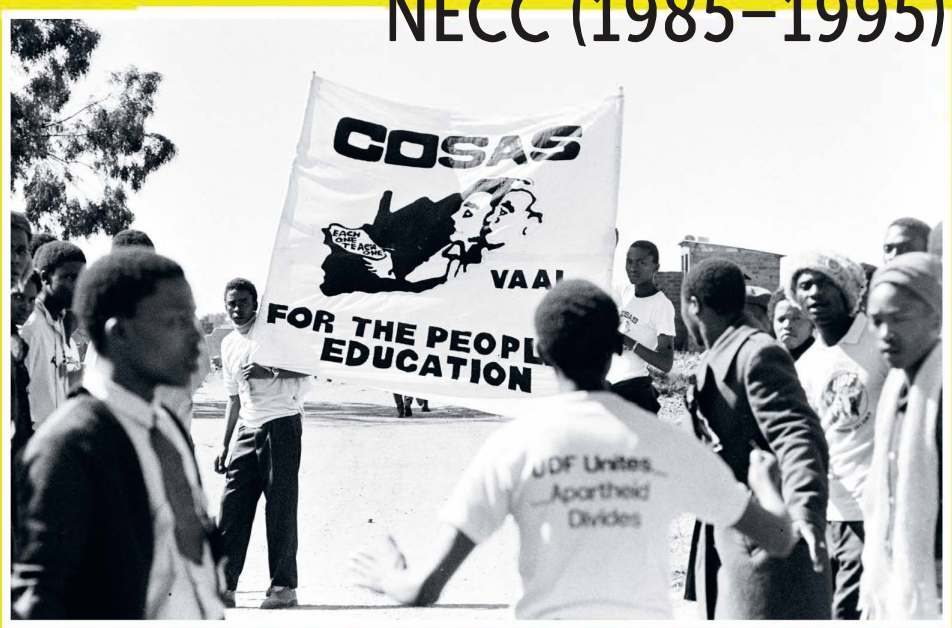
FROM EDUCATION CRISIS TO ORGANISATION

REFLECTIONS ON THE NECC (1985–1995)



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Reflections on the NECC (1985-1995)

Contributions by Linda Chisholm, Shireen Motala, Yogesh Narsing, Terri Maggott, Charissa Shay-Sithole, Elaine Unterhalter and June Bam

Review by Maureen Robinson

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The National Education Crisis Committee (NECC), later the National Education Coordinating Committee, was an intergenerational social movement that united South African students, parents, and teachers in schools and universities between 1985 and 1995, advocating for 'People's Education for People's Power' and working to transform the education system.

At the launch of the book, *From Education Crisis to Organisation: Reflections on the NECC (1985-1995),* Linda Chisholm, one of the co-authors, explained how the book started as an opportunity to reclaim memories of the work of the NECC. She pointed out how the 1976 Soweto uprisings and the 2015 #Fees Must Fall movement live strongly in people's minds, whereas the NECC, also a key moment in the history of educational resistance, has received less attention.

The Introduction to the book explains the origins of the NECC. In the 1980s South African schools for Black and Coloured learners had become a battleground against apartheid. It was a time of mass protests

and class boycotts, and the regime responded with violent police crackdowns and the banning of student organisations. Amid this chaos, the Soweto Parents' Crisis Committee convened a conference in 1985 to discuss a solution to the crisis in Black schools. The conference was attended by more than 100 organisations, including parents, teachers, and students, with delegates taking a resolution to set up a national coordinating committee for education.

Over a period of ten years, the NECC brought together a range of organisations and actors in education across the country, in a struggle for what became known as 'People's Education for People's Power'. Educational change was seen as a primary vehicle for social transformation, with the more radical slogan of 'Liberation before Education' also taking centre stage at certain points in the movement's history.

The seven authors of this book were collectively driven by a commitment not only to capture the rich history of the NECC, but also to document challenges, tensions, and lessons to be learnt. As such, the book is divided into two main parts. Part 1 is entitled *Historical glimpses into the NECC* and comprises analytic reflections on different aspects of the NECC, while Part 2 records 19 interviews with people who were active in various organisations at the time. The chapters are complemented by an extensive list of abbreviations and acronyms relating to the period, as well as a timeline of key events that occurred between the declaration of the State of Emergency in July 1985 and the disbanding of the NECC in April 1995. A massive list of references across chapters provide additional sources.

School pupils at Lamontville High School outside Durban protest against South African Defence Force attacks, 1987. Photo: South African History Online

What then are the key issues identified in the historical glimpses of Part 1? Different authors discuss the NECC within the broader anti-apartheid movement, the students' role in the NECC, tensions relating to intellectuals, activism, and knowledge creation, and the transnational dimensions of the NECC's funding networks. A final chapter in this section presents the Khoi-San social movement as a contemporary manifestation of the link between education and culture.

