

“MAKING HISTORY COMPULSORY”: POLITICALLY INSPIRED OR PEDAGOGICALLY JUSTIFIABLE?

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Abstract

While recognising the contested nature of History as a school subject, this article explores the political context and practical implications of making History compulsory until Grade 12. After twenty one years of democracy, South African society lacks social cohesion, a sense of nationhood and is experiencing occurrences of xenophobia. To address these concerns, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) established the History Ministerial Task Team (HMTT) to oversee the implementation of compulsory History in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase. The terms of reference of the task team include: the strengthening of History content; a review of the content in the General Education and Training (GET) band; its implication for teacher education, professional development and textbooks. The campaign to make History compulsory was promoted by the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) and intensified after the outbreak of xenophobic attacks in 2008. To maintain the academic and professional status of History teaching, this article attempts to answer the question: what is the purpose of History as a school subject? To respond to this question, Barton and Levstik's model: "the purposes of History teaching", is employed as a framework to evaluate the proposal. By conducting a review of the post-apartheid History curriculum with special reference to complex phenomena such as nation-building and xenophobia, this article argues for attention to be given to the improvement of teachers' pedagogical practice and historical knowledge rather than policy reform which may be destabilising a large segment of the school system. The anticipated HMTT report is alerted against gratuitous political interference and to some practical implications of its work for educational practice.

Keywords: CAPS; Citizenship education; Curriculum; History as compulsory; Nation-building; Third space; Xenophobia.

Introduction

The school as an institution is routinely assumed to be society's only hope against the spread of complex social pathologies. This instrumentalist way

of reasoning seems to be common at times when society experiences social crises. The wave of xenophobic outbreaks in 2008, for example, intensified the call made by the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) for History to be made a compulsory subject in the school curriculum. SADTU claims that schools must provide compulsory History lessons to produce patriotic young South Africans, who can appreciate the “road we’ve travelled as a nation” and who are willing to contribute to building the “developmental state we envisage” (Saturday Star, 2014). Regular occurrences of xenophobia are arguably clear evidence of the youth’s lack of nationhood and historical knowledge. To address this knowledge and patriotic deficit, attention is being given to the History curriculum for a solution. Currently, the social crisis is exacerbated by the numerous “mustfall” hashtags, service delivery protests and incidents of overt racism as reflected in the media (Mail & Guardian, 2016). The political nature of the proposal to make History compulsory is underscored by the appointment of a Ministerial Task Team. Given the diverse reactions emanating from this initiative, this article asks the question: what “is” the purpose of History as a school subject.

During the pre-1994 period, History teaching is known to have been ideologically biased in favour of the political establishment and against the majority of South Africans. In the post-1994 period, this epistemological injustice demanded immediate redress. Subsequently, the national curriculum was reformed three times: Curriculum 2005 implemented in 1997, the Revised National Curriculum Statement of 2007 and Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) implemented in 2011. Additionally, in 2015 the Minister of Basic Education of South Africa, Me Angie Motshekga appointed a History Task Team (HMTT) to oversee the implementation of History as a compulsory subject in the FET phase. Thus, another curriculum reform in History teaching is being contemplated. The task team is mandated to research how other countries have dealt with the introduction of compulsory history and citizenship education in their schooling system and to make recommendations to implement it in South African schools. The terms of reference highlight the “strengthening” of history content in the FET band, a review of history in the GET band and its implication for curriculum implementation (DBE, 2015:4).

The DBE proposal provoked diverse reactions from the political, journalist, professional and academic sectors. The Democratic Alliance’s (DA) expressed concern that History could be used as an ideological tool and that the

DBE has acceded to the demand of SADTU (Mail & Guardian, 2014). A media report argued that making History compulsory will teach the youth the role played by other African states in the liberation struggle against apartheid and consequently make them good citizens and prevent them from becoming xenophobic (Maravanyika, 2015). The South African Society for History Teaching (SASHT) responded comprehensively to the proposal. In a statement, the SASHT, "... seeks in the first place, the assurance that whatever recommendations the task team should make, the present place of history among the elective FET subjects for the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination (DBE and IEB) will not be undermined or weakened" (SASHT, 2015: n.p.). The SASHT's statement is carefully crafted to promote History as a subject and suggest that, "it may well be that the best way to strengthen the content of History in the GET and FET is not to make any big changes to it, but to improve teachers' content knowledge through training and to improve the quality of their teaching" (SASHT, 2015, n.p.). The SASHT generally adopts a vigilant but engaging and cooperative approach towards the proposal.

