

# HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY CURRICULUM: AN UN-SILENCING APPROACH

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2019/n22a6>

Maserole Christina Kgari-Masondo  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
Kgarimasondo@ukzn.ac.za  
ORCHID No: 0000-0002-1850-6363

## *Abstract*

*The South African History Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) emphasises the significance of History being that of empowering learners with historical skills and knowledge but there are critical gaps that this article tries to posit that affects quality teaching. The current global atmosphere of democracy with its emphasis on decolonisation, demands curriculum transformation. Such a context calls on ways of bridging the divide between theory and practice in education. CAPS-History emphasise the importance of teaching historical concepts but excludes the critical concept of Historical Significance which safeguards skills of interpretation and understanding why certain histories are in the official arena and others not. This article argues the CAPS-History curriculum has to be transformed to reflect the ideological changes that is experienced globally. The article uses critical discourse analysis in an attempt to uplift historical knowledge of Africans and to un-silence historically significant narratives. Data for the article was drawn from the observation of the author's teaching experiences by using auto-ethnographical methods. The findings of the article are that CAPS-History have carried the implicit message that Historical Significance should be attributed to white males in power and selected events in history of people in positions of power and themes like symbols and symbolism, which are key in indigenous knowledge, are silenced. The conclusion of this article is that CAPS requires an epistemology that supports democratic principles of equality which calls upon un-silencing of certain historical narratives by employing Historical Significance as one of the critical concepts thinking concepts*

**Keywords:** Historical Significance; Un-silenced; History; Symbols; Symbolism; Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement.

## **Introduction**

Agency is key in the post-apartheid dispensation, as such action has to be taken by all South Africans so as to fight for the equality of all which includes recognition of all knowledges. It has been aptly put by Bacon's

that “knowledge is power”.<sup>1</sup> This means that the education system has to be congruent with the needs of the society it serves. In the current South African educational order schools and institutions of higher learning depict the aforementioned picture as teachings that are frequently disciplinary based, and curricula that are not serving the wide communities as the knowledge drawn upon are mainly Western in nature. Since, “knowledge is a commodity and access is the key” this means that, those who do not possess and cannot access knowledge are at a disadvantage. Hence educationists argue that an effective curriculum has to adhere to the needs of the society it serves because knowledge is heterogeneous and diverse in nature as it is socially constructed.<sup>2</sup> The way that a curriculum is delivered requires a teacher who employs critical discourse theory to engage with bias, injustices and irregularities when teaching History. According to Grumet a curriculum is based on the stories that we tell learners about their past, present and future.<sup>3</sup> This understanding of curriculum aided me to focus on Historical Significance and probe about which stories learners are taught about their past, present and future and prompted me to ask, who tells the stories? Hence this article challenges the incompatibility between “intellectual rigour” and “relevance”<sup>4</sup> as this has manifested in the construction of the CAPS-History curriculum and the teaching of History.

An added interpretation of curriculum is that of Aoki who argued that curriculum should not concentrate only on the intended aspects but also on how it is lived by learners and teachers,<sup>5</sup> denoting that the curriculum has to speak to a social context. This is a call for the ability to use knowledge effectively as power which to many teachers and learners becomes a serious disadvantage since the knowledge in formal education is not always in congruence with the informal education they engage with at home. In South Africa the curriculum stories are drawn mainly from a Western milieu. History as a subject as depicted in CAPS consequently has similar ramifications – it is burdened with a Western focus and much content thus becomes foreign to many learners who are not familiar with a Western context. Scholars have, in this regard, raised an important issue

- 
- 1 JMR García, *Scientia Potestas Est–Knowledge is power: Francis Bacon to Michel Foucault*, *Anglia-Zeitschrift für Englische Philologie*, 119(1), 2001, p. 109.
  - 2 Y Waghid, *Democratic education: Policy and praxis* (Stellenbosch, University Publishers, 2002), p. 69.
  - 3 MR Grumet, *Restitution and reconstruction of educational experience: An autobiographical method for curriculum theory*, M Lawn & L Barton, *Rethinking curriculum studies: A radical approach* (London, Croom Helm, 1981), pp. 11-130.
  - 4 C Williams & S Wilson, *Pedagogies for social justice: Did Bernstein get it wrong?* *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 14(4), 2010, pp. 417-434.
  - 5 T Aoki, *Interview: Rethinking curriculum and pedagogy*, *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 35(4), 1999, pp. 180-181.

of themes that are silenced in historical narratives but have ignored the knowledges that are undermined and ignored in History.<sup>6</sup>