Much research has gone into these chapters, with extensive use of archival sources such as pamphlets, journals, and newspaper articles, supplemented by several theoretical analyses. The detail of the accounts is impressive −even at times overwhelming − and close and concentrated reading is needed to do justice to the many names, dates, organisations, and publications that constitute the evidence cited in these chapters. It is a dense manuscript, not a popular text, and is likely to be of particular

interest to political scientists, historians, educationists, activists, and postgraduate students of education, politics and history.

Two examples provide a taste of what the reader can expect in Part 1. The chapter entitled "Situating the NECC within the anti-apartheid movement" describes several tensions, schisms, and disputes across the movement, thus reminding us that even organisations such as the NECC, that transcended differences between political players in positive ways, will be characterised by contestation. The chapter "Students of the NECC: SRCs, democratic school governance and 'Liberation before Education'" describes the intergenerational solidarity of the time and asks whether such solidarity across the education sector might be possible today.

Part 2 documents interviews with a range of people who played key roles in the NECC. With thousands of people involved in the NECC, the selection of interviewees is always going to be partial. The authors acknowledge this, indicating that the people interviewed "are not a definitive group, nor are they representative of all the layers and categories of people who were involved" (p. 3). Nevertheless, as the authors go on to say: "It is hoped that the selection of NECC personalities and activists is sufficient to give a sense of a vibrant, formidable organisation that was arguably one of the foremost historically significant forces in South African education" (p. 4).

Represented in these interviews are people who were involved in the Soweto Parents' Crisis Committee, local and regional NECC executive structures, members of university-based Education Policy Units, political, teacher, worker, and student organisations, People's Education commissions, and education and funding agencies. The vast array of structures represented here gives an immediate sense of the vibrancy of the times, with different interviewees describing the energy of their day-to-day involvement, including ways in which the police and army had to be held at bay on several occasions.

PEOPLE'S ENGLISH FOR PEOPLE'S POWER

A committee working under the People's Education Commission of the NECC has drafted proposals based upon the positions emerging from

- the Freedom Charter
- resolutions of the December 1985 and March 1986 Education Crisis Conferences
- the Education Charter
- the priorities of community and worker movements

These proposals aim to assist all learners to

- understand the evils of apartheid and to think and speak in non-racial, non-sexist and non-elitist ways
- determine their own destinies and to free themselves from oppression
- play a creative role in the achievement of a non-racial democratic South Africa
- use English effectively for their own purposes
- express and consider the issues and questions of their time
- transform themselves into full and active members of society
- proceed with their studies

Do you support these aims ?
Do you agree with the specific proposals which follow ?
Do you believe that the specific proposals match the aims ?

The specific proposals which follow depend upon an understanding of

EDUCATION AS PROCESS

The term process here means exploration through language. It involves discussion and revision, and an understanding of how parts are eventually related to the whole.
Process values the contributions of all the learners and makes every member of the group responsible for the learning experience.
The teacher's role is to make this possible.

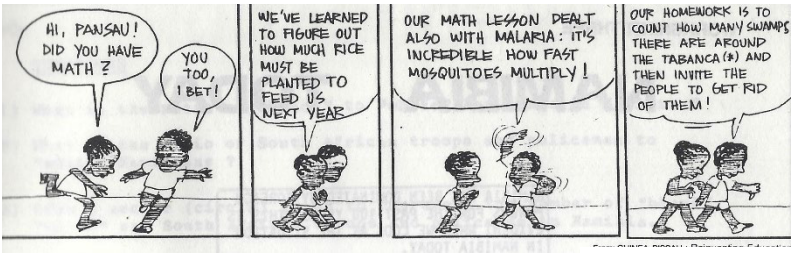
The committee needs your response to these specific suggestions about method, content and language competence.

METHOD might include

- discussion, debate, argument, speeches
- group and pair work
- sharing and pooling of ideas
- collecting and recording community based experiences
- storytelling, readings, retelling
- participation by members of the community
- research
- dramatization, performance, song
- the actual production of newsletters, pamphlets, notices
- co-operation not competition
- collective development, not individualisticselfishness
- thinking, not memorising

