Selected excerpts

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Refer to the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) in any contemporary discussion, and very few people will know what you are talking about. Yet, this organisation played a pivotal role in South African society: it provided sustained resistance to apartheid education during the crucial decade of transition between 1985 and 1995. Images of students marching against police, facing tanks and bullets and organising resistance across the country are ingrained in the memories of those who lived through that period of struggle. What is less widely known is how students and others were mobilised to cre9ate a formidable force of foot soldiers who challenged state authority in every area of the education system.

The NECC emerged from a National Consultative Conference of parents, teachers and students, which was called by the Soweto Parents' Crisis Committee (SPCC) in December 1985 to discuss the crisis in schooling (SAHA, n.d.). The Conference was attended by more than a hundred organisations. The delegates identified a need for a national coordinating committee (Muhammad, 1996) for education, and the following year the NECC was formed. It espoused the view that the struggle for education should be in education. It adopted the idea, then current, of 'liberation before education' and called for 'People's Education for People's Power'. As a 'loose, mass-based organisational structure' (Rensburg, 1996) both the central NECC coordinating body and its members engaged in several independent educational campaigns and initiatives, many of which focused on defining what a liberated or 'people's' education might be.

Extract from Introduction by Terry Maggott and Linda Chisholm

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Scholars of the People's Education movement generally agree that the NECC emerged from a meeting in 1985 called by the SPCC. That meeting called for a larger meeting, which was held at the University of

the Witwatersrand and attended by more than a hundred organisations, and the topic of discussion was finding a solution to the crisis in black schools. Since 1979, South African townships had become centres of resistance against apartheid on various fronts, including schools and universities.

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In anticipation of a future beyond apartheid, the People's Education movement, coordinated by the NECC, experimented with new methods of schooling, teaching and teacher education; methods that, in practice, laid the foundations for the future (Bot, 1986; Hartshorne, 1988; Tomlin, 2016). In doing so, it brought the future squarely into the present. This was a stark contrast to the call for ungovernability, which reduced the possibilities for reconstruction in the future.

Coloured schoolchildren from the Western Cape on the march, 1980 school boycotts. Photo: South African History Online

The NECC initiated significant interventions, such as the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) and Education Commissions, to focus on People's History, People's Mathematics and People's English. These interventions were concerned, not only with 'crisis management' (Carrim and Sayed, 1992), but with promoting a non-racial future through curriculum design and school governance practices mandated by and designed in close collaboration with 'the people'. In addressing these issues, the NECC hoped to lay the foundations for a non-racial future. One practical application was to 'place the development of mathematics in a more balanced historical context so that the present Euro-centric vision of mathematics is challenged by acknowledging the major contributions made by other communities' (Breen, 1991).

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The future of education that the NECC envisaged consisted of a single, democratic, non-racist, non-sexist education system. Part of this vision hinged on the twin ideals of democracy and agency. Students were radicalised into seeing themselves as active agents in their learning, and through structures such as the parent-teacher-student associations (PTSAs) and student representative councils (SRCs) forged a space in which schools could function democratically. This was a radical change from the banking model underpinning the pedagogy of Bantu Education. As an example, weeks before the first ever democratic election, on 1 April 1994, the National Education Conference launched a campaign to get learners, teachers and parents at each school to draw up a code of conduct to govern the culture of schools (Soderland, 1994). Arguably, this was the culmination of years of agitating for a single, non-racial education system that required the active participation of everyone involved. In other words, the vision for democracy was not left to the future: learning during the crisis prepared society for a system based on bottom-up change, in contrast to the top-down, tyrannical model of Bantu Education.

The apartheid government banned the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) in August 1985, four months before the NECC was established. By this time, COSAS had grown into a powerful political force affiliated with the United Democtratic Front (UDF). *Photo: South African History Online*

Part of the vision for agentive, democratic school communities lay in programmes of mass action, and indeed, the NECC supported both students and teachers as they struggled against apartheid. Throughout its ten years it tried to remedy past injustices by keeping schools open and functioning amid the continual political, economic and social crises, as a way of preparing for the future. To do this, the NECC organised various People's Education programmes, including subject commissions, namely People's History, People's English and People's Mathematics. It also tackled administrative challenges to black education, by protesting successfully against permits for black school- goers. It held catch-up programmes (with partner organisations) for 2000 pupils in Pietermaritzburg (Mngadi, 1990), to make up for the class time lost because of school closures in 1990. A winter school was organised in July 1993 in Soweto, albeit with limited success (Mavuso, 1993), and in September 1993 the NECC announced 'amazing prizes' for students who showed commitment to catching up on missed school activities (Strachan, 1993).

Almost 40 years after the emergence of the NECC, why is it important to remember an organisation of this kind? The answer lies in the broad nature of the NECC. It was able to bring together various actors in education, from across the country, at a time when the war against black lives was at its peak. It was, possibly, the last instance of a mass movement in education, one that transcended the narrow confines of the university student movements that have populated the history of the new democracy. The NECC was also an important experiment with the agency of the various actors in education: teachers, students, parents and communities – agency that has, arguably, been eroded by the tendency towards neoliberalism in the post-1994 period, in which education is increasingly privatised and dictated not by these actors but by market forces and the proliferation of education technology (Vally, 2007).

Lastly, the NECC was also an important example of the ways in which class mobility is sometimes related to participation in education movements, given how several of its former members now occupy elite positions in government and universities. But perhaps most importantly, consideration of the NECC adds to the rich history of the education struggle in South Africa by highlighting a period not dominated by the African National Congress (ANC), whether pro-ANC in 1976 or anti-ANC in 2015. The following chapters deal with various aspects of the NECC and thus contribute towards a new memory of resistance in South African education.

From chapter 1: Situating the NECC within the broader anti-apartheid movement by Terry Maggot.

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