This article focuses on the thinking concept of Historical Significance which is a second order historical thinking concept used to teach History in a creative and critical manner. As Levesque has articulated, historical thinking concepts like Historical Significance are not the “content” of History but are essential when engaging with enquiries in the subject and when deepening historical narratives.<sup>7</sup> Historical thinking concepts are Western constructs that emerged in the 1970s and are relevant to our South African context as they aided in giving History narratives cognitive substance. Historical Significance is a key concept used by historians to advance an understanding of the past.<sup>8</sup> The idea of significance hinges on interpretation in is a different way to understand the peculiarity between “structural or causal explanations (analytical discourse) and intentional explanations of History (narrative discourse)”.<sup>9</sup> Hence, Cercadillo suggests that, learners must be taught significance for the purpose of cognitive development.<sup>10</sup> Symbols and symbolism are part of Historical Significance since they deal with interpretation and has, in my view, been overlooked in literature and the various South African History curricula since 1994. A symbol is an object that represents or stands for something else, chiefly a material object demonstrating something abstract,<sup>11</sup> while symbolism refers to the use of symbols to signify ideas or qualities.<sup>12</sup> This infers that a symbol is an object that is signified through symbolism which is representation. Symbols can change their significances subject to the context in which they are used, which means that the symbolic significance of an object or an action is understood by when, where, and how it is used. According to the South African Government Information Bureau symbols have been critical in enforcing the new South Africa.<sup>13</sup> It is also determined by

---

6 A Hostetler, P Sengupta & T Hollett, Unsilencing critical conversations in social-studies teacher education using agent-based modelling, *Cognition and Instruction*, 36(2), 2018, pp. 139-170.

7 S Lévesque, “Teaching second-order concepts in Canadian history: The importance of ‘historical significance’”, *Canadian Social Studies*, 39(2), 2005, np.

8 B Vansledright, “Thinking historically”, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 41(3), 2009, pp. 433-438.

9 J Wertsch & M Rozin, “The Russian revolution: Official and unofficial accounts”, *International Review of History Education*, 1998, p. 48.

10 L Cercadillo, “Significance in history: Learners’ ideas in England and Spain” (Ph.D., University of London, 2001), p.14.

11 Dictionary.com, “Symbol” (available at <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/symbol>, as accessed on 13 June 2018).

12 Literary Devices, “Symbolism” (available at <https://literarydevices.net/symbolism>, as accessed on 13 June 2018).

13 South African Government Information, “History - Into the second decade of freedom”, 2012 (available at <http://www.infor.gov.za/aboutsa/history.htm>, as accessed on 3 April 2018).

who reads the work. But the focus in the literature is based on Western lenses of symbols and symbolism of events as indicated in the work of Cercadillo.<sup>14</sup> In order to determine which historical narratives are to be accorded as significant we have to understand that significance is based on judgemental pronouncements which are based on different measures that can be applied. Such measures are socially constructed and are determined by the social context at any given time. This implies that the principles for Historical Significance should assist in coordinating historical narratives into rational and important narratives. This denotes that historically significant narratives have to be represented in a holistic manner in terms of knowledge, events they come from and people they depict. Therefore, any representation of a historically significant narrative that lacks a holistic approach is guilty of silences and an incomplete representation.

CAPS-History for Grade 4 to 12 do not emphasis Historical Significance as being pivotal for learners to interpret History. This is because History must be taught not as knowledge collection but as a web of understanding, drawing from all the knowledges of the learners we teach. Though it is difficult to decide what ought to be significant in History, whether for the purpose of the curriculum or for national rituals and symbols, it is necessary, so as to inform and enrich classroom practice, to incorporate Historical Significance as key in understanding the essence of what History is all about. In this regard the literature on the teaching of History has neglected the integration of the concept of significance and the issue of symbols and symbolism, especially the African indigenous perspective. Thus, Historical Significance, including its emphasis on symbols and symbolism, is important and has to be integrated into CAPS or new curriculum version. This is because with Historical Significance the concern is how historians use evidence not to create detached “facts”, but as data for establishing what connect them.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, it is the “frame of reference” within which specific facts or events are essential in order for them to become significant.<sup>16</sup> CAPS-History inaugurates learners into a historical process<sup>17</sup> of which Evans would approve.<sup>18</sup> But, as argued by

14 L Cercadillo, “Significance in history: Learners’ ideas in England and Spain” (Ph.D., University of London, 2001), p. 14.