Given the multifaceted nature of South African history, a diverse historiography perpetuates a troubled perception of the past (Bam & Visser, 1996:11). At the public hearings on Curriculum 2005 called by the Department of Education in November 2002, disagreements amongst stakeholders arose about the inclusion of diverse cultural beliefs and practices (Chisholm, 2003:8). Given the diversity and inequities in the South African education system (Spaull, 2012), uniform implementation of the History curriculum is still a work-in-progress and highly contested. Towards the end of the curriculum reform processes some form of consensus about History teaching has been reached on academic grounds. The dominant role players such as the African National Congress, teacher unions and university-based intellectuals united around the need for a secular, liberal humanist, rights-based curriculum that recognises the diversity of South Africans (Chisholm, 2003:12). Siebörger (2016) argues that the current curriculum highlights History as the study of change and development over a period of time which involves critical thinking about stories of the past and present (DBE, 2011). He furthermore highlights the academic dimension of History which should be retained in any future curriculum change. Additionally, the recognition of the need to decolonise the curriculum as well as the epistemological project to deconstruct dominant approaches to History, should be regarded as part of an academic approach. History teaching as pedagogical practice is reflective and

critical, dynamic, not static. As a feature, the History curriculum should be subjected to critique and reconstruction: open to (re) interpretation.

To explain the diverse interests associated with the purpose of History teaching, this article draws on Barton and Levstik’s (2008) model which implies of an overlapping of visions. According to Barton and Levstik, three main competing visions describe the purpose of History teaching: patriotic nationalism, academic discipline and democratic participation. Educators, politicians and the public hold conflicting ideas about what and how History should be taught (Barton & Levstik, 2008). This model is useful because it identifies and illuminates the common interest in History teaching. In addition to Barton’s model this article employs Weldon’s (2009:177-189) notion of “curriculum as conversation” and “border crossing”. Homi Bhabha’s (1996:53) notion of “third space” is borrowed to foreground the uncertainty but desirability of an inclusive democratic and dynamic approach to History teaching.

Using Barton and Levstik’s model as analytical lens, a critical review of the post-apartheid history curriculum will be conducted. Following this introduction, the article is structured under certain sub-headings: searching for a new theoretical compass – politics and the purpose of History teaching; the terms of reference of the HMTT; the evolution of the History curriculum in the post-apartheid period, a discussion, followed by the conclusion that alerts the HMTT against political interference in the curriculum and implications of the proposal for educational practice.

Searching for a new theoretical compass: Politics and the purpose of History teaching

It was the outbreak of xenophobic attacks in 2008 and its reoccurrence in 2014/15 that placed the South African political authorities under pressure to prevent future xenophobic outbreaks. In this context, the Minister of Basic Education Angie Motshekga declared that History could enhance nation-building, national pride, patriotism, social cohesion and cultural heritage. “A country that chooses to hide its heritage and historical footprints from its children, takes the risk of having them repeat the mistakes of their predecessors” (Mail & Guardian, 2014). The Minister deduces that poor historical knowledge amongst the nation’s youth is a reason for xenophobia and poor sense of nationhood. The Minister further commented that “

we need to equip our youth with an accurate account of our history in order for them to make educated decisions regarding their own future” (Phakathi, 2015). Consequently, the Minister announced that History will be made a compulsory subject in the FET phase (Mail & Guardian, 2014).

SADTU sees History teaching as playing a reconstruction and developmental role in a post-apartheid society. SADTU asserts that History should be taught in conjunction with the democratic constitution that seeks to build a South Africa inclusive of everyone who lives in it, black and white. This History should be taught to advance nation-building, healing of wounds, bridging the gap between the South African rich and South African poor, so as to realize a developmental state, able to compete in a globalized world (SADTU, 2014).

