

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL AND HISTORY TEACHING IN SOUTH AFRICA SOCIETY: DO PRIVATE SCHOOLS PROVIDE THE ANSWER?

Monica Phillips
(RAU)

1. INTRODUCTION

The educational system in South Africa evokes a concerned reaction from many educationalists. In a society consisting of a mix between so many different cultures, races and nationalities, the schools and education systems must be adopted to suit these specifically South African circumstances. This adaptation has not taken place, and it is doubtful as to whether or not the schools and education systems meet the needs of all South Africans.

It has often been said that the private schools in South Africa provide the perfect example of how equal multi-cultural education can work successfully within one school. In the course of my essay I will attempt to determine whether the above statement is true or not. To be able to do this it is first necessary to look at the actual role of the school in South Africa – does it invite or divide the South African people? I will then look at the role played specifically by history as a subject in present day South Africa and the possible role it can play in a future South Africa. It is also important to look briefly at the situation of the public schools – do history teachers in these schools find themselves in a dilemma, and if so, why? After this discussion on history and education in South Africa in general, I would like to address the issue as to whether or not the private schools provide the answer to South Africa's educational problem by referring specifically to a case study involving two of these schools.

It is important to point out that some South Africans (especially certain whites) are content with the educational system as it exists at present. They feel it is adequate because it caters for each culture in their own separate schools. South Africa is however a multicultural society and the education systems have to be satisfactory and relevant for all the different cultural entities found in the country. Up to now, the white population are the only group whose educational needs have been answered adequately.

2. THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL IN SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY

There are two opposing views on the role played by the school in society. The traditional view is that the schools reflect the culture of society. The more recent view is that the schools have an innovative role to play in society – they can help change attitudes and norms and bring about social reconstruction.¹ To what extent are the schools able to do this in South Africa? From my study, the results of which are presented later, it is evident that the success of the private schools in promoting social reconstruction is limited because it is difficult to have an educational value system which is different to the value system of society. This aspect will however be elaborated on at a later stage.

In the heterogeneous South African society, the school has the potential to be either a dividing or uniting force. It will divide people of different

cultures when they are separated from each other, and remain ignorant of each other. This ignorance often results in fear and suspicion of others. A vicious circle is created – people become scared of each other and the gap between cultures grows wider.

The school can however become a unifying factor by teaching people to respect and accept other cultural backgrounds. This also results in a fuller, richer society than one where only one main culture is presented.² In the South African situation, people, by being exposed to each other in the educational system, can learn about each other and become more understanding. Ignorance and misunderstandings can be eliminated by the recognition of inaccurate stereo-types.

Because, however, the school is a social institution which is directly influenced and affected by political beliefs and policies³, there is little hope of the educational system changing unless these political policies change. Until then, the schools will reflect the prejudice and discrimination present in our society.

3. THE ROLE OF HISTORY IN SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY

At present, history, as it is taught at public schools in the Transvaal, according to the TED syllabus, makes it difficult to break down the cultural barriers which exist in the country. It is therefore a divisive force in most white schools because it is based on a white centered syllabus. Teachers can however, within the framework of the biased syllabus, try their best to create a cultural awareness by presenting the perspectives of other cultural groups. It is however difficult to do because of time constraints and it also requires a lot of extra effort on the teacher's part – many aren't prepared to do this.

I spoke to a teacher from a public school about this and she said that although the syllabus is restricting, she tried to do as much extra as possible within the framework of the syllabus, eg. she presented other perspectives; gave lessons on other cultures. She said however that this could only really become meaningful to the pupils when they actually came into contact with, and spoke to people of other races. This however is impossible to achieve in the public school situation. She therefore wholeheartedly supported the idea of integrated, multicultural education. In fact, she said she saw multicultural education as a fact of the future.

There is a large difference between the present role of history, and the potential role that history can play in the South African society. Rich explains how education must help the youth prepare for a continually changing future.⁴ It is evident that there are changes taking place in South African society and its structures, and it is important for people to know how to cope with these changes. Through history, young people can learn how to accept, respect and live alongside people

of different cultures. History can teach them (although not all young people!) to be empathetic towards and admire people who are different to them. "The study of history may provide us with a vivid realisation of different possible ways of life, different ideas, different ideals and different beliefs, values and attitudes."⁵

As we have seen though, this is virtually impossible to achieve in public schools. Can we find the solution in private schools?