15 RJ Evans, *In defence of history* (London, Granta Books, 2012), np.

16 P Rogers, The past as a frame of reference, C Portal (ed.), *The history curriculum for teachers* (London, Falmer Press, 1987), pp. 3-21.

17 Department of Basic Education, *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). National Curriculum Assessment Statement for Social Science Senior Phase* (Pretoria, Government Printing Works, 2011), p. 9.

18 RJ Evans, *In defence...*, np.

Munslow, this is a Western oriented and rationalist / empirical process construction or version of History and requires deconstruction.<sup>19</sup> Hence, this article through the observations of the author, tries to illustrate that Historical Significance has to be integrated into the CAPS so that it depicts a History that accommodates different significances so as to ensure a holistic narration of historical accounts. Empowering learners to comprehend that History is constructed and reconstructed according to context is important, because this determines what questions, events, people, developments are seen as “significant” and important for learners’ study.

In sum, part of the aims of History in the Further Education Training has not engaged with the concept of Historical Significance.<sup>20</sup> CAPS-History maintains that learners must be taught skills such as interpretation by making sense of historical evidence within a context.<sup>21</sup> As argued by Wertsch and Rozin, Historical Significance focuses on interpretations<sup>22</sup> but from my observation and analysis of CAPS-History the concept itself has been left out. Equally, literature on Historical Significance has omitted using symbols and symbolism to understand importance in History, which means that, History learners are disadvantaged in terms of understanding what is historically significant. Focus has been placed on significance in terms of events, people and historical characters but the symbols and interpretations, especially African indigenous ones, have been overlooked which leaves a gap in understanding historical narratives. Since symbols are a historical source of evidence, it is important that their interpretations are constructed by different learners in a diverse context. I therefore argue that for learners to understand historical narratives they need to understand the concept of Historical Significance so that they can understand how narratives are accorded significance from within their own, and other, social, cultural, political and economic contexts.

## **Methodology**

Data reflected in this article comes from my observations of the teaching of History using CAPS-History and my training of History teachers between 2008-2018. As argued by Zwozdiak-Myers, teachers who are keen to improve in their professional practice are constantly asking

---

19 A Munslow, *Deconstructing history* (London, Routledge, 2006), pp. 16-17.

20 DoBE, *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) Grades 10-12 History* (Pretoria, Cape Town, Government Printing Works, 2011), p. 8.

21 DoBE, *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) Grades 10-12 History* (Pretoria, Cape Town, Government Printing Works, 2011), p. 9.

22 J Wertsch & M Rozin, “The Russian revolution...”, *International Review of History Education*, 1998, p. 48.

questions about their teaching practice, which inspires commitment to continuously learn, create or find new ideas.<sup>23</sup> For this study the data used are the author's written reflective teaching journal, secondary sources and CAPS-History. This study is auto-ethnographic in nature and is based on highly personal accounts and experience of the author.<sup>24</sup> Embodied auto-ethnographic accounts of professional practice in education, such as the one in this article, can serve to reconfigure power relations, opening up interpretations of experience and remaking practice communications. This is supported by Denshire who argues that the impact of auto-ethnography can be to "create discomfort through their challenges to traditional realist modes of representation".<sup>25</sup>

The teaching journal I constructed since 2013, was a self-reflection of my pedagogy and observations of the teaching of CAPS-History, as I started engaging with the teachers I trained at university. Through discussions in class and, an analysis of CAPS-History, I came to the conclusion that though the History curriculum safeguards quality teaching and learning, there are a silence related to Historical Significance I then started to reflect on how I taught History before 2013. This I did in order to link my practice with the observations I made while teaching at university. I did this so as I try to detect changes and similarities in how CAPS-History dealt with Historical Significance. I concluded that to-date CAPS-History did not engage with Historical Significance, and especially how it relates to symbols and symbolisms linked with African Indigenous Knowledge. I then discovered that even before my teaching at university I did learn to view CAPS-History in a critical and innovative manner by involving my learners' worldviews in my History teaching. I continued with the same process of reflection and journal keeping while teaching at university. I did this to ensure what, as Waghid argues, to create an effective curriculum that will integrate the worldview of the society it serves.<sup>26</sup> The learners I taught in high school were all Africans, while at university they constituted the vast majority of the student population.

Decisions on which themes from CAPS-History to relate to Historical Significance for the purpose of this article became explicit based on my engagement with my learners, reflections on my own teaching and through

---

23 P Zwozdiak-Myers, *The teacher's reflective practice handbook* (New York, Routledge, 2012), p. 3.

24 AC Sparkes, Autoethnography and narratives of self: Reflections on criteria in action, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 17(1), 2000, pp. 21-43.

