

# DEVELOPING A CORE CURRICULUM FOR THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA\*

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## INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

This paper is no more than a programmatic statement of the main ideas and approaches which in my view should inform the development of a core curriculum for the subject of History in the schools of the new South Africa. It is, however, based on many years of research, practice and consultations and discussions with school teachers, academic and adult educators in South Africa, other African countries and Europe. As such, I trust that what I am about to present will at the very least give rise to a fruitful exchange of views among the participants at this conference. I hope, furthermore, that some of the mechanisms and processes I suggest for the development of a core curriculum in the sense in which I use that term here will be deemed sufficiently interesting to give rise to groups of teachers and others bent on exploring and adapting them in order to further their own commitment to the democratisation of the curriculum development process in South Africa.

I should also point out by way of introduction that the thoughts presented here are part and parcel of a much wider project of mainly primary school curriculum development which my colleagues and I have been conducting in the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa, which is based in the Faculty of Education of the University of Cape Town. We believe that all such initiatives should eventually be co-ordinated and as far as possible and necessary also integrated by a National and by various Provincial Curriculum Development Units. In this spirit, then, I offer to you the following thoughts about the core curriculum for History in the schools of the new South Africa.

## CORE CURRICULUM

The term "core curriculum", as used by most South African educators refers to the minimum common

elements (usually only to the syllabus content) of subjects studied in South African schools. The corollary to such a core is the existence of options beyond the core; the selection of options used to be departmentally determined along lines of the then prevalent apartheid categories. Used in this manner, the core curriculum is synonymous with what in Europe is referred to as the national curriculum.

The rationale for such a national curriculum is that in very large or very populous and diverse nations, a large measure of commonality should be promoted so as to maximise the possibility of freedom of movement for all citizens since it is obvious that if all or most schools teach a core of common contents, methods, approaches and skills, parents who for whatever reason are forced to move from one part of a country to another will not be constrained by the consideration that in the absence of such a national curriculum, their children might have to "start from scratch".

While there are obviously also other, usually cultural, considerations that influence the pursuit of a national curriculum, there is no doubt that at the heart of this quest lie these, essentially economic, motives. What is not immediately obvious to most people, however, is that in these contexts, the existence and the reality of the nation, viewed and experienced as a kind of social envelope, is taken for granted. That is to say, the many, often bitter, struggles that had to be waged in order to bring into being the nation concerned lie way back in the past. They are sufficiently distanced and "processed" that they are no longer experienced as a direct influence on events and emotions of the present. History, working as a kind of selective memory, has in these cases enabled the people of the country concerned "to forget many things", as the French historian Ernest Renan, once wrote.

It is precisely because we in South Africa today cannot take the existence of a South African nation for granted

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that we have to define the concept "core curriculum" somewhat differently from the conventional manner. The question of national unity and national identity is a very complex one indeed and this is not the forum in which to attempt to deal with it in any detail. If you need any reminder of this, I refer you to the vitriolic discussion now taking place around the issue of historical monuments, statues, paintings, place and street names, etc. It is correct, however, to say that most people not located on the right of the political spectrum in South Africa are agreed that in some sense we are engaged in the process of building a nation from among all the different groups of people who constitute our society. I shall take it as axiomatic that in the modern world schools are the main mechanisms of socialisation of the new generation and that schooling, for this reason, is one of the main instruments of nation building however this process is defined in detail. Within the general school curriculum, again, certain subjects, or segments of knowledge, are deemed to be particularly important as instruments of socialisation. Traditionally, History is deemed to be the pivotal subject in the shaping of the consciousness of the youth of a country.

The details of my proposal derive from two fundamental propositions. The first of these is that in all multi-ethnic societies, a core culture emerges to one degree or another. The reflex of most Eurocentric theories of nationality was (and is) to assume that the different "cultures" remain separate and discrete entities that hardly influence one another. In reality, however, there is a confluence of cultural streams such that cultural purists and "fundamentalists" are often hard put to keep the different cultures apart.

If I may remind you of a period in our own history, General Hertzog's notion of the "two streams" in relation to the white communities of South Africa bore witness to his understanding, albeit in a racially clouded environment, of this general phenomenon. In the South African case, taken as a whole, certain demographic and historical relationships have combined to heighten this particular effect. In our country at this time, there is a peculiar balance of power between whites and blacks, crudely perceived. Whereas the former control most of the economic and military power accumulated as the result of colonial and apartheid strategies during the past 350 years, the latter have both a demographic preponderance and a certain measure of control over labour power and industrial skills. Either "side" can paralyse the state and society by withdrawing its co-operation.

At a cultural level, one of the consequences of this is that a conventional assimilationist model cannot work without inordinate measures of coercion. As a result, the willingness of people in South Africa to

accommodate one another is much greater than in most societies divided along racial lines. What has tended to happen is that the different cultural streams ("tributaries") that have flowed together in South Africa in the course of three-and-a-half centuries have created a large common "pool" or core culture to which all South Africans have access. Despite the media distortion which gives the impression that South African society is an outpost of Europe on the "dark continent", the factual situation is one in which a process of what I call mainstreaming by confluence has taken place. None of the three major tributaries, i.e., African, European and Asian, is dominant to the point of assimilating the others.