Further support to make History compulsory was pledged by the highest political office in government: President Jacob Zuma. During a gala dinner in Midrand, President Zuma addressed parents in an aim to call for support of the campaign to have History declared compulsory at all schools (SABC TV, Morning Live, 26th June 2015). It seems that the proposal to “make History compulsory” has strong political intentions. While the first post-apartheid curriculum (C2005) has been critiqued for its “political symbolism” the proposal seems to be a perpetuation of the same problem. Jansen uses the concept “political symbolism” to explain the distance between curriculum policy ideals and practical outcomes (Jansen, 2002:199). An application of Barton and Levstik’s model signifies patriotic nationalism as political interests that inform the proposal to make History compulsory.

History serves a variety of purposes which differ from one society to another (Barton, 2001:54). While the connection between national identity and History is inescapable, alternative approaches may lead to more sophisticated understandings of important historical concepts. Barton (2001) argues that students in Northern Ireland give explanations that overlap with those of children in the United States and in some instances they have a better understanding of the nature of the discipline. They also have a broader framework in which to understand History. Children in Northern Ireland are less likely to equate change with progress and see change in a rational way. This is unlike the U.S experience of some children who have an internalized emphasis on “national history”, a greater sense of “our” and “we” and a jingoistic sense of important people and events (Barton, 2001:52). While Barton recognises the similarities between Northern Ireland and U.S children, he also identifies how History teaching influences their identity and criticality.

In the absence of an established “History teaching culture”, the South African educational sector can derive valuable lessons from international studies to inform how the practice of History teaching can be put to the common good of all (Barton & Levstik 2008).

A dearth of classroom research on History teaching in South Africa impedes the development of an empirically based conceptual framework. To analyse the various purposes of History teaching Barton and Levstik’s model and Weldon’s (2009) notion of “curriculum as conversation” can serve as analytical and conceptual framework. Weldon (2009) articulates a position that recognises the complexities of the past, acknowledges the contentions of the present and promotes an inclusive History for the future. Additionally, to accommodate Weldon’s “curriculum as conversation” as emerging unknown productive spaces, Homo Bhabha’s (1996:53) notion of a “third space” is incorporated to describe History teaching as an ambivalent site where co-construction of new narratives can emerge without being forced into primordial unity or fixity. From a theoretical perspective, South African History consists of multiple voices that are vying for discursive spaces to assume their power positions. In the new discursive space lies a generativity which accommodates all in the “third space”, that may offer an inclusive and democratic way forward.

What is clear in the political pronouncements mentioned above is the lack of reference to the current state of History teaching in South African classrooms. No assessment of the current state of citizenship education in Life Orientation or pedagogical questions about History teaching at the classroom level appears to have informed the political discourse. Political aspirations seem to have become the prime motivation for the appointment of the History Ministerial Task Team.

Establishment of the History Ministerial Task Team (HMTT)

In 2015 the Minister of Education formalized the establishment of the HMTT in a government gazette (DBE, 2015). A team of History experts were commissioned to compile a report based on the following terms of reference:

To conduct a research study on how best to implement the introduction of compulsory History in FET schools as part of citizenship located within Life Orientation; 2- to strengthen the content of History in the FET band; 3- to review content in the GET band; 4- to present proposals regarding teacher development in initial professional education and continuous professional development, to prepare a public participation plan and draft implementation and management

plan with time frames indicating: alignment with History textbooks according to the reviewed curriculum, key concerns for the implementation in the FET band and policy amendments and recommendations emanating from this process (DBE, 2015:4).

Considering these terms of reference, the following observations are problematized. First, the assumption that citizenship education ranges across Life Orientation and History would require curriculum specialist from both subjects to be part of the task team. The HMTT consists exclusively of History experts. Second, the “strengthening” of History content presupposes a lack of historical content and as it stands, it is ambiguous for the purposes of an investigation (Siebörger, 2016). It is not clear what historical content is in need of “strengthening”. Third, a review of GET content without investigating the present state of History teaching would lead to an incomplete assessment. Lastly, the proposal for curriculum reform has cost and training implications at teacher education, professional development and management level. Curriculum designers need to be cognisant of the system-wide consequences of policy reform.