25 S Denshire, On auto-ethnography, *Current sociology*, 62, 2014, p. 840.

26 Y Waghid, *Democratic education ...*, p. 69.

the reading and analysis of my teaching journal and secondary sources. As argued by Denshire “an auto-ethnographic representation of practice can function as something of a corrective to depersonalized and disembodied accounts of professional work”.<sup>27</sup> A thematic method of analysis was used to analyse my data. The key themes identified from my reflection journal were based on the correlation with the purpose of this article like: what is Historical Significance? understanding Symbols and Symbolism, my observations of CAPS-History, how I taught Historical Significance in school. These themes are discussed and theorized further down.

I used the critical paradigm because the aim is to change how CAPS-History is currently excluding Historical Significance. As a result, an unsilencing approach to History was as it links to the paradigm and the nature of this project, which is to integrate and transform the concept of Historical Significance by integrating indigenous knowledge. The paradigm is aligned with critical discourse analysis used in this article as it highlights matters of power irregularities, manipulation, exploitation, and structural injustices.<sup>28</sup> This discourse relates with current debates globally of anti-colonial approach concentrates on “mechanics and operations of colonial and re-colonial relations and the implications of imperial projects”.<sup>29</sup> In this article I term the unsilencing approach as the process of rewriting, re-reading, reviewing CAPS-History because, it allows themes that are significant in History to be pushed from the periphery to the centre.. As proposed by Ramose, African people must regulate the teaching, learning and content of their education grounded on their understandings for contextual relevance.<sup>30</sup>

### **Understanding historical significance and symbols and symbolism**

From the literature reviewed it is clear that Historical Significance is represented by authors based on the significance of people as historical

---

27 S Denshire, On auto-ethnography, *Current sociology*, 62, 2014, p. 833

28 J Blommaert & C Bucean, Critical discourse analysis, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 29(1), 2000, pp. 447-466.

29 M Simmons & G Dei, Reframing anti-colonial theory for the diasporic context, *Postcolonial directions in education*, 1(1), 2012, p. 74.

30 MB Ramose, Foreword, S Seepe (Ed.), *Black perspectives on tertiary institutional transformation*, (Johannesburg, Vivlia, 1998), p. vi.

characters in history,<sup>31</sup> however some scholars placed emphasis on events<sup>32</sup> and others combined both events and characters as being significant.<sup>33</sup> The representation of Historical Significance as signified through people presents the argument that they are more important than events and vice versa. The arguments posed for the representation of both events and people signify that collaboratively people and events in history are important as people are compelled to react to their circumstances. The focus on people infers that without particular individuals who reacted in the way that they did, history would have possibly unfolded in a different way thus, and events are significant because of the individual person or people involved.<sup>34</sup> However, what is missing is the symbolism and symbols of these events and the people involved. As Danto reiterates for Historical Significance to be rendered what it is, narratives must report events which actually happened in a chronological order, explain what happened so as to connect events and attach some meaning to them.<sup>35</sup> This explains that Historical Significance is about the selection of narratives according to relevance. However, that relevance must give or have meaning for the History of the society and has to be told in an authentic manner. These would be holistic or integrated historical narratives as they allow for stories to be told from the context studied and in which studying takes place.

Among the literature reviewed only Cercadillo mentions symbolic significance in terms of events, but he omits people and symbols.<sup>36</sup> He argues that symbolic significance is normally related to myths and the main objective of historians is to provide solid arguments in order to debunk these.<sup>37</sup> He further argues that people get the History wrong deliberately in order to forge national unity. Arguments like these reveal what is perhaps

---

31 See, HC Triandis, *Individualism and collectivism* (Boulder, Westview Press, 1995), G Partington, "What History should we teach?", *Oxford Review of Education*, 6(2), 1980, pp. 157-176; M Bradshaw, Creating controversy in the classroom: Making progress with Historical Significance, *Teaching History*, 125, 2006, pp. 18-25; P Seixas, Mapping the terrain of historical significance, *Social Education*, 61(1), 1997, pp. 22-27; P Seixas, T Morton, J Collyer & S Fornazzari, *The big six: Historical thinking concepts* (Toronto, Nelson Education, 2013).

32 G Partington, "What History should we teach?", *Oxford Review of Education*, 6(2), 1980, pp. 157-176, C Counsell, *History and literacy in Year 7: Building the lesson around the text* (London, Hodder Murray, 2004), p. 45.

