

A R T I C L E

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Why History Teaching?

1. INTRODUCTION

The significance and value of the historicity of the human being is unquestionable. Man is born in a historical setting and every event and situation in which man finds himself after birth, is anchored in historical events. Throughout his life he remains part of this historical reality (and cannot escape from it). The historical bondage of the human being is essential for him, not only to understand and to grasp his present, but also his future situatedness because "man's choices and decisions in his activeness in his situation within his landscape and horizon are co-determined by his historicity" (Nel in Duminy et al. 1967: 122-123).

Man has therefore to know his past to understand his present to actualise his future meaningful. Through educational intervention teachers at school try to explain historical events to their students in order to understand and to appreciate their present situations but also to set future expectations for themselves. These expectations, according to Ripinga (1980: 98-99) must meet and comply with the character, needs and expectations of the society of which they are members. All should not only be imbedded in the school curriculum but also in the subject curricula. According to Barrow (1983: 24) "... the curriculum is socially and historically located, and culturally determined", therefore it is the need and right of every person to know his past. This knowledge of the past was transferred to the younger generations traditionally by the elder members of the community but important historical facts were lost along the road because:

"It can be said that every time a lucid and informed old African dies, a whole part of the historical landscape of his country is abolished. The old customs break down and the old men, keepers of traditions, vanish".

(Coetzee 1966: 97)

Today this transmission of knowledge of the past takes place formally in school via *inter alia* the subject History. If students are not offered the opportunity, or are unwill-

ing to study History, they are deprived of an opportunity which could have enabled them to understand their present situation and to cater for a better future.

2. DEFINITION OF THE CONCEPT 'HISTORY'.

Many attempts have been made to give a clear and comprehensive description of the concept 'history' with the result that no general accepted one exist.

Clark (1979: 1) sees 'history' as a record of what has happened in the past while Carr (1973: 30) viewed it as a continuous dialogue between past and present. Marwick. (1983: 17) gives a broader meaning to the concept when he writes that history: can connote the entire human past as it actually happened ... man's attempt to describe and interpret that past ... the attempt to discover the significant things about the past". The Department of Education and Training also views history as a systematic study of the past, based on evidence; a selection of facts and events that are arranged, interpreted and explained (Syllabus for History Std 6 1986: 1).

Van Jaarsveld (1974: 21) also offers an acceptable definition when he views history as dealing with the thoughts, strives, emotions and actions of people who live in a society; in other words about human experiences in the past. But he also reveals an important dualism in the concept viz., that it is an investigation of (a) what really happened and (b) 'knowing' in the form of a stories or reports referred to as 'Knowledge' or 'Science'.

The next question that arises is: "Why students bother with events that took place years ago"? To answer this question we have to look at the aims of History teaching at school.

3. THE AIMS OF HISTORY TEACHING

The value and significance of the subject are imbedded in the aims of the subject itself. If the teachers therefor succeed in reaching their aims in every lesson the transmitted content ought to be of significance and value to the students.

The general aim of education (for South African Schools) is the leading of the child to proper adulthood to take up his rightful place in society. The necessity to attain this aim in the black school was realized by certain black leaders in Africa in the past. During the Nuffield Conference in 1953, the Addis Abeba-Conference in 1961 and in the speech of Ki-Terbo in 1961 the importance of a thorough knowledge of the past in educating the child was stressed (Thirion 1987: 40-41). The aim of teaching and, especially history teaching for blacks since gained a lot of attention.

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According to Leopold von Ranke (in Marwick 1983: 54) the aim of history is **not to please**, nor to give practical maxims of conduct, **not to arouse emotions** but knowledge pure and simple. Van Jaarsveld and Rademeyer (1977: 95-104) add to the knowledge component also the more deepseated value thereof, viz. the broadening of the students' time, reality and value horizons, the enlightenment of the contemporary problems, and responsible citizenship.

Oosthuizen (1988: 1) is very specific when he summarizes the aim of history teaching as follows:

"'n kritiese ingesteldheid en waardering van die eie en ander kultuurwaardes en wêreld; 'n perspektiewiese houding teenoor sake; insig in die plek en rol van tradisie, samelewing en kulture".

From the above it is clear that history teaching embraces more than intellectual development - it also determines the philosophy of life which in turn will determine attitudes within the community in particular and the outside world in general. These aspects are also emphasized by the Department of Education and Training in the aims stated in the syllabuses of the different standards. Here the aims are divided into general and specific aims and each course of study has been developed to achieve, inter alia, the following general aims: (Cf D.E.T. Syllabus Std 6).

- i Personal development;
- ii the development of a sense of citizenship;
- iii the development of positive attitudes and values;
- iv to contribute to an understanding and an appreciation of their own heritage and other people;
- v the understanding of the unique nature of individuals and events.

It is clear that history teaching is more than intellectual enrichment. It has unquestionably to do with the spiritual development and disposition of the students towards better citizenship, with the necessary understanding of other people for peaceful co-existence and appreciation of what is their own and what belongs to other.

4. MISCONCEPTIONS AMONG STUDENT REGARDING THE AIMS OF TAKING HISTORY AS A SUBJECT

Irrespective of the aims teachers in history teaching try to achieve many students reveal ignorance about the real value and significance of the subject. From the results from an investigation in a few secondary schools regarding history teaching (Cf. Thirion 1987) it was apparent that the real aims of history teaching are swallowed up by personal intentions and future expectations of pupils.

Respondents mentioned a wide range of reasons varying from positive remarks like "...to be responsible for your country" and "to be loyal to state an country", to other reactions like "Because I want to know the untruths that they teach us about our people".

Although a number of students have expectations which they want to realize by means of learning more historical facts, it is also obvious that a political echo is to be detected from some of the responses. As many as 83 students mentioned that they intended to follow a legal or parliamentary profession to change South Africa politically, while other belief that history will tell them about the problems of blacks, how the Boers took their land from them and why Blacks suffer (Thirion 1987: 140).

From the above it is clear that some students see History as a political weapon to change which is contradictory to the real educational aims of history teaching. It is also clear that history teachers should be aware of the enormous responsibility which rest on them to realize and to actualize the actual aims of the subject History.

5. CONCLUSION

Although history teachers are concerned about the content and the mastering thereof by their students, it is very important that they should never overlook the aims of the subject. Apart from imparting knowledge they should always be aware of the indirect aims they have to reach. They have to bear in mind the universal aim of education in general but also the aims of history teaching in particular.

Success in reaching the aims of history teaching will ensure a well-balanced student with, not only the necessary knowledge of the subject, but also with the necessary understanding and appreciation of the others' culture, heritage and their unique nature, revealing a sense of good citizenship with positive attitudes and values.

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