

## **MY 1976-JOURNEY THROUGH MY EXPERIENCE OF 'THE TIME TO LEARN PROJECT'**

(By “Nits” Palani)

My political journey and political consciousness started when I got to the Transvaal College of Education in 1975 as an 18-year-old going on 19. It was here that I met people like “Jerry” Waja, political activist, part of the Black Peoples Convention and the South African Student Organisation (SASO), and Gerrie Lubbe, pastor of the Via Christi Community Church. Liberation literature definitively shaped my thinking at the time, but more than that was the living examples of people who were deeply aware of the political, social (material conditions) at the time. People like Hassan Lorgat, Haroon (Bera) Mohammed, Feroz Patel, Robert Abrahams and many others that I got to know during that time shaped my mind, but the physical place that got me to actively engage in matters of social justice was the Via Christi Community Church (VCCC) in Flamingo Street, Lenasia. It was here also where my journey of faith started with Gerrie Lubbe.



“Nits” Palani

The physical place, VCCC, where “The Time-To-Learn Project” was started in 1974 by teacher-trainees-student-teachers of the then Transvaal College of Education (TCE), became literally the birthplace of my political consciousness. The TCE was a training college for 'Indians' of South African descent.

The purpose of the 'project' at the time was to prepare children of school-going age between 7 and 15 years old, who were not at school. The children were resident in Lenasia in the sub-economic area of Lenasia. Lenasia in apartheid South Africa was a designated so-called Indian area. The 87 school-going age children were not attending school because they could not be admitted to 'an Indian school' because their parents did not have so-called Indian identity documents.

Jerry Waja was alerted to this alarming situation by a social worker at the Johannesburg Indian Social Services Association (JISWA), and he shared this alarming situation with my college friends and colleagues. The call to act / respond to this despicable situation was inspired soon after the VIVA FRELIMO RALLY, led by the Black Peoples Convention and the South African Student Organisation initiated and inspired by Steve Biko.

At the time of initiating the 'action' Jerry was a member of the South African Student Organisation (SASO). He used this initiative to recruit members for SASO but the need to confront and correct this untenable situation enjoyed paramount importance to recruiting members for SASO.

I became a member of the start-up team of 'The Time-To-Learn' Project. The express purpose of the project at the time was to provide tuition to the affected children to accelerate them through two grades in one year, and if possible three grades for the much older children.

At the project we had to find innovative ways of providing accelerating-learning methods and learning material in the absence of any researched learning material and teaching methods. Together with the other volunteers we made the required input particularly in teaching-learning numeracy and literacy.

Jerry Waya explained, "At the time accelerated-learning was not defined in any research-literature in the field of 'education-study". Realistically It would be difficult to compress two or three grades of learning into one year and to make matters worse, we had to compress students learning by a required measure of supersonic-speed and imagination. As tutors we were restricted to two-by-two-hour sessions per week. Our tutoring services were made available to 87 learners.

Jerry Waya reflected, "The way forward was focus on the three Rs – reading, writing and arithmetic – concept development and concept progression became vogue only in 2005. We approached it without any such education theory definition."

Experienced teachers broadly decried this effort as a futile exercise, since it was not done before. There were criticism and judgement expressed that we were a bunch of ambitious student teachers. We the young ones were undeterred and forged ahead.

Our commitment generated huge excitement among our twenty active participant student teachers. People like Gavin Frank and Russell Abrahams contributed the 'fun learning' (our academic approach that we were taught at the time). Gavin and Russell infused Art and Music into the learning programme, which enhanced the learning and teaching and made it attractive. Feroz, Jerry and I focused on constructing learning-material for specific purpose of "catch-up", which required our daily constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing after each session.

During the second term of the school year in 1975 we enrolled all 87 children at what was known as Highveld Primary School. The experienced teachers looked on with sceptic and cynical approval. In 1976, all the children were re-enrolled at the school at a higher grade level (promoted two grades). There were 17 were children already over the age-limit of 16. We asked them to stay on at the programme, and assist younger children, while we

engaged them with the focus to acquire functional literacy and numeracy. We were pleased that all our 17 over-aged children became functionally literate by the end of 1976.

“TIME TO LEARN” became homework centre. This programme continued together with other alternative education programmes until the early 1980s but was then forcibly closed down through notable efforts of the apartheid security-police. When the homework centre was forcibly closed, I was amongst the teachers who got arrested. Feroz, others and I were taken to the Protea Police Station. It was Gerrie Lubbe who negotiated our release with the Brigadier Haystack - Head of Security. We were released after a long day at the police station.

It was a privilege for me to be part of the Time-To-Learn project. This effort to serve our community, was a critical place where I was guided by commitment and love for our people and our struggle for dignity.

What started as an education/community project became an incubation of social justice thought and practise. I was afforded a deep philosophical and intellectual journey where critical questions like, 'what does it mean to be human', and 'what is freedom', were asked. I recall Jerry Waya trying to explain, the isiZulu expression, "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu - a person is a person through other people ("I am because we are.")

I am grateful for my colleagues and comrades Jerry, Feroz, Haroon, Linda, “Mudney” Halim and others, who served with compassion and a desire to make a difference in troubling times. May the Lord rest the souls of our dear colleagues Mudney and Feroz.