33 L Cercadillo, "Significance in history: Learners' ideas in England and Spain" (Ph.D., University of London, 2001), p. 14; M Bradshaw, Creating controversy in the classroom..., *Teaching History*, 125, 2006, pp. 18-25.

34 G Dawson, *Commemorating war: The politics of memory* (London, New York, Routledge, 2017), p. 5.

35 L Cercadillo, "Significance in history: Learners' ideas in England and Spain" (Ph.D., University of London, 2001), p. 39.

36 L Cercadillo, "'Maybe they haven't decided yet what is right': English and Spanish perspectives on teaching Historical Significance", *Teaching History*, 125, 2006, pp. 6-9.

37 L Cercadillo, "Significance in history: Learners' ideas in England and Spain" (Ph.D., University of London, 2001), p. 69.

the central aim of myths in historical narratives, namely providing people, by means of History, with a sense of identity and direction.<sup>38</sup> Mason takes this further by proposing that the History in myths is illustrated in the way it “brings us across such artificial distances as time and space, and translating us from ourselves to them”.<sup>39</sup> Thus, looking at Cercadillo’s understanding of symbolic significance it explains why symbols have been overlooked and silenced in historical narratives. This indicates a colonised perception of Historical Significance as it excludes Ray’s views of myths as history because in African oral tradition “myth” and “history” overlap and merge into one another. As suggested by Ray, “Myth blends into history as cosmic and archetypal events bear upon local situations, and history blends into myth as local and human events become ritualized and infused with cosmic and archetypal meaning”.<sup>40</sup> The conceptualization of Historical Significance by omitting symbols as signifying what is important has missed the most important aspect of African understanding of what is significant in History. Lévesque explicitly articulated this by arguing that, “traditionally, English Canadian Historical monographs and school textbooks have carried the implicit message that Historical Significance should be ascribed to white middle and upper-class British males in positions of power or authority”.<sup>41</sup> This depicts that Historical Significance is based on the significance of people and events as per Western epistemology. The reaction to this is that whatever is in the curriculum must help learners to relate to their world and be able to interpret it.

Symbols are explained as culture’s form of transcending the immediate situation, they will always be connected to the fundamental values and goals accepted in a society. Symbols are also seen a representation of something else by association, resemblance, or convention, especially a material object used to represent something invisible.<sup>42</sup> Symbols are important for all societies, but for Africans who embrace oral tradition, it is engraved in their historical make-up. Symbols “are considered to be patterns that provide distal excess to some structure”.<sup>43</sup> It implies that knowledges have

---

38 E Wiesel, “Myth and History”, AM Olson (ed.), *Myth, symbol and reality* (London, University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), pp. 20-30.

39 H Mason, “Myth as an ‘ambush of reality’”, AM Olson (ed.), *Myth, symbol and reality* (London, University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), p. 16.

40 B Ray, *African religions, symbol, ritual and community* (New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1976), p. 24.

41 S Lévesque, “Teaching second-order concepts in Canadian history: The importance of ‘historical significance’”, *Canadian Social Studies*, 39(2), 2005, np.

42 Anon., Website demography, “Symbol” (available at <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/symbol>, as accessed on 18 September 2018).

43 P Vogt, The physical symbol grounding problem, *Cognitive Systems Research*, 3(3), 2002, pp. 429-457.

to be taken into consideration for Historical Significance to be relevant for all societies as by means of knowledge a society is constructed. As argued by Bodnar, symbols are national traditions.<sup>44</sup> He adds that, the United States has always pursued some historical symbols over others in an endeavour to encourage unity and, therefore, support for the state itself. Therefore, people and events that were core before the American Civil War, like colonisation and revolution, were commemorated as symbolically significant.<sup>45</sup> For example, the Statue of Liberty historically excluded immigrant narratives.<sup>46</sup> The statue in the 18<sup>th</sup> century symbolised the ideals of American republicanism, especially the belief in liberty, equality, and fraternity.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, as with many symbols not everyone will be happy with the interpretation behind them as symbols and they depend on who tells the story and for what purpose. Consequently, for some of the immigrants to America the Statue of Liberty did not represent their aspirations because the state and the middle class excluded them from the narrative of the history of America. Since symbols and symbolism are not static it was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that immigrants felt accommodated by the state symbolism of the statue as it now affirms that liberty, equality, and fraternity best explain the American experience of all. In this manner the state attempted to united all citizens. This example reveals that the History of any nation has to entail the Historical Significance of symbols as they delve deep into the representation of what the History means to the people of that country. Thus, symbols and symbolism can contribute to national unity and nation building.

