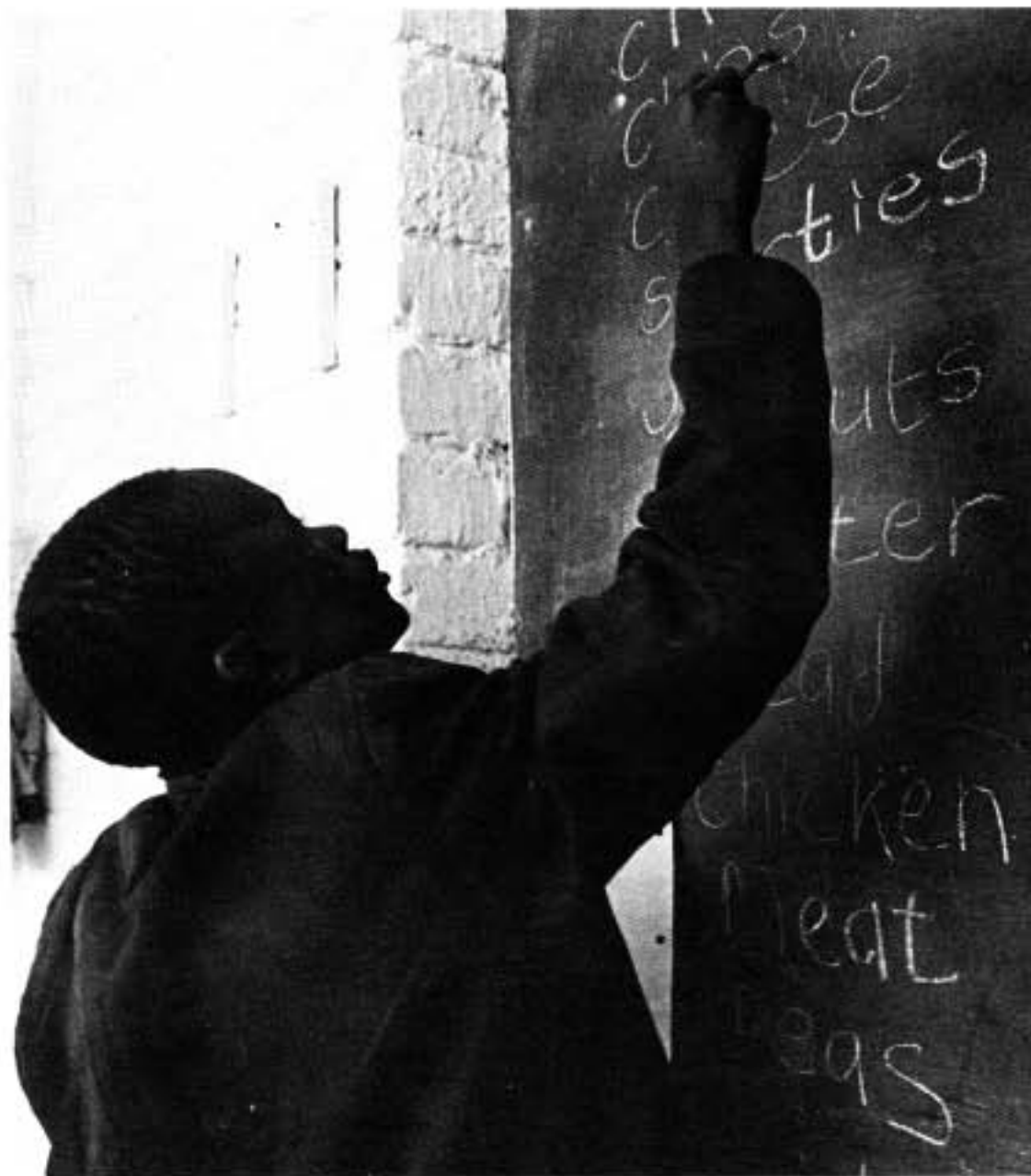
1990 has been designated World Literacy Year and September 8, International Literacy Day. But, according to Edward French, literacy specialist at the University of the Witwatersrand, highlighting the problem this year will not alleviate South Africa's acute crisis. "What we need is urgent planning for a decade of literacy," he says. However, literacy in South Africa is a political minefield.

