

POLICY MATTERS

STUDY OF THE PAST FOSTERS BROADER UNDERSTANDING

Don't deprive pupils of chance to study history

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In today's article in our series, ROB SIEBÖRGER pleads for an education policy which gives more space to the teaching of history in schools.

The introduction of a new curriculum for the final three years of high schooling in 2006 has forced many high schools to make fresh choices in the subjects that they offer in Grades 10, 11 and 12.

Whereas in the past matriculants typically did six subjects, two of which were compulsory languages, now they have seven subjects, four of which are compulsory (two languages, life orientation and mathematics or mathematics literacy). This means that there is now only space for three other subjects and pupils and schools face restricted choices. History is one of the subjects most affected.

The arguments against taking history are usually one or more of the following: history isn't any use in getting a job; it's better to do more sciences; we need to look to the future not the past; South Africa's past is divisive – studying it makes white pupils defensive and black pupils bitter.

Recent events have highlighted reasons why history, on the other hand, should be taught.

The reason given by Emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu and many politicians for South Africans to respect the rights of foreigners and refugees in the country is an appeal to remember that it was to neighbouring countries that South Africans fled, and were accommodated and assisted in the struggle against Apartheid, at a very high cost to them. Without a sense of this history being ingrained in school, it's more than likely the young adults caught up in xenophobic violence are completely unaware of how South Africans were received by countries around us in the past.

News of another kind was that the IFP had taken exception to what was contained in an Oxford University Press history (Grade 12) textbook, in particular the use of a cartoon by Zapiro, which depicted Mangosuthu Buthelezi's pen dripping with blood at the time of the pre-election violence in 1994. The cartoon, however, was not an illustration. It was used in an exercise to analyse bias, set out in a sophisticated and thorough way. Ironically, in the light of the criticisms made, the most likely conclusion of the exercise is that the media in 1994 was biased in its treatment of Buthelezi and that history ought to reflect that. It is, thus, again a reflection of a lack of good history teaching in school that gives rise to an inability to see that the intention of the textbook was sympathetic to Buthelezi.

Let's expand on these two examples, to support the argument for why history should not be dropped but retained as a useful school subject. Knowledge of the past of one's country is typically something that history is expected to provide in the primary school, but is this enough to prepare school leavers to cope with the complexities that South Africa presents today?

The danger is that an outline of the history isn't enough to equip them. In order to understand the history in such a way that they can use it to inform their thinking, they need to go into more depth, to debate, weigh up and consider the impact of events and the actions of people. It's especially those who are going to be future leaders in their professions and communities that need these

insights, and it's precisely these high schoolers who are being denied them by the short sighted policies of schools, which elect to drop history as a subject, to consign it only to less able learners, or not to employ specialist history teachers.

Many readers who did history at school will remember that the purpose served by cartoons in matric history exam papers was simply to provide a different (and usually more tricky) context for some of the short questions. The questions which followed the cartoons were often trivial ('Who is the person in the middle?') and were at times obscure, without any direct connection to the major topics being studied.

Cartoons in the present curriculum (downloadable curriculum statement: <http://www.education.gov.za/Curriculum/SUBSTATEMENTS/History.pdf>) fulfil an entirely different purpose. Now they are one of a variety of written and visual sources of information which candidates are expected to analyse, interpret and use in their answers.

In other words, the matriculants are expected to be able to do what a well informed adult would do when reading a newspaper or viewing a TV programme, or to make sense of different kinds of documentation that an employer would place before an employee.

This is a real life task, which requires a candidate to balance different view points and be able to come to conclusion based on the evidence studied. While some of these skills will be touched on in language teaching, there is no other high school subject that requires this type of intensive, structured work (as spelled out in the Assessment Standards of the curriculum statement). And, arguably, there is no other subject that prepares school leavers as thoroughly for the most basic writing work they will have to undertake at university or in the workplace (whether in science and engineering, commerce or the media), namely report writing.

It is, thus, a fallacy that history does not prepare learners for a job. Yes, it does so in a generic, rather than a specific way, but that means that its skills can be used in all jobs, not just select ones (such as tourism, accountancy or life sciences).

Much is also sometimes made of subjects which are said to prepare learners for university, but most first year students will testify that they help them very little in fact. 'We covered all the school work in the first few weeks,' is a common refrain. The insights and skills history imparts will stand them in far better stead than this.

Three further reasons can be given to support the argument for teaching history now. First is that South Africa's democracy rests on an appreciation of its values by its citizens. Fundamental to being able to understand the purpose and workings of democracy are a strongly formed sense of personal identity and a tolerance of the standpoints of others.

History is best placed within the present school curriculum to foster the development of these values. It asks for critical and empathetic thinking that will assist learners to get beyond reactions of either guilt or hatred. It's no easy task to face up to ourselves, our communities and our society. Many learners and teachers will only achieve this imperfectly, but will be much better democratic citizens for having attempted it.

Other grounds for teaching history are derived from the curriculum content itself. The curriculum requires the exploration of "heritage" by learners. It's early yet to comment, but the initial indications are that learners have undertaken a wide variety of projects on local and national heritage. These have led them not so much to understand why monuments have been (or should be)

erected (which is what the old history would have taught), but to comprehend the contributions made by people and groups to their localities.

Finally, the Grade 12 curriculum contains an innovative and extensive section on globalisation which is designed to give school leavers a critical understanding of the forces that shape today's world within an historical perspective.

It's difficult enough to cope with incessant change, but to do so without being provided with any tools to analyse and interpret it, is disabling. History is able to bring together the political, cultural and economic factors that contribute to globalisation and to provide learners with the opportunity to discuss and debate them meaningfully.

My appeal is that all Grade 10-12 learners be given the option to study history, and that departments of education, school principals, governing bodies and parents think again about what young adults most need when they leave school.

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