Needless to say, the terms of reference shows no obeisance to the context that gave rise to the proposal to make History compulsory. When the proposal emerged in the public domain, there was a clear presupposed correlation between issues of nation-building and History teaching. According to the Minister of Education, making History compulsory will address the lack of nationhood, xenophobia and social cohesion (Mail & Guardian, 2014). However, to expect the school to ameliorate social ills may be unrealistic when considering that xenophobia in the South African context is not only a “deep dislike of non-nationals by nationals of a recipient state” (Valji, 2003:n.p) but rather a violent practice that results in bodily harm and damage (Harris, 2002). In practical terms, nationhood requires the expulsion from the “domestic space” of all that comes to be regarded as alien and dangerous; thus demanding a violent relation with the other (Campbell, 1998:13). In a study by Crush, Ramachandran and Pendleton (2013), it was found that in Southern African countries, citizens across the region tend to exaggerate the numbers of non-citizens in their countries, to view the migration of people within regions as a “problem” rather than an opportunity and to scapegoat non-citizens. The intensity of xenophobia varied significantly. Richards (2009) explained the economic causes of xenophobia which include the rising costs of food and commodities, service delivery failures and micro-politics of local communities. The same study asserts that the history of South

Africa’s immigration policy is rooted in the country’s racialised past which contributes towards xenophobia (Richards, 2009). When History teaching is expected to have certain predetermined outcomes such as to develop a sense of nationhood and the eradication of xenophobia, the intricate nature of the pedagogical task should not be underplayed.

While the objective of this paper is to respond to the research question: what *is* the purpose of History as a school subject?, a review of the curriculum content in the post-apartheid period assists to evaluate its knowledge content in relation to the political concerns expressed. The following section reviews the evolution of the History curriculum during the post-apartheid period until the present.

Evolution of History in the post-apartheid curriculum

For the past twenty one years, the South African curriculum has undergone three reform processes: Curriculum 2005 (C2005) launched in March 1997, the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) (2007), initiated in 2002 (Van Eeden, 2002:10-20; Van Eeden, 2012:1-24) and the current Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), implemented in 2011. What follows is a review of the evolution of the History curriculum. Reference will be made to the inclusion of content relevant to xenophobia and nation-building. Manifestations of curriculum tendencies in terms of Barton and Levstik’s model (2008) on the purpose of History teaching will be noted as observed in the policy.

History in Curriculum 2005 (C2005)

During the tenure of the first post-apartheid Education Minister, Sibusiso Bengu, from 1994 to 1999, History virtually disappeared from the school curriculum as an autonomous subject (Polakow-Suransky 2002). Due to the large knowledge component, and an inadequate Outcomes-based Education (OBE) training programme, an outcomes-based curriculum placed new demands on teachers (Harley & Wedekind, 2004:200). Curriculum 2005 had three design features that impacted directly on the didactics of History:

- It was outcomes-based which was manifested in its lack of content;
- An integrated knowledge system with eight “learning areas” when History and Geography had to combine as social sciences from Grade 1 to 9;

- It was informed by a learner-centred pedagogy which was undermined by poor teacher support and learners' social capital (Harley & Wedekind, 2004: 97). According to Jansen (1999), C2005 was doomed to fail due to its "political symbolism", poor quality teacher qualification, lack of social capital amongst most learners' and lack of textbooks (Taruvunga & Cross, 2012). The first curriculum reform (C2005) was:

A compromise curriculum which reflected and captured elements of constructivism, progressivism and traditional essentialism and in its intent, C2005 was a dramatic departure from the authorization subject and teacher-centered apartheid curriculum and pedagogy, as it marked a paradigm shift from a subject-dominated to an integrated curriculum with an active learner and a facilitating teacher" (Taruvunga & Cross, 2012:128).

In the absence of clear guidance and content, teachers were expected to develop their own learning materials to achieve specified "learning outcomes". With no textbooks and the combination of History and Geography in a new "learning area", during this period, History teaching and learning declined rapidly. The curriculum indicated tendencies of an academic disposition devoid of content. An outcome-based curriculum for a mainly impoverished educational sector and the integration of History and Geography into one learning area, contributed to the diminution of the subject now in desperate need of survival. Given the legacy of History during the pre-1994 era, there was clearly no emerging approach to History teaching as defined by Barton and Levstik (2008) in Curriculum 2005. The apparent absence of a culture of History teaching received some attention in the revised curriculum.