In a paper entitled "Illiteracy and adult basic education in South Africa", prepared for the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa, Linda Wedepohl makes the point that the term "literacy" does not always fully reflect the concept under discussion. The process goes beyond merely reading and writing to include at the very least, numeracy and language learning, and the term "adult basic education" (ABE) is often more appropriate.

**A DEFINITION** of literacy, argues Wedepohl, should go beyond a mere ability to read and write. It should define literacy as enabling and functional. It must be accompanied by understanding and insight, be related to the life of the learner and contribute to the growth and development of the individual and his/her community.

It is important to note that the definition of literacy in a complex, multilingual community such as South Africa is fluid.

Linguistic diversity and the proximity and interaction of rural and industrial worlds affect the definition. In a paper entitled "Adult Literacy work in South Africa: A history to be made", French points out that "literacy work is thus seldom merely the teaching of reading and writing skills, but is likely to include second, and possibly third, language instruction, either as a supplement to mother-tongue literacy, or as the site of literacy acquisition itself, the latter a



## and writing

practice which is only justified by the personal commitments and needs of learners."

The story of the introduction of literacy to South Africa has not been investigated in any coherent fashion and remains open to conjecture. There appear to have been no early efforts directed expressly at teaching adults literacy. After World War II, the United Party government instituted a commission of inquiry into adult education which set up a plan designed to foster local efforts. With the coming to power of the National Party in 1948, the liberal and radical night schools were simply destroyed by attrition. Adrienne Bird (1984) has eloquently described how official harassment affected the growth and brought about the decline of the adult night school movements for blacks on the Witwatersrand.

Literacy services were improved in the 1970s. Several factors, including the need for a more skilled workforce and the influence of the world-wide literacy movement were responsible. French argues a two-fold contribution to the awareness of the issue of adult literacy: on the one hand there was some growth of literacy work linked to notions of liberation, on the other hand, some believe the authorities moved into literacy

work in order to pre-empt its use by radical movements.

The first South African independent literacy organisation was formed in 1946 under the aegis of the Institute of Race Relations, and registered as the Bureau of Literacy and Literature (BLL) in 1964. Two similar organisations, Operation Upgrade (1966) and Learn and Teach (1972) have since been established. The mid-1970s saw the state becoming directly involved in literacy work with the establishment of adult education sections in the education departments for blacks.

**IN SPITE** of these attempts, the need for adult literacy work in South Africa can hardly be doubted in terms of the statistics. According to the 1980 census, 97 percent of whites were literate, while the literacy rates for Asians and coloureds were 80 percent and 69 percent respectively. The level of illiteracy amongst blacks in 1980 was estimated at between five and nine million of a total adult population of about 14 million. The fragmented nature of South Africa obviously makes an exact figure problematic.

More disturbing, research by French has revealed that fewer than 50 000 adults were completing literacy courses annually. This is not only less than one percent of illiterate adults, but a mere fraction of the number of people reaching adulthood every year without any schooling or with insufficient schooling to be considered literate.

As South Africa starts the last decade of the 20th century, the implications of a largely illiterate, poorly-educated, rapidly-urbanising population must be apparent to all. A final statement by French might perhaps give an idea of the impasse in literacy work:

"A powerful state, while unwilling to engage in a literacy campaign of its own, would certainly not permit a large-scale popular adult literacy movement to succeed. And even were the state to develop a whole-hearted commitment to the promotion of literacy, its efforts would be denied legitimacy by an opposition which questions its ability, or even its right, to serve the interests of a people to which it denies franchise and the full rights of citizenship."

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