4. PRIVATE SCHOOLS – A CASE STUDY

Private schools are often presented as examples of the success of multicultural education in South Africa, and it is because of this that I undertook a case study to try determine:-

- (a) do private schools have the answer to South Africa's education problems?
- (b) what is the role of history in the private schools?

My case study is extremely limited as I only considered two private schools in the Johannesburg area. I went to each of the schools concerned, sat in on std 9 and std 10 history classes and then held a discussion with both the history teachers and some of the pupils. The questions I asked can be found in Appendix 1 and 2.

So, it is important to note that when I speak of private schools in this essay, I do *not* refer to private schools in general because my study does not extend that far. I am making generalisations on the basis of a comparative exercise between only two schools. My study therefore, rather than presenting a representative sample of private schools, provides an insight into the differences between two private schools, and the way in which they see and teach history.

I will now present a discussion describing history at both "school A" and "school B", after which I will analyse the teaching at each school critically. An assessment of the role of the private school in South Africa will then follow.

4.1 School A

This is a private English School in Sandton with 240 pupils. It is integrated but all pupils must first have attended the school's primary school so they are all on the same level.

There are only whites in std 9 and matric this year – the first blacks are now in std 7. There are also Afrikaans children in the school, and the children of diplomats eg. American, so a whole spectrum of cultures is presented, and this provides for many different perspectives.

a) Teacher's Answers

I will not go into depth on each of the answers given by both teacher and pupils, but rather those that I consider most important.

The school works according to the TED syllabus, something which I found very interesting. Up to std 10 the teacher has a lot of leeway with the syllabus, and generally does her own thing eg. in std 6 they use the School Councils Project – in Std 7 they work according to the JMB

syllabus – in std 8-9 teacher emphasises and concentrates on areas of choice.

In std 10 however, the TED syllabus is strictly adhered to because pupils have to write the final TED matrix exam.

The teacher is very keen to encourage debate and discussion in the class. These are usually very interesting because new points in the class range from right to left wing. She tries not to influence the attitudes of the pupils and she respects and acknowledges all views as long as they are substantiated. The children are free to challenge her views as well – which they do!

The teacher feels that the main problem with history at the school is the TED syllabus. She says that she is dreading the day that it has to be taught to Blacks, Coloureds and Indians in her class. She does however try to do her best within the framework of the given syllabus. She also tells the pupils, and keeps reminding them that the syllabus is onesided, and she tries to present as many other views on events as possible. The teacher feels that the role of history is to prepare the pupils for the future so she encourages questioning, after which pupils must be able to make their own decisions and formulate their own opinions.

b) Pupils Answers

The pupils I spoke to felt there should be more study of current affairs in history because of its close links with the past. They felt that history was meaningful because it is related to the present day. They did not however enjoy South African history because they felt it to be biased and onesided (a result of the TED syllabus), although the teacher does give many points of view. They felt that the history syllabus gives the government perspective, while their teacher provides the balance – they are then left to make their own decisions. The pupils felt that they did know about other cultures and didn't attribute this directly to history, but rather to the school environment (multicultural) in which they found themselves. When asked what they would like to change about history at school, they said the syllabus. They proposed a move away from what they termed as "pure Afrikaner development" to a more "South African" history for all South Africans. They still wanted to keep Afrikaner development in the syllabus to a certain extent though because they see it as an important part of South Africa history.

4.2 Commentary

What struck me about this school was the enthusiastic attitude of both the teachers and pupils to history. The pupils I spoke to were obviously very intelligent, and they had very mature views – eg. one pupil reads the whole spectrum of newspapers (out of his own free will?) and from this formulates his own opinions. They enjoy their history, and feel it teaches them about people and life –

something no other subject could teach them.

The pupils are extremely aware of current and political affairs. They also do not just accept what is told to them, but question and challenge if they disagree. I found this very positive.