This assertion leads us directly to the second of my propositions, viz., the fact that under the pressure of capitalist development there has developed in South Africa in the course of the past century, more or less, a peculiarly South African core culture in virtually all the decisive spheres of life. This "mainstream" culture is a peculiar amalgam of diverse South African elements originating in Africa, Europe, Asia and, increasingly, also in North America. Whether we consider religion, music, sport, food, dancing or any other major activity in South African life, the impact of all of these four influences is present in one or other degree. An example from the sphere of religion must suffice in the present context.

The phenomenon of the independent African churches in South Africa is a copybook example of the development alluded to here. Whatever the variants of the phenomenon and whether they are called "independent", "Ethiopian" or "Zionist", all of these so-called syncretistic churches in various combinations and permutations represent the flowing together of European, African and some Asian elements. In recent times African-American influences and even Caribbean elements have also begun impacting on these churches. Even more interesting and significant is the fact that there has been a flowing back into the established Christian churches of African influences such that these churches have been obliged to adapt to the African reality in order to remain viable themselves.

This is an excellent example of what I have dubbed "interfluence", i.e., the situation where the mutual enrichment by way of interpenetration is so "natural" that one does not at once notice the complex and nuanced paths that lead to it.

It is in line with and against the background of the evolution of this core culture that I want to make some suggestions about how we should go about initiating the process of developing the core syllabus for the subject of History in our schools.

We should begin by providing ourselves with the space and time in which to undertake the thoroughgoing revision of the syllabi required by the new situation in which we are today. In brief, this means simply that we have to place a moratorium on external examinations in history regardless of which grade or standard we are concerned with. Lest cries of outrage make it impossible for this suggestion to be heard and considered on its merits, let me add immediately that internal examinations monitored and moderated by a negotiated mechanism such as the history teachers' association or by some circuit task group set up for the purpose can be organised without any special effort. The skills aspect of the subject would under these circumstances constitute the main focus of such monitoring. My suggestion is that we give ourselves a minimum of two years during which we will conduct public debates on what should be taught in our schools and how best it should be taught. Moreover, we can arrive at some agreement on the issues where there are real gaps in our knowledge or where there are polarised and polarising interpretations that should for as long as necessary be allowed to coexist.

Let us also agree right now that it will be necessary to carry all, or at least the most influential, interpretations of specific controversial or emotive events, such as the Great Trek, slavery, indentured labour, the institution of pass laws, etc., in all textbooks or in other types of educational aids. We must avoid at all costs the situation where some books carry only one interpretation while others carry only another. Such bibliographical segmentation corresponding to ideological and methodological divisions in the body academic would constitute a disaster. Besides the possible political wisdom of the position I am advocating, I believe that the subject of History would be best served precisely by the juxtaposition of different interpretations. For in this way, students and other learners can be brought to realise the nature of historiography as a social science. On the basis of the experience we have of historical writing in all parts of the world, we can safely assume that sooner or later the canon of South African history (and of world history as seen from the angle of vision of South Africans) will become established regardless of the differences that will persist in approaches to the subject.

In my view, this process can be driven by a combination of scholarly and popular initiatives. History teachers' associations, teachers' associations and unions as well as teachers' resources centres, university departments and students' organisations can and should take the lead in proposing items which they would consider as indispensable to the core syllabus. Through workshops, seminars, conferences, public debates in the media, and by all other means that would attract ordinary people to the consideration of their

past, these proposals can be discussed, amended, refined, placed in question, their weaknesses and strengths identified, and so on. The entire process ought to be monitored and recorded by the national and provincial curriculum development units. From time to time these units should circulate drafts of the core syllabus derived precisely from these debates around what one hopes will be numerous proposals for comment and criticism. In the meantime, the situation suggested earlier should be allowed to persist where history teachers will continue to teach essentially whatever they wish to teach provided that they will be subject to some process of peer monitoring or some other way of ensuring professional standards.

### TRIBUTARY SYLLABI

On the assumption that the process of determining what should constitute the core history syllabus in terms of both content and skills can be agreed upon, what mechanisms should be institutionalised in order to ensure that space, time and competent educators are provided for the realisation in practice of the much-suggested "accommodation of diversity" in the history syllabus?

Two points should be made crystal clear at the outset. The first of these is that the standard of assessment for the so-called tributary (peripheral, optional, etc.) aspects of the syllabus have to be exactly the same as those set for adequate or inadequate performance in the external ("core") examinations. The second is that all the peripheral or tributary interests that become manifest or vocal should be respected, even if it leads us uncomfortably close to the abyss of tokenism. In this regard, it is very important that we accept the basic principle that any self-defined group should have the right to demand or at least to expect that its legitimate interests will be accommodated. Of course, no group whose "interests" are in conflict with the anti-racist principles of the interim constitution would have the right to insist on such accommodation. In my view, we can expect much experimentation and even more charlatanry, at least in the short term, but this is an unavoidable price we shall have to pay in order to arrive at an understanding of all the agendas that need to be addressed in the emerging nation. Another vitally important principle that will have to be upheld rigorously is that no learner shall be excluded from any course on the grounds that he or she does not "belong" to the group concerned.