History in the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) 2002

History re-emerged as a subject after a review of Curriculum 2005. The National Department of Education instituted a committee in 2000 to review Curriculum 2005. The result of the review process was the introduction of the second curriculum reform: the Revised National Curriculum Statement (DoE 2002). The RNCS resuscitated History from its weakened position. Kader Asmal took over as Minister of Education in 1999 and appointed Me June Bam as head of the South African History project to revive the subject in the school curriculum (Polakow-Suransky, 2002).

History content in RNCS

The revised curriculum policy provides broad guidelines for the study of History within the General Education and Training Band with the following objectives:

(To provide) general knowledge and understanding of the history of all people in South Africa; (to understand) our diverse past and how it informs the present; (to appreciate) heritage and identity construction; (to participate in) oral tradition and archaeology and environmental impact; citizenship, (to promote) social and technological developments; (to teach) social organisations and their relevance; (to develop) skills to engage with historical sources (RNCS, 2002:4) (Insertions by the writer, MND).

The policy stipulates three learning outcomes in the Foundation phase (R-3), Intermediate (4, 5 & 6) and Senior phase (Grades 7, 8 & 9):

1. Historical enquiry (sources, writing history pieces, communication); 2.- historical knowledge and understanding (chronology and time; cause and effect and similarity and difference) and 3.- historical interpretation (based on sources influencing factors, interpretation of past, memory etc (RNCS 2002:7).

The RNCS document repeats traditional topics in Grade R to 3: personal biographies, national symbols and national holidays. These topics can be developed into relevant and interesting lessons which should contribute towards a sense of national identity: unity in diversity being the overarching ethos of nationhood. In the Foundation phase, the RNCS provides sufficient content and opportunities for the competent History teacher to teach national content.

Major historical themes in the intermediate and senior phase History (Grades 4 to 9) provide stimulating and relevant content to make History interesting. Themes such as human evolution, ancient civilizations in Africa, slavery, colonialism, human rights and democracy are rich in materials relevant to develop a sense of nationhood and respect for all human beings. Under the heading “Issues of our time” xenophobia is mentioned specifically in an appropriate context which could productively contribute towards a human rights ethic: crime against humanity, Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Holocaust and Nuremberg Trials, xenophobia and genocide e.g. Rwanda, Balkans (DoE, 2002:62). These two references provide sufficient evidence that the RNCS (2002) provides the content necessary for learners to acquire knowledge of xenophobia and nationhood.

Weldon (2009:182) asserts that the second curriculum reform aimed “at permitting the unofficial, the hidden, to become visible”. Weldon argues

that the RNCS (2002) contributed much towards post-conflict reconciliation and the writing of a new history for South African schools. Weldon argues that the RNCS can be seen in a positive light in three significant ways: first, its recognition of diverse memories and subjugated knowledge of previously marginalized communities: second, by using Applebee's notion of the "curriculum as conversation" opportunities are created to converse about experiences in a disciplinary way to develop skills and knowledge: third, the curriculum creates space for "disciplinary traditions" which interrogate texts of a diverse nature, sees artefacts as complex pieces of evidence and a multiplicity of voices as individual perspectives.

The RNCS rescued History as a discipline and provided a foundation for its future development. The RNCS seems to balance intersecting visions of Barton and Levstik's model of History teaching with careful presentation of the need for national and citizen content, democratic participation and maintaining the principles of History as an academic discipline.

Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) 2011

The experience of the two earlier curriculum reforms provided valuable knowledge to improve the quality of the new curriculum and attend to shortcomings (See Kallaway, 2012:23-62 for a comprehensive discussion). According to CAPS, History has the following aims: to create an interest in the past, provide knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the past and forces that shaped it, an understanding of historical enquiry and sources and evidence of history (DBE, 2011:10). The RNCS used the concept "learning outcomes"; CAPS replaced it with "aims". The "learning outcomes" identified in the RNCS have been incorporated under concepts in History stating that: the study of History involves different points of view, different narratives, texts, cause and effect, change and continuity and chronology (DBE, 2011:11). The "learning area" of social science has now been changed to the "subject" social science consisting of History and Geography (DBE, 2011:8).