I did however have some reservations about history at the school. Firstly, because they work according to the TED syllabus, all the skills they learnt in history before matric eg. interpretation, have to be ignored for the final matric exam. The matric year is just like matric in a public school. In matric their whole year is geared towards that final exam and this results in negative attitudes. They are also taught, to recognise the syllabus as biased, and yet in matric they have to conform to it. I realise the teachers experience it as a problem as well and there is little that can be done about the situation. It is perhaps best, even if matric is a bad year as far as history goes, that these pupils have at least been exposed to "alternative" history in std 6-9.

A problem arises here though because the teacher has a lot of leeway during std 6-9 and this could cause the problem that a structure could be lacking. History could become a "hotch potch" of events which pupils are unable to connect with each other. In my view this is not happening in school A. But it could if the teacher is allowed too much freedom to deviate from a certain framework.

Another problem which I encountered was that there were no exercises in empathy done in the class, ie. the pupils with left wing attitudes was never forced to defend the right wing position and in this way gain an understanding for the views of others. This aspect is also evident in debates and discussions. Although these are excellent and essential exercises, the pupils all have their own views on a subject, and don't even listen to, never mind empathise with the views of others. Debates therefore often tend to become shouting matches between dogmatic pupils rather than valuable exercises in which pupils can learn from each other.

Despite all the negative aspects which I have highlighted, I was impressed with the history at the school and the way it was taught. Different perspectives were given and what is most important is that the children were taught to and expected to think for themselves. As far as I could gather, there was little indoctrination taking place in history.

4.3

School B

This school is a non-racial independent school which is "committed to genuine non-racial education outside the established apartheid structures "and which" seeks to promote integrated practices and oppose racism in education in Southern Africa, and to give active support to the promotion of full integration in private and public systems of education throughout the region."⁶

The school is near Bryanston. From what I saw, at least half of the school is made up of Blacks, Coloureds and Indians. It is interesting to note that independent schools are very critical of "white" private schools for only allowing a token enrolment of Black students, for accepting state subsidies and for sticking to their history and traditions which are founded in a privileged society.⁷

a) Teacher's Answers

The syllabus used at this school is the JMB syllabus. It is used as the core syllabus and the teacher is able to deviate from it to a certain extent. The matric year is directed at the JMB final exam.

Std 6 and 7 – integrated teaching with history as a part of social studies.

Std 8 – teacher does her own thing – She uses and works according to a workbook (written from a Marxist perspective).

Std 9 – teacher starts to prepare pupils for matric.

The JMB syllabus is not white centred, and there is scope for all views and all cultures.

The pupils are taught various historical skills – critical analysis, logical arguments and empathy. Interpretation is considered extremely important with scope being allowed for it, even in final matric exams, as long as these interpretations are substantiated by the correct evidence. The one matric class I attended received 3 articles on the Cold War which they had to use, with their text book (P Kallaway: History Alive 10) to interpret a cartoon.

Each article presented a different perspective on the Cold War. Pupils therefore are exposed to many different viewpoints in the classroom situation. They are expected to critically analyse these views and then came up with their own conclusion.

Again, pupils have a keen questioning attitude. They are not afraid to challenge and question the teacher and the teacher encourages this. These pupils have developed the ability to be able to think for themselves. Debate and discussion are encouraged in the class, but pupils generally hold the same kind of views and therefore only differ on major points. The majority of the pupils came from very liberal and wealthy houses.

b) Pupils Answers

The pupils I spoke to about history felt their interest started in their std 7 social studies class where they learnt about people of other cultures. They enjoyed the way history was taught to them especially hearing different viewpoints and integrating source material and background knowledge for interpretation. They believed that the most important thing they learnt in history was to have respect for others points of view. Their school, they say, "Opens your mind".

When talking about multicultural education, one black girl said she felt that you do lose your cultural heritage to a certain extent in these schools. But she said that one becomes a richer person because one learns to appreciate and accept other cultures. She spoke about feeling part of a "school culture" where everybody in the school shares and accepts the same values. She also wanted to learn history which is not directed only at the black culture, but rather a bigger "South African culture". Another pupil, when asked what the role of history is in South Africa, said that history is not important for everyone because "you have to be interested in history to be able to learn from it." Generally the pupils were happy with history and the way it was being taught.