In practice, any person who would normally not be expected to be interested in the details or a particular category of people, e.g., a particular religious group, would already in day-to-day practice have manifested such interest and his or her desire to be part of a project

on the history of the group concerned would not be perceived to be extraordinary or perverse.

The really difficult question we shall have to find an answer to is the one concerning the appropriate mechanisms for maintaining acceptable standards. On the assumption of a flexible or variable time-table in which a certain relation will be maintained between core and tributary syllabi, it will be necessary, for example, to create space and time for "tributary specialists", some of whom will be extra-mural people, to teach classes in "their" speciality and for proper negotiated forms of assessment to be instituted. One such mechanism that would seem to lend itself admirably to this kind of strategy is the use of portfolios or work files which would allow the learner maximum scope for creativity and initiative, yet make possible the assessment of his or her performance by educators other than the specialists concerned. We ought to have workshops and seminars on the best ways of building into the new curriculum acceptable forms of tributary learning and teaching.

#### **A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE**

By way of concluding this short input, I should like to refer to a practical example of what I have described here in programmatic terms.

If we take an element in the Std. 5 History syllabus such as slavery, we can show very clearly what the relation between the core syllabus and the tributary syllabus might be. In principle, exactly the same could be done with any other element of the syllabus.

To begin with, the core content would have to include the concept of slavery, the prevalence of this form of forced labour in the world in the wake of colonial conquest, the specific reasons for the introduction of slavery at the Cape, the conditions under which slaves were held, the emancipation of slaves and the general effects of slavery on South African society. All South African children in Std. 5 would have to acquire this core knowledge.

In the Western Cape, however, because of the much more intensive, lasting and indeed ongoing cultural and social effects of slavery, we know that there is much greater interest in the modalities and consequences of slavery in this region. At this point I believe we should be quite careful about emphasising a regional approach to the history of South Africa. Let me state it bluntly: the compromises of the negotiated settlement that gave rise to the 9 provinces have no rationale other than the decentralisation of administration and the possible reinforcement of democratic practices that may derive from this. It is quite possible that this constitutional

and bureaucratic experiment may turn out to be a great success.

On the other hand, it might turn out to be a very short-lived experiment. Before committing massive research and other educational resources to the entrenchment of something about which we are very unsure, I believe we should look for approaches and solutions that have the potential to outlast any experiments.

For this reason I want to suggest that we base the tributary component of this History syllabus at the primary and junior secondary level on the study of local history. This history will be relevant and "fitting" irrespective of the particular constitutional envelopes in which the locality may be put from time to time. Moreover, besides enriching and enlarging the knowledge of the learners especially about the part of the country in which they live, the study of local history will afford dedicated and competent teachers the space and opportunity to expose their students to the hands-on skills of historiography. At higher levels (standards or grades), the optional aspects of the History syllabus would have to be conceptualised and implemented differently but similar segments of knowledge which at present would appear to be of interest only to limited constituencies could be offered for special study by all interested learners.

If this basic approach is acceptable, it is easy to see that a class of Std. 5 students in Cape Town or in Wellington might wish to do a project on the question of slavery in their locality with a view to understanding what actually happened and how it has affected their lives across the centuries. The work done in such projects (which might make up, let us say, about 20% of the History syllabus) would be peculiar to the particular school or even class, i.e., few if any other children in Std. 5 in South Africa might be studying this segment of the history of the country, but it would be subject to exactly the same rigorous assessment as would the core syllabus. How this would be done is essentially a management task but it is in principle completely soluble.

Two things are very clear in this approach. Firstly, only a few such projects would be possible in any given year. They would, therefore, have to be chosen very carefully with a view to interesting all or most of the children who are studying history in Std. 5 at a given school and in order to expose them to some of the more basic techniques of historical research. It is also possible, secondly, that through careful monitoring of such "tributary" studies, new themes and issues of "core" importance will rise to the surface. While we should not be unrealistic about this latter possibility, it is quite proper to remind ourselves that we are living in

an epoch, both globally and nationally, where everything is being reviewed and all the "truths" of yesterday are being questioned. It is, therefore, quite possible that through these tributary studies taking place in thousands of schools throughout the country our core

syllabus will be enlarged and changed in ways that we cannot foresee at present.

I have no doubt that we are capable of taking up the challenge that "history" has placed before us in this country at the end of the 20th century.

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## **GESKIEDENISLEERPLANNE: HISTORIOGRAFIESE TENDENSE EN ONDERRIGBEHOEFTE**

Tema van die Konferensie van die Suid-Afrikaanse Historiese Genootskap, PU vir CHO, 10 -12 Januarie 1996. Vir verdere inligting kontak:

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## **HISTORY SYLLABI: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TRENDS AND METHODS OF INSTRUCTION.**

Biennial conference of the South African Historical Association, Potchefstroom, January 10-12, 1996.