

A SUBJECT “PROMOTIONAL AGENDA” VERSUS DECLINE IN ENROLMENT FIGURES: THE NEED TO IDENTIFY THOSE SCHOOLS SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE

Gordon Brookbanks

History educator

Westerford High School, Cape Town

brookbanks@telkomsa.net

Abstract

The “value” of a discipline, occasionally arouses debate. With History it’s no different, and sometimes perhaps more challenging. As the general trend still indicates declining numbers in most provinces, Westerford High School in Cape Town displays an outstanding example of an institution with high success rates in History. From the Westerford High experience other schools are challenged to reconsider their status in the teaching of History and adapt where it is required. A personal view on why perhaps Westerford’s success in History is exchanged.

Keywords: National Curriculum Statement (NCS); National Senior Certificate (NSC); Further Education and Training (FET) phase; History as a discipline.

The subject promotional agenda

All history teachers in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase seem to be confronted by the need to promote their subject. At a subjective level, most History educators are hopefully themselves life-long learners passionate about History as a subject of intellectual inquiry. They are encouraged by their History Curriculum Advisors to make all attempts to “market” the choice of History in their respective schools. They are also encouraged within their own History Departments, to encourage learners to choose History when making their choice of electives in the third term of their Grade 9 year.

These subject “promotional agendas” which History educators are challenged with, are in line with a *Report of the History and Archaeology Panel*

(2000) commissioned by the then Minister of Education (Kader Asmal), which argued for the need to promote the importance of the study of the discipline of History ... within school education. This argument was then integrated into the continuing work reflected in the *Manifesto On Values, Education and Democracy* (2001:4) which argued that 'putting history back into the curriculum is a means of nurturing critical inquiry and forming an historical consciousness', stressing that promoting a strong study of the past is a particular educational imperative in a country like South Africa, which is itself consciously remaking its current history.

The study of History, as argued by the Department of Basic Education (2011), also supports citizenship within a democracy by upholding the values of the South African Constitution. It reflects the perspectives of a broad social spectrum, encourages civic responsibility and responsible leadership, promotes human rights and peace by challenging prejudices that involve race, class, gender, ethnicity and xenophobia, and prepares young people for local, regional, national, continental and global responsibility.

The *Manifesto On Values, Education and Democracy*, which serves to underpin education reform in South Africa post 1994, concludes that when taught by imaginative teachers, the richness of History has a larger capacity than any other discipline, to promote reconciliation and reciprocal respect of a meaningful kind, because it encourages a knowledge of the other, the unknown and the different. It is History in this modern sense that Williams (1976) had in mind when he emphasised that, in different hands, it teaches or shows us most kinds of knowable past and almost every kind of imaginable future.

Decline in enrolment figures

The discipline of History, inspired by a South African radical historiography and which explicitly challenged the apartheid narrative of the past, could have been expected to flourish in a transitional society like South Africa. However, despite the government policy and pedagogic imperative regarding the importance of the study of History within the curriculum and need to promote it, there has been a decline in enrolment for History. The discipline is increasingly perceived as being a "dispensable luxury in the context of a neoliberal" economic project (Verbuyst, 2013:20).

Public discourse regarding curriculum priorities in South Africa now emphasise the importance of Mathematics, the Sciences (both Physical Science and Life Science), and Information Technology, increasingly relegating the study of History to a “Cinderella” status. The Sunday Times (27th October, 2013, 2), in an article entitled *New focus on Maths teachers*, now argues that the Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, “hinted at the possibility of setting up a directorate for maths, science and technology”.

Concern about this is highlighted by van Eeden (2012:45) stating “the ever-decreasing popularity of History as a FET-level subject... necessitate(s) urgent discussion and speedy action”. She supports this conclusion with statistics of learner enrolment in History from Grade 10 to 12, showing a decline from 2004 to 2010 in 7 of the 9 provinces. The decline in enrolment figures in the Western Cape, are as follows:

Western Cape	2004	2010	% decrease (an estimate)
Grade 10	29 613	19 053	-36%
Grade 11	19 048	13 997	-27%
Grade 12	12 876	11 393	-12%

Swimming against the tide

As history educators who believe in the policy and pedagogic imperative for promoting the discipline of History in the FET phase, it is necessary to identify those schools which do not follow the declining trend and therefore seem to be swimming against the tide.