4.4 Commentary

Once again I saw many positive aspects in the history teaching at School B. These are very similar to School A eg. pupils have a questioning attitude; they are presented with many different views; pupils learn about other cultures (although I do not know whether this is because of history or because of the general school environment and the people they come into contact with). Once again multicultural education works in this school situation. A big plus in favour of School B is the syllabus they work from. This caters for the many different races and cultures at the school and allows scope for interpretation.

I do however have some criticisms concerning mainly the way history is taught. Firstly, the teachers and pupils rotate classrooms so that pupils always have history in a different classroom. There is therefore no history classroom atmosphere and in the lessons I attended no media was used – it is extremely difficult to use teaching aids eg. media, because these have to be carried around with the teacher. Although, none of this is the fault of the teacher, it seems to make history less interesting. I must say though that I did only sit in at two lessons, and this is my opinion from these lessons – the history class may not always be presented in this way.

As with School A, no exercises are done to develop the skill of empathy. It is good to say that one must have respect for others' points of view, but it was difficult to gauge what the reaction of both pupils and teacher would be to a conservative point of view – would they respect this, or would they only respect the views they agree with? The whole school is very "anti-government", but never have to do an exercise in empathy where they have to defend it, or try empathise with Afrikaner nationalists. This, in my view, is something which is definitely lacking in their history classes. The debates they have in class usually end up in fights with no one listening to another's point of view. Pupils should be put in the situation where they are forced to defend a view which is not their own so that they can see how other people think and feel.

A more serious problem however is the way history is taught. The teacher whose classes

I attended is a self-confessed Marxist and this obviously comes through in her teaching, although not purposefully. When a teacher knows she is strongly committed to a viewpoint, she should do everything possible to compensate for bias by giving fair alternatives.⁸ I question whether this is done – in std 8 pupils work from a workbook written from a Marxist perspective (the teacher was involved in the writing of these workbooks). What presents a problem for me is that the pupils in the history class may be indoctrinated by the teaching and not even notice it (they, by the way, deny being indoctrinated). The indoctrination that is occurring in many public schools may be occurring here as well – only this is indoctrination in a different viewpoint. This view is my personal view which I got after observing the classes and especially talking to the teacher. It was reinforced when I asked the teacher what she thought of the TED syllabus and she said that many of her "radical" friends who taught in public schools were able to "use" the TED syllabus to their advantage. This sounds like blatant indoctrination. As I say though, I am purely speculating on what I doserved in one short day.

5. THE PRIVATE SCHOOLS AND SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY

Most private schools in South Africa, including the two I attended, are racially integrated, multicultural schools. While race and colour play no role in these schools, a new factor does – money. The private schools are very expensive to attend and therefore the pupils at the schools came mainly from wealthy families. The problem I have with this is that although the schools may be open to all, they are only available to those who are wealthy, which cancels out a lot of the South African population! The schools are however expensive to attend because they rely heavily in parental rather than state subsidies.

Within the private schools, the pupils are colour blind and are all on one equal footing. They are able to laugh, cry, share things, have relationships and be friends with whoever they want to, no matter what race, culture or colour. Their school creates an idealistic situation or "school culture" (School B) in which all races are equal but when they see the reality of the South Africa situation, the values are different. Everyone is seen in terms of colour and culture, and their rights and opportunities depend on this. It is difficult for these children to adapt to the "real world" because they have been educated according to a different value system to the one reflected in the social and political structure of the country. As Rich puts it we should note that "the sources of power destructing the attainment of democratic participation in the larger society would have to be reformed before one can realistically believe that youth would not be continually frustrated in their attempts to live by the ideals learnt at school."⁹

6. CONCLUSION

Multicultural education is a necessity for this country. For all the different cultures to be able to coexist together in peace and prosperity they have to know each other. History can be the vehicle through which cultures can learn about each other. It can "teach the general lesson that what is unfamiliar and strange is not for that reason to be distrusted and despised."¹⁰ Multicultural

education can dispel the fears many people have and an be unifying force in our complex multicultural society.