Thus, in light of the above, ignoring symbols in African History is like omitting a major part of the history of Africans. Mick explains that symbols and symbolism are difficult to conceptualise in History but are important. He argues that:<sup>48</sup>

*It is hard to keep thinking about the symbolic meaning of objects and behaviour. To do so requires practice in adopting a view of actions that is sufficiently detached to permit analysis and interpretation, and sufficiently empathetic to produce insights. It is usually simpler to deal with the objects and behaviours themselves.*

---

44 J Bodnar, Symbols and servants: Immigrant America and the limits of public history, *The Journal of American History*, 73(1), 1986, p. 149.

45 D Golding, Symbolism, sovereignty and domination in an industrial hierarchical organisation, *Sociological Review*, 27, 1979, pp. 169-77.

46 B Blumberg, *Celebrating the immigrant: An administrative history of the Statue of Liberty National Monument, 1952-1982* (Boston, The Institute for Research in History, 1985), p. 9.

47 J Bodnar, Symbols and servants ... , *The Journal of American History*, 73(1), 1986, p. 151.

48 DG Mick, Consumer research and semiotics: Exploring the morphology of signs, symbols, and significance, *Journal of consumer research*, 13(2), 1986, p. 196.

The above quotation illustrates that it was easy for the symbolic nature of Historical Significance to be overlooked because understanding symbols requires empathy and many historians employ a Western lens, which is detached from African epistemology. This, according to May, is because research on the significance of symbols has been relegated to poets and literary critics.<sup>49</sup> Since fields like Psychology have realised that it is important to understand people and events within their context, symbols are now perceived as being important. However, History are still lagging behind on aspects like symbolism as they are still termed as not historically significant in people's stories. Nevertheless, symbols are what dresses-up History, and to acquire a rich History one has to understand and know such symbols. This happens through the means of "social processes of sharing modes of behaviour and outlook within [a] community".<sup>50</sup> This indicates that every society has certain aspects of their culture that makes History significant. According to May, "These foundational principles of the societal culture are articulated in definite basic symbols and myths which offer some form of unity to the culture".<sup>51</sup> Symbols and symbolism are pivotal for Africans as life is perceived as holistic with no line of demarcation between the sacred and profane.<sup>52</sup> Symbols provide people with unifying cultural markers that are spatial and temporal.<sup>53</sup> For example, most indigenous people of South Africa identify themselves with places they come from as these are sacred spaces where their umbilical cords are buried. Thus, places become the cultural markers of their sacred spaces, a symbol that depicts their identity and birth place – *ekhaya* – which means home.

All nations have rituals they perform which are Historically Significant, but as Partington argues we choose what is significant and what is not. For South Africans a flag is a ritual symbol and is chosen as such. But CAPS-History depict a flag as an object for an event not as a symbolism that tallies with the country's pre-colonial and also colonial history and related temporal values and principles. It is true that national symbols are taught in Grade 6, and most textbooks unpack the symbolism in the flag, the coat of arms and so forth. However, what about how these flags are symbolic to different people? Nothing is mentioned about flags in pre-colonial Africa

---

49 R May, The significance of symbols, *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, 1960, p. 301.

50 UIF Hannerz, *Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto culture and community* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 184.

51 R May, The significance of symbols, *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, 1960, p. 314

52 J Amanze, *African traditional religions and culture in Botswana* (Gaborone-Botswana, Pula Press, 2002), p. 302.

53 P Harries, "Imagery, symbolism and tradition in a South African Bantustan: Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Inkatha, and Zulu History", *History and Theory*, 32(4), 1993, p. 106.

as if they only occurred in colonial times. Significant national dates like the 16<sup>th</sup> June 1976, focuses on the celebration of the youth (the significance is on people and the event itself) but little is emphasised on the symbolism and symbols related to the event. For example, the symbolic Historical Significance of learners being taught in Afrikaans and English was to deny African learners' knowledge of their languages which tallies with their identities. What is highlighted in the textbooks is that Afrikaans was the language of the oppressors nothing is mentioned on the fact that it was violation of the identity of indigenous people's identity by denying them to learn using their languages. This means that, it is important when celebrating such events to look at different symbols and symbolisms that will enhance nation building and address the injustices of the past. It is significant to know people behind the events and the events themselves but equally what the events and the people symbolise is important.