In the Foundation phase CAPS document, History is taught as part of the subject Life Skills. Life Skills consists of "beginning knowledge", "creative arts, "physical education" and "personal and social well-being" (DBE, 2011:7-9). Social science concepts to be taught in this phase are: conservation, cause and effect, place, adaptation, relationship and interdependence, diversity and individuality, and change (DBE, 2011). Opportunities to discuss human

rights, xenophobia and nation-building are provided at least two hours per term. In Grade 3 the document makes specific mention of stories and experiences of older family and community members that are historical in nature.

Umalusi (2014) conducted a comparative study between History in the NCS and CAPS in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase. Drawing from this study, some of the conclusions based on the FET phase, are valid in the GET phase. Those conclusions are briefly stated below:

In terms of the broad aims of the curriculum, and the underpinning focus on history as enquiry, the NCS and the CAPS are very similar. Thus a new approach to history as a schools subject has not been taken. In terms of historical skills to be developed, the CAPS is a repackaging of NCS, as most of the skills are the same. CAPS specifies the content in greater detail while the NCS never indicates time frames per topic ... Assessment guidelines are much clearer than in the NCS (Umalusi, 2014:99-100).

In the section on the current curriculum that informs History teaching, subject content relevant to xenophobia and nation-building has been clearly identified. Because History teaching is informed by a common curriculum that is compulsory for all learners between Grade R and 9, the argument to make History compulsory may be deemed superfluous. CAPS acknowledges that Grade 9 History is an exit level and reminds textbook writers to cover topics comprehensively to provide for learners who will not select History in Grades 10 to 12 (CAPS, 2011:44). History curriculum developers approached their work with the full understanding that a comprehensive curriculum is needed because not everyone continues with History until matric. Learners who completed Grade 9 would therefore be expected to have acquired sufficient History content to satisfy national needs accommodated in the curriculum.

In response to the research question, evidence presented includes topics of personal interest, human rights and nation-building as early as the Foundation phase. Besides the inclusion of national symbols, national holidays such as Freedom day, Human Rights day, June 16 and Women’s Day opportunities are provided to teach learners about xenophobia and nation-building. If youth are xenophobic and do not have a sense of national identity, making History compulsory from Grades 10 to 12, may arguably be of little consequence. It would be more valuable to investigate the pedagogical challenges that teachers are experiencing with the implementation of the current curriculum rather than proposing another curriculum reform. It is noteworthy that Barton and Levstik’s purposes of History teaching are identifiable in the specified content

of the new curriculum. Researching curriculum implementation of History teaching across the diverse type of schools in South Africa should precede any reform.

Discussion

What has been presented in the preceding sub-sections aims at answering the research question: what is the purpose of History as a school subject? This question emerged as a response to the establishment of the HMTT by the Minister of Education.

The miracle that the rainbow nation symbolized after a peaceful transition to democracy is fast becoming a myth which politicians want to preserve. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was instituted in 1995 by the state as an instrument mandated to confront the crimes of apartheid and to promote nation-building and unification (Valji, 2003). Counter master narratives were needed to transform memories of the past into beacons of hope for the future. The promotion of a discourse of nation-building, national identity and social cohesion has become a national imperative for a successful South African state. Xenophobia is part of everyday service delivery protests at community level and indicative of grassroots socio-economic frustration (Richards, 2009). The Rhodes Must Fall initiated a nation-wide student protest movement and ushered in a new period of uncertainty. It is not surprising that the political leadership's irritation with the miscarriage of the nation-building project compels them to look for urgent solutions. The proposal to make History compulsory – even though it is already compulsory for nine of the twelve years of schooling (RNCS, 2002; CAPS, 2011) is therefore a sign of political desperation which lacks pedagogical justification.

Resistance to major curriculum reform emanating from the work of the HMTT may be expected. Curriculum reform involves spending resources which could be better employed to improve a (f)ailing educational system in poor and rural communities. Making History compulsory in FET will exert additional pressures on existing school staff establishments and financial resources. This article referenced literature (Masigo, Reitzes & Amisi in Richards 2009; MacGregor *et al.*, 2015) to illuminate the complexity of xenophobia and nation-building to support the proposal that making History compulsory seems political rather than pedagogical. It is significant that the SASHT noted as part of its report on a Round Table discussion arranged

by the HMTT that: “It seems that there were general agreement across the commissions that the integrity of History as an elective subject was to be preserved and that Life Orientation would develop patriotic citizenship” (SASHT, 2015:n.p.). The SASHT is hopeful that no drastic changes to the existing status of History in the FET phase will be made, thus implying that History should not be made compulsory in the FET phase.

