

SOME CONSIDERATIONS FOR HISTORY TEACHERS IN ACKNOWLEDGING AND VALUING HERITAGE AND TEACHING GOOD CITIZENSHIP AT SCHOOLS IN A POST-COLONIAL, POST-APARTHEID ERA

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Abstract

In a diverse and fractured post-colonial society, schools need to take cognizance of the multi-faceted perspectives of heritage represented within the school community. A healthy debate between the various segments of the society of which a school is but a microcosm, needs to be facilitated and consensus reached on the recognition of a common humanity and the rights of citizens in a complex and vibrant nation. It is in the minutiae of that which is to be found in local history, and the pride that the preservation thereof instills in communities regarding their heritages and their place in the world, that a sense of belonging and, ultimately, good citizenship is fostered. Embracing previously ignored heritage does not necessitate “wiping the slate clean”. The citizenry will be left poorer in the intellectual and historical debate if the net is not cast wide enough and the emphasis falls upon exclusion and segmentation rather than the need to embrace.

Keywords: Diversity; Microcosm; Heritage; Common humanity; Citizenship; Post-apartheid.

Introduction

It is essential that a healthy debate between the various segments of South African society should be encouraged at education institutions, and that the airing of well considered opinions and the recognition of a common humanity be promoted in a quest to foster good citizenship. South Africa, and indeed much of Africa, is fractured due to its long colonial history which affected diverse population groups and races in different ways, and there is a multiplicity of perspectives on heritage. It is only with rigorous debate concerning that which is to be considered valuable for preservation and recognition of the diversity in our complex and vibrant society, that good citizenship and a respect for the rights of fellow citizens will be enhanced.

In his foreword to the volume *The Road to Democracy in South Africa* former president Thabo Mbeki deals with the denial of the history of the colonised by the colonial overlord who “had a history he obliged us to learn and commit to memory. We for our part, had to have no history except as secondary, peripheral, inferior and lesser beings dependent for the discovery of our past on what our betters decided was our past” (Papenfus, 2004).

By the same token, it is the duty of educators and historians to preserve and reflect in their writing and teaching all that has contributed to rendering the communities that make up the woof and warp of our society. It is in the minutiae of that which is to be found in local history, and the pride that the preservation thereof instils in communities regarding their heritages and their place in the world, that a sense of belonging and ultimately good citizenship is enhanced as diverse people appreciate the melting pot which makes up our multi-lingual, multi-cultural character. The converse is also true, as developers, ordinary South Africans and both the simply careless and actively malevolent destroy local heritage, and with it the collective memory which is whittled away. Schools represent a microcosm of the society in which they function and it is incumbent on these institutions to reflect the multi-faceted heritage of the diverse local communities which they serve. The history teacher can and should deal with these issues in their classes and initiate the debate about that which is worth preserving and reflecting in their schools.

At this juncture the wanton destruction of statues, monuments and artefacts by the over-zealous drivers of the #Rhodesmustfall campaign, warrants attention. The students who participated in this campaign, have not adequately considered the necessity of doffing their hats to shades of the past which may not be appealing to large segments of South African society and indeed may even be considered deeply offensive, whilst embracing previously ignored heritage. Embracing this heritage is entirely legitimate, and the slate should not be “wiped clean” by writing events out of the narrative in an ill-conceived quest to somehow make them “un-happen”. The thoughtless destruction of relics which point to an unpopular colonial era, though assuaging the desire to erase a bitter past from the collective memory, needs to be lamented. The exclusion of African history from the national dialogue left South Africans poorer in the intellectual and historical debate. It ought to be viewed as a travesty should the reverse occur. All aspects of the past should be held up to the light of scrutiny. Investigation of all aspects of heritage, both the glorious and the bitter needs to be undertaken. In the debate the net should be cast wide.

Schools, representing communities which are but a segment of society as a whole, need to embrace and reflect the heritage of those entities, and also inculcate good citizenship at the macro level by promoting a healthy, questioning respect for the past. The naming of buildings and facilities after forebears serve to both honour and, often, to remind (rather than honour). Special functions and ceremonies establish a “connection” with aspects of the past, be that connection a positive experience or merely the acknowledgement of bitter battles of a bygone era. Good citizens need to engage not only with that which is worthy of celebration and honour, but equally with that which has spilled over in agony and been a blot on the national tabloid of the past (Howes, 2016).