One such school is a Quintile 5 co-educational government high school in the Western Cape province, Westerford High School. At this school, History is neither a “dispensable luxury”, nor does it have a “Cinderella” status. Results of a pilot study¹ show that over the period 2007 to 2013, 50% of Grade 10 learners’ each year (on average 185 learners in a Grade) have chosen History as one of their three electives. This 50% “take-up” of History at the school is despite learners at this particular school being obligated to choose either Physical Science and/or Life Sciences, thereby reducing their options for electives even further. Enrolment figures for History in Grade 10 for 2014 is 96 learners, of a possible 188, amounting to 52% of the Grade.

¹ A pilot study can be viewed as a dress rehearsal of the main investigation (De Vos, 2005:206).

Based on the statistical inquiry into the gender of learners who chose History in Grade 10 at the school over the same period, on average each year 49 learners were boys, and 42 were girls. Therefore gender does not play a significant role in influencing the choice of subject. History is generally considered, by learners, as a “difficult” subject to attain high marks in. Yet, in the 2012 Grade 12 National Senior Certificate results at Westerford High School, 65 out of 97 History learners attained an “A” symbol, with an average of 81.4%. Furthermore, while the Department of Basic Education prescribes that 1.5 hours per week are allocated in Grade 8 and 9 to the teaching of the History component of Social Sciences, at Westerford High School 2 hours is allocated per week to the teaching of History. The school has increased the time allocated on the timetable to the teaching of History in the GET phase due to the subject’s contribution towards developing both critical thinking and the literacy of learners.

If, as van Eeden (2012:45) argues, the declining enrolment figures for History requires “urgent discussion and speedy action”, it is imperative that schools such as Westerford High School, which are swimming against the prevalent tide, be identified. Such schools need to be engaged with to determine what their recipe for success in meeting the policy and pedagogic imperative in promoting the discipline of History entails. Perhaps the solution to the decline in enrolment figures for History, can be found in the exceptions, rather than the rule at present.

At Westerford High School the History educators, in terms used in the *Manifesto On Values, Education and Democracy*, are “Imaginative teachers”, passionate about their discipline, able to inspire learners who therefore recognise and understand the value of the discipline, and create a learning environment in which learners have fun and the discipline of History comes alive. Learners and the subject go beyond the text book and classroom, where their minds are opened to most kinds of knowable past and almost every kind of imaginable future (Williams). An example being, at the time of this issue of *Yesterday & Today* going to print, two educators and 46 learners from Westerford are in Vietnam to engage in issues related to the Vietnam War, or what the Vietnamese refer to as the American War, with the purpose of enriching the learners understanding of the Vietnam War Case Study, which will feature in the Cold War question in their final Grade 12 exam in November 2014.

Image 1: In front of a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) tank in the grounds of the Reunification Palace, Ho Chi Minh City (former Saigon). We walked past the gates which were breached by a VNA tank in 1975. The Palace, seat of the South Vietnam regime, was bombed in 1963, and again in 1975 when Saigon fell to the NVA



Source: Photo by G Brookbanks

References

- Department of Basic Education 2011. *National Curriculum Statement, Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement*, 8.
- De Vos, SF 2005. *Research at grassroots for the social sciences and human services professions* (3rd Edition). Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Govender, P 2013. *New focus on maths teachers*, *Sunday Times*, 27 October, p. 2.
- Ministry of Education 2000. *Report of the History / Archaeology Panel to the Minister of Education*. Available at: http://education.pwv.gov.za/Policies_Reports_2000/History_Archaeology_Rep.htm. Accessed on 25 January 2001.

- Van Eeden, ES 2012. The Youth and School History – Learning from some of the thinking of yesterday in South Africa. In: *Yesterday & Today*, 8, December 2012. Pretoria: Bontshi Business Services Pty (Ltd).
- Verbuyst, R 2013. History, historians and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *New Contree, A Journal of Historical and Human Sciences for Southern Africa*, 66:20.
- Williams, R 1976. *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*, London.