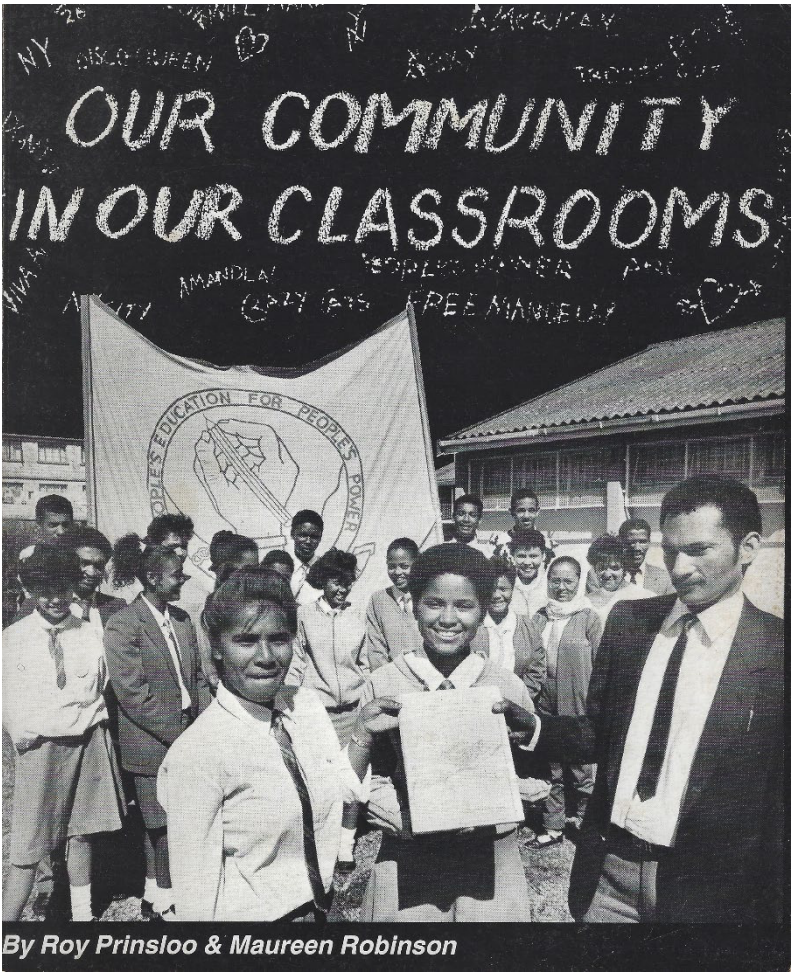
NECC Press Release, 1986, published in 'People's Education for Teachers,' proceedings of a conference held at the University of the Western Cape, October 1987.

Several photographs are included in the book. Interestingly, all are of moments of protest, showing banners of organisations such as the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), the Azanian Students' Organisation (AZASO) and others. Missing are any pictures that reflect ways in which the NECC influenced approaches to teaching and learning, surely a cornerstone of educational transformation. Many teaching resources were developed at the time, as outlined in the chapters on the People's History Commission, and mentioned by other authors, and it would have been illuminating to see examples of these.



Cartoon from "People's History" - magazine of the Cathkin History Society

The reviewer sourced examples of the teaching resources emerging at the time.
Above:
An alternative approach to teaching mathematics, from an NGO in Guinea Bissau called Reinventing Education.
Left: 'What is People's History?' worksheet.
Next page:
Teachers and learners at a Cape Flats secondary school researched their community's history.



From the back cover of Our Community in our Classrooms:

"In 1986, a group of teachers and students from Cathkin Senior Secondary School on the Cape Flats decided to explore Heideveld, their community. Our Community in our Classrooms documents this exciting project, and locates it within a people's history tradition. The book includes an outline of the history of Heideveld, with numerous photographs, students' drawings, and other illustrations. It also contains discussions and guidelines for teachers of all subjects who would like to bring local history into their school curriculum."

[The book] documents a history that needs to be placed on record, along with the many moments of resistance, reform, and transformation in our country. Younger generations need to be able to look back on, and understand, the struggles of their parents…

The final chapter of the book, "The NECC in retrospect," provides a useful overview of the themes and lessons articulated in the different chapters. It outlines the importance of documenting the history of educational struggles, and reflects on the key campaigns, debates, tensions, and fractures in the different social movements that made up the NECC. It reminds us of the urgency and volatility of the times, referring to how structures were built, even as many national leaders found themselves imprisoned. Key themes of the book are summarised, including the vision of democracy and agency, cross-sectoral and intergenerational organisation, the intellectual-activist relationship, international support, and liberatory education.

In its entirety, the book is a valuable contribution to historical information and provides detailed analysis of political, organisational, and personal factors that were prevalent during the time of the NECC. Many books, monographs, and papers were written in the 1980s and 1990s on different aspects of the NECC, however few would have as comprehensive a coverage as this book. It documents a history that needs to be placed on record, along with the many moments of resistance, reform, and transformation in our country. Younger generations need to be able to look back on, and understand, the struggles of their parents, and the book opens this opportunity.

In the final chapter we read: "The thousands of people who were involved in its organisations took with them, wherever they were, formative ideas and experiences that assisted them in helping to shape their own future, as well as that of the country" (p. 272). This opens challenges for subsequent writings: to trace the leadership roles that many of these people have or continue to play in South Africa, to consider whether the creative curricula of People's Education have filtered into the content and teaching methods promoted today, to explore the influence of the NECC on later policy initiatives, such as the National Education Policy Initiative (NEPI), and to reflect on what it would take for our South African society to work productively and in transformative ways across our diverse communities.

Professor Maureen Robinson, former Dean of Education at Stellenbosch University, was a teacher on the Cape Flats during the turbulent 1980s and went on to produce alternative teaching material in the Materials Development Project at the University of the Western Cape. She spent more than 30 years in teacher development in tertiary education.

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