The school as the crucible of heritage and citizenship education

The debate regarding the appropriateness of statues, names of buildings, names of schools and the preservation of dubious artefacts in the quest to embrace a diverse heritage, is one which has been pertinent not only in post-apartheid, post-colonial South Africa, but wherever societies have had to grapple with a troublesome past. The statue of Oliver Cromwell outside the House of Commons is a case in point. Since before it was erected it has divided opinion, as he is a figure widely considered to have been guilty of an assortment of war crimes (Langer, 1975), ethnic cleansing and religious persecution on a grand scale (Public Monuments and Sculpture Association, 2011). The bust of Caligula (the little soldier’s boot), proper name Gaius Julius Caesar Germanicus, in Copenhagen, stirs up little emotion (Ulrich, 2010). Yet, in his three and a half year reign, Caligula was a sadist, pervert and insane tyrant with little equal (Langer, 1975). Consider, too, Vlad the Impaler – revered in Romania and hated to the nth degree by almost all others (Pallardy, 2015). Another in the litany of infamy is Pyotr Stolypin of Tsarist Russia. The hangman’s noose is colloquially referred to as Stolypin’s Necktie for reasons which need no further explanation. His statue has yet to be removed from its position in Moscow (Parfitt, 2011). History is truly a study of the good, the bad and the ugly. It is a study of the affairs of humanity, so it is no surprise that the entire spectrum ranging from the most heinous to the most saintly falls within its ambit. Should we be really honest about the heritage of man, the full spectrum must be represented.

The #Rhodesmustfall campaign quite rightly needed to be aired and there needs to be robust debate about the way in which the heritage of a post-

colonial society is dealt with. Academic institutions should create space for rational discussion to take place concerning these matters. However, the mere fact that some elements which make up the heritage of a society with a deeply troubled past are offensive, is not reason enough to dispense with them. It can be argued that there may be the very real danger that the issues which are relegated to a forgotten past and swept under a carpet of political expedience will in time show signs of a resurgence. Despite there being little hard evidence that there is a direct link, it could be contended that the way in which post-war Germany has dealt with its uncomfortable recent reality has in some respects facilitated Holocaust denialism and a resurgence of neo-Fascist xenophobic movements in the twenty-first century (Overdorf, 2014). Greater consideration should be given to the “contextualisation” of heritage in society. The broad spectrum should be reflected, a substantial part of it celebrated, some elements juxtaposed with those which are problematic so as to balance the representation and yet other aspects of our past only presented to be held up to public scrutiny and subjected to rigorous debate.

It is at schools that the opening salvos of the discussion can be discharged. Within the context of a school community as a representation of the broader society the first steps in the contextualisation of heritage can be taken. It is incumbent upon History departments at schools across the length and breadth of the country, indeed the continent, to embark on a concerted effort not only to recognise and acknowledge the diversity of current school communities, but also to represent the disparate elements of their past in an appropriate context. Knowledge, understanding, tolerance and acceptance are rungs on a ladder to fostering good citizens. Exposure to the intellectual, emotional and moral intricacies of a disparate historical background can be negotiated in the crucible of school communities where an open, yet rigorous exchange of ideas and arguments can take place in a relatively tolerant and safe environment devoid of the politically charged cauldron of the national stage.

Some schools reflect their past by simply displaying valued artefacts in a single glass cabinet. Others house a heritage section in their libraries. Yet others have a venue set aside as a school museum. Many schools spread their heritage display throughout the campus. In all of these ways they are acknowledging their past and inculcating in their children a healthy respect for their heritage. Indeed, the learners learn to value what they have because they see how the past is commemorated and valued. Many a school honours its forebears by dedicating names of former principals and prominent pupils

to buildings and sporting facilities. Special functions such as “Founders Day” and National Public Holidays are also widely celebrated. These establish a connection with a past and present which is greater than the individual. A sense of belonging to a bigger “whole” which is greater than the sum of its parts becomes ingrained in youth. Out of this is moulded what could be described as “good citizens” (Howes, 2016).