But, my study has shown me that although this sounds good in theory, in reality the situation is more complex. Multicultural education as it exists in the private and independent schools does work. It shows however that a different value system is present in multicultural schools – a value system that is not present in South African Society; and “a rationale for secondary education must start with what are judged to be the best values of our society.”¹¹ This causes a definite problem for the private schools in South Africa. Although, in my view, they are doing an excellent job in educating an aware and thinking group of young people of all races, these schools are not accepted as the correct form of education by South African society. I am of the view, as reflected in my study, that the only true that multicultural education will work completely successfully in South Africa, is when the values that are taught in the multicultural schools are the same as the values held by the South African society.

QUESTIONS PUT TO THE HISTORY TEACHER

- A. 1. What are your teaching qualifications and where are they from?
2. What is the content of your history syllabus for std 6-10, and what is the rationale behind it?
3. Does it cater for people of all cultures, and if so, how?
4. What do you feel are most important – the content or skills taught in history?
5. How do you handle or use biased content?
6. Must attitudes be put across implicitly or explicitly?
7. How do you evaluate – interpretation vs facts?
8. What are your views on debate and discussion – is it encouraged, how much time is spent on it?
9. What changes would you like to bring about in history teaching?
- B. 1. What is your philosophy on history teaching?
2. How do you bring this across in your teaching?
3. What forms the basis or foundation on which history is taught at your school? eg. Christianity, headmaster’s views, teacher’s view, school ethos.
4. What is the role you see history playing in South African society?
5. Can history be used to bring people of different cultures together? If so, how?
6. In multicultural education do you think pupils lose or enrich their cultural heritage?
7. Are your pupil’s views eg. concerning politics, generally liberal? If so, what reasons do you give for this – school, home environment, a subject?

QUESTIONS PUT TO SOME OF THE HISTORY PUPILS (std 9 and 10)

- A. 1. Do you enjoy history? Why or why not?
2. Does your teacher present many viewpoints on a subject?
3. Which is considered more important by your teacher – facts or interpretation? – How do you feel about this?
4. Do you have a lot of debates and discussions in history?
5. Does your teacher emphasise and point out the way history is related to the present?
6. Your views and ideas eg. on politics – have they been stopped by the school, a subject, a teacher, your home?
- B. 1. What role has history played in your life?
2. What do you learn, if anything, about other cultural groups in history?
3. Has history given you a sense of empathy or understanding for others?
4. Is what you learn in history meaningful to you as
 - (i) part of a particular cultural group
 - (ii) part of a broader “South African” culture?
5. What role do you think history plays today, and what role will it play in a future South Africa?
 - Can history bring different cultures together?
 - Is it necessary to try bring different cultures together? Why or why not?
6. How would you, if you could, change history teaching to make it more meaningful to you?
7. Do you think you have been indoctrinated at all, in your history classes?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Corke M, Gibson H: South African Association of Independent Schools: A Prospectus
 Edgington D: The Role of History in Multicultural Education *Teaching History*
 Kindred, Bagin, Gallagher: *The School and Community Relations*. Prentice - Hall Inc., New Jersey, 1984.
 Rich J M: *Education and Human Values*. 5Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., Massachusetts, 1968.
 Smith F R, Cox C B: *Secondary Schools in a changing society*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1976.
 Tomlinson P, Quinton M: *Values across the curriculum*. The Falmer Press, London, 1986.
 Tutchim J, Demutt C: *Multicultural Education – Views from the classroom*. BBC, London, 1983.

REFERENCES

1. J M Rich: Education and Human Values, p. 1.
2. Edgington D: The Role of History in Multicultural Education, p. 3.
3. Kindred etal: The School and Community Relations, p. 21.
4. J M Rich: Education and Human Values, p. 8.
5. R Barrow as quoted by D Edgington: The Role of History . . .” p.4.
6. Corke M, Gibson H: SAAIS: A prospectus, p.1.
7. Ibid, p. 2.
8. Tomlinson, Quinton: Values across the Curriculum, p. 82.
9. J M Rich: Education and Human Values, P. 10.
10. R Barrow as quoted by D Edgington: The Role of History . . . p. 4.
11. Smith, Cox: Secondary Schools in a changing society, p. 13.