Although this paper argues that making History compulsory is not feasible to redress xenophobia and nation-building, there exists much room for improvement in the implementation of the History curriculum. Hypothetically, if teachers are epistemologically and pedagogically better equipped, learners should receive a better quality education. The political leadership has given inadequate attention to the possibility that the problem of poor behaviour and historical knowledge of youth could be the consequence of a largely dysfunctional education system (Spaull, 2012) and an impoverished quality of life that is exacerbated by a high youth unemployment rate of 34,8 % (Stats SA, 2014).

Conclusion

In response to the research question: what “is” the purpose of History as a school subject?, a policy analysis supports the view that the purpose of teaching History is a combination of national, academic and democratic interests (Siebörger, 2016). The Umalusi (2014) report on the state of the History curriculum asserts that the curriculum is underpinned by enquiry thus endorsing Weldon’s (2009) view that the current curriculum recognises subjugated knowledge of previously marginalised communities. Weldon (2009) asserts that History should be evidence-based to create space for a “conversational” and deliberative engagement with texts and artefacts. The promotion of critical thinking is a key objective in an evidence-based approach to History. To pre-empt the report of the HMTT, the following cautionary comments may be worth considering.

The HMTT consists of highly qualified people who are aware that political interference and agenda setting in curriculum reform is undesirable. While there is a need to recognise and restore the rightful place of History, it should be pursued for the right reasons. Political interference may perpetuate an unpopular view of the subject which should be protected from ideological manipulation. The HMTT should be aware that History has been a victim

of a “market-friendly orientation” approach to education (Chisholm, 2004: 15). The declining numbers in students selecting History as a subject has been exacerbated by some state student financial aid projects that compel students to select scarce skills subjects in the sciences and business fields. This impacted negatively on the popularity of History. The decline in the teaching of History is not unique to South Africa. Similar trends have been observed in England (Paton, 2011) and Nigeria (Adoberin, 2012). Changing the curriculum has far-reaching pedagogical, social and economic consequences and should therefore be approached cautiously.

To obviate a possible destabilisation of History teaching and citizenship education, an assessment of the current state of History and Life Orientation should be conducted. A nation-wide investigation into the state of History teaching should specify the number of schools offering History in the FET phase, the number of qualified teachers and projection of the possible impact of making History compulsory at schools where it is not offered. A clear idea of the human resources available will then inform the extent that the proposal is feasible or not. While studies in other countries may be useful to inform how to carry out the plan, findings of local studies should inform the extent that History can be implemented at FET level.

Investing in the improvement of curriculum implementation will restore History as an essential school subject. The same can be said about Life Orientation. Findings from new research into the state of History teaching and Life Orientation/Life skills should inform innovative programmes to improve the epistemological and pedagogical quality of teachers. It was noted earlier that the curriculum and textbooks are cognisant of the fact that many learners will not continue with History beyond Grade 9. An analysis of the History curricula evinced that sufficient care was taken to equip learners with adequate historical knowledge and citizenship education which should provide building blocks for future personal development.

South African historiography is predominantly written within traditional perspectives. Reference was made to the ongoing projects of decolonising the curriculum and the dynamic nature of History teaching. Useful pedagogical tools for history writing and teaching can be taken from Weldon’s incorporation of Applebee’s “curriculum as conversation” and Giroux’s “border crossing” (cited in Weldon, 2009:177). What is needed is a paradigm shift towards an inclusive authentic democratic History. While taking cognisance of Barton and Levstik’s model, future programmes require innovative theoretical and

conceptual frames that are inclusive and democratic.

This article argues that the linearity between compulsory History, xenophobic attacks and nation-building is flawed. History teaching cannot operate as a single variable in an educational system that is often described as unequal or dysfunctional (Spaull, 2012). While keeping the History discourse alive, the HMTT should not ignore that available resources could be invested productively to improve current pedagogy instead of spending it on extensive curriculum reforms. Notwithstanding the educational role that History teaching is playing, its value as an academic discipline must not be compromised. While the work of the HMTT can be viewed as an exercise in curriculum design, its recommendations should be subjected to critique especially the role that politics play in defining History teaching.

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