There is, however, also a growing sense of exclusion which is manifesting itself amongst communities. Frustration at the abysmal lack of service delivery, unemployment and lack of opportunity serves to exacerbate a perceived sense of exclusion in which individuals and communities increasingly feel their heritage and contribution to society is unwanted and unvalued. People who feel that their heritage has not been embraced either by the curriculum or their local schools are increasingly loath to tolerate or accept another’s heritage as they sense that the promise of a “better life” slips further out of their reach. This is an unfortunate trend in which the youth lose faith in government, the education system and their own schools who all demonstrate an inability to address the need for inclusiveness and a strategy to build a unified community and nation based on respect for self, for others and honouring a common heritage which doffs its hat at all the nuances of past experience.

With respect to those schools which played an important role during the 1950s to 1980s to oppose the apartheid state, there is an urgent need to document their histories, particularly whilst former principals, students and community leaders are still alive and can give their unique perspectives on events in their enclaves. So too, is the perceived unwillingness of schools in prosperous communities to embrace the entire spectrum of historical experience of their learner demography. (Howes, 2016) Many have since the dawn of democracy maintained an open admission policy and become diverse in their representation, but the heritage that is displayed and honoured has not adapted to the new reality of the communities they serve. Charles Villa-Vicencio, in a chapter in the book *Africa since 1990* quite rightly points out: “The long history of colonialism and 50 years of statutory apartheid that imposed spatial, social, economic and cultural separation on people of different racial groups created a climate of suspicion, fear and exploitation that continues to undermine the capacity of South Africans to learn to live together” (Seleti, 2004). Schools are ideally placed as servants of local communities to reverse this lamentable trend if they embrace their diversity and reflect the notion that all heritage is valued. There should be healthy

debate amongst all stakeholders and consensus reached at schools about which aspects of their heritage need to be elevated, toned down, engaged with, but not obliterated. History cannot be undone. The tide cannot be rolled back and a “tabula rasa” or clean slate magically called into being. Schools should, can and indeed, “must” assume the responsibility of contextualising their local histories, artefacts, names, ceremonies and “monuments”.

History teaching at schools needs to take cognizance of local history and the role played by the communities they serve in the broad tapestry of heritage in South Africa. Learners should be exposed to events which took place in the neighbourhoods of their schools and the oral history component of the curriculum lends itself admirably to that very kind of investigation. Interviews with the generation which participated in the struggle for political freedom and democracy can be conducted with relative ease, as the participants usually speak about events of their youth with alacrity. Video or audio recordings of these often insightful interviews should find their way into the repository of a school archive, accompanied by transcripts and the reflections of learners who participate in the process.

History educators would be ideally positioned to spearhead collection and collation of data, the preservation of artefacts uncovered in the process and in driving a process of discussion and debate amongst the various stakeholders about what is worthwhile preserving, recording and exhibiting at their schools. Principals, teachers, learners and parents need to be part of the process of incorporating records of the past into the milieu of the school. School museums and displays are not the only ways to reflect the heritage of a particular school community. Ceremonies and special events commemorating specific issues, some of them co-inciding with national public holidays and special days, can be used to encouraged awareness and respect for the past. Humans are the only species that build on the knowledge of previous generations, because we have language which can convey it across generational divides. Previous knowledge does not need to die with a generation, but can be acknowledged and preserved as long as an effort is made to do so. History teachers can, in their classrooms, play a pivotal role in facilitating the process in their local communities.

Conclusion

It is incumbent on South African schools, given the complexity of the bitter and fraught history of a fractured society, to delve into issues surrounding their heritage and how the appropriate contextualisation thereof impacts on good citizenship education. Mutual respect for widely differing perspectives of heritage is essential as a healthy debate between the various segments of South African communities is encouraged. Tolerance for the well considered opinions of the participants in this dialogue and the recognition and respect for a common humanity needs to be fostered. Schools, and especially history teachers, it should be recognised, play a vital role in the process of inculcating in the youth a healthy respect for the past, others, authority and themselves. Ultimately, rational, responsible, reflective and tolerant people make good citizens.

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