Other examples of ritual symbols are animals which are considered as national symbols which are normally regarded as holding the countries' national culture.<sup>54</sup> As indicated by Minahan, to illustrate the significance of symbols, such as currency, flag, uniforms, and places of worship, and war armour of countries are often adorned with their national animal symbols.<sup>55</sup> Thus, such symbols must be taught in schools to safeguard nation building and unity.

### **My observations of CAPS-History and teaching Historical Significance**

As a History Education lecturer who trains teachers to teach the subject, I have observed a number of missing aspects in CAPS-History that impacts on the quality of teaching and learning. My observation lies in the fact that CAPS-History that Historical Significance as an important historical thinking concepts that can assist learners, teachers, including policy makers to choose relevant narratives that are linked with the South African society, are missing. One can argue that the absence of the concept can be due to the fact that teaching Historical Significance is embedded in the principles of unsilencing of narratives which is a continual fight of eradication of the belief that Western epistemology is the only lens that can be used to qualify what comprises as knowledge. CAPS-History only focus on the following second order historical thinking concepts: historical

---

54 N Hammerschlag & AJ Gallagher, "Extinction risk and conservation of the earth's national animal symbols", *BioScience*, 67(8), 2017, pp. 744-749.

55 J Minahan, *The complete guide to national symbols and emblems* (Santa Barbara, Denver, Oxford: Greenwood Press, 2009), pp. xx-xxi.

evidence, multi-perspectivity, cause and effect, change and continuity and time and chronology.<sup>56</sup> The afore mentioned historical concepts requires interpretation skills of visual and written historical evidence in order to help learners understand what is Historically Significant. This is because the mentioned concepts, when it has to be studied as per the curriculum, require historians, policy makers, learners and textbook writers to understand what is significant, how it was decided what is significant, and the reasons why that which was deemed as being Historically Significant is in the curriculum.

But in schools I discovered a disjuncture whereby historical narratives were not accorded significance as practiced by the societies studied. This was established during the period of the revised National Curriculum Statement (NCS) which emphasised citizenship. This is still echoed by the current CAPS-History, which emphasises that historical narratives must be entrenched in the significance of the South African constitution and that learners must be taught its values including those pertaining to nation building and citizenship.<sup>57</sup> Observing the teaching of CAPS-History and my Grade 8 teaching of the subject made me understand the gaps which stem from silencing features of Historical Significance. In addition, this is also evidenced by the prospective teachers I teach at university and the textbooks used currently in schools as they focus more on Western ways of narrating stories and issues like symbols and symbolism are overlooked. For example, in 2008 – 2011 I taught Grades 8 and 9 and my experiences were that the content and themes that I taught were missing the Historical Significance of the Historical characters studied. The focus was more Western and indigenous themes were discarded, despite being alive in unofficial History such as media and community stories. I consequently had to draw on unofficial History to supplement the way the textbooks prescribed interpreted the curriculum to teach the classes.

The examples of themes in the CAPS-History Grade 8 curriculum I am referring to are as follows: *Changing worlds: The Industrial Revolution in South Africa: diamonds and gold, and changing work and lives in South Africa on the mines, the land and in the cities (including the 1913 Land Act)*. My focus was on the significance of the events by looking at industrialisation and its impact on South Africa. An additional focus was

---

56 DoBE, *CAPS Grade 10-12 ...*, p. 10.

57 Department of Education, Republic of South Africa, *C2005 Revised National Curriculum Statement Grades 7-9 (Schools) Senior Phase* (Pretoria, Department of Education, 2004), p. 148.

looking at the symbolism of industrialism for South Africans in terms of land loss, the introduction of factories and the agricultural revolution. I did not only focus on events and people but went beyond the Western categories of what is significant in History. Also, in terms of the significance of historical characters, such as mineworkers, I would go to the extent of looking at symbolism of men leaving their homes to work in mines and what that meant to families as this is significant in homestead leadership and helps to teach learners about the family unit. In terms of the Land Act of 1913, I un-silenced the curriculum by focusing on the significance of land for Africans in order to show the Historical Significance of symbols and symbolism. Land for Africans is more than a title deed but has as deep symbolism as an inheritance, History, identity, religion and home. Thus, land is a critical symbol of livelihood for Africans and has to be integrated as such in historical narratives. In this regard my argument was to explain the impact of land dispossession to Africans and that it was not just about losing title deeds but it was a loss of their History, identity, humanness, and religion.<sup>58</sup> This infers that land loss to Africans before 1913, and thereafter, and its significance was more than being people involved or an event taking place, it was a symbolic representation of destruction of the destruction of African History, identity, humanness, and religion. The loss of land symbolised the dehumanisation of Africans as land gives them humanness.<sup>59</sup> Such symbolism was not to be found in the CAPS curriculum or the workshops we attended. My university studies and experiences of Africanism assisted me to teach my learners to use such unofficial History.

My experiences of especially CAPS-History serves to alert the prospective teachers I teach that; it is important to teach a holistic History of any theme. It also serves to emphasises that Historical Significance is important as a historical thinking concept as it empowers teachers and learners with interpretations so as to be able to teach rich histories.<sup>60</sup> As the current approach to teaching History focuses on decolonization, a learner-centred pedagogy which would allow learners an opportunity to use their diverse unofficial knowledges to understand some themes taught in class tallies well with the use of Historical Significance.

---

58 MC Kgari-Masondo, "Women as guardians of the environment in the midst of forced removals: From Lady Selborne to Ga-Rankuwa", *Alternation Special Edition*, 14, 2015, pp. 77-105.

59 MC Kgari-Masondo, "A socio-environmental analysis of land alienation and resettlement in Ga-Rankuwa, c. 1961 to 1977", *Journal for Contemporary History*, 38(2), 2013, pp. 21-45.

60 J Wertsch & M Rozin, "The Russian revolution...", *International Review of History Education*, 1998, p. 48.

## **Un-silencing historical narratives – Historical Significance**

Transformation in the teaching of History by inserting Historical Significance as one of the key historical thinking second order concepts in CAPS-History is imperative. The relevant authorities have been silent about how this could be done. This article proposes that through the implementation of an un-silencing pedagogy Historical Significance can play a major role in ensuring that themes and stories that are not visible in the curriculum will be foregrounded. Thus, the insertion of Historical Significance in CAPS-History requires the urgent attention of policy makers and teachers. A systematic curriculum development exercise, including the development of teaching and learning materials, needs to be done to ensure that diverse epistemologies are drawn together when historical narratives are prepared for use in the classroom. Naturally, History teachers who encompass both Western and African Indigenous Knowledge would do a great job in integrating the two epistemologies in historical accounts. But university History courses seldom seem to engage in the integration of knowledges. Most History teachers have no training in courses that entail diverse indigenous knowledges and they need ready-made History materials to assist them. This article has shown, through the example of the author's teaching narrative that, though challenging, committed practitioners of History who are willing to engage in an un-silencing pedagogy which requires "border crossing"<sup>61</sup> can succeed. Such a crossing deals with contradictions and allows for creative solutions thereof, for:<sup>62</sup>

*... the dimensions and boundaries of the 'unofficial' need to be explored in greater detail. By considering the symbols, images, versions, texts, institutions and media which bombard children daily with images of the past. It requires consideration of their potential effects and the ways in which they relate to the 'official' versions.*

In terms of the teaching of History it means that the integration of unofficial and official narratives that are both Western and indigenous to Africa require recognition so as to bridge the gaps learners engage with outside the classroom when learning about their society. The main impact of teaching History narratives in a divisive manner is the eruption of conflicting views which can cause confusion to learners. Such a segregation of knowledges has to be addressed by all concerned. Otherwise this can lead to challenges in

---

61 H Giroux, *Border crossings: Cultural workers and the politics of education* (London, Routledge, 1992), pp. 30-40.

62 R Phillips, *Contesting the past, constructing the future: History, identity and politics in schools*, *British Journal of Education Studies*, 46(1), 1998, p. 45

understanding History as illustrated in the narrative of the author above. The author's narrative also depicts that students in her History Honours course still struggle in bridging the gap between the Western orientated official and the unofficial indigenous African knowledge. This indicates that teaching teachers and learners an integrated History that excludes knowledges of learners' context produce unconstructive members of society as they are faced with unsolved mysteries of a subject that end up discriminating and silencing what is historically significant historically in their personal narratives. The result is an incomplete History based on one-sidedness.

“Cultural border crossings pedagogy”<sup>63</sup> is proposed as one solution that can assist in un-silencing themes that are still colonised in History. The pedagogy is relevant in that it empowers the teacher with skills to help himself/herself first and then the learners to understand diversity and multiculturalism. Teachers are able to understand different cultures as different and not superior and in the process, learners will best understand their identity as South Africans in a globalised world. Cultural border crossing pedagogy would also be relevant as the teacher will assist learners to reconstruct and demystify the tension between official Western knowledge and unofficial indigenous African knowledge in History learning. The pedagogy tallies well with the values of the South Africa's Constitution. The tenets are based on the corrective measures to the divisions of the past so as to create a society based on democratic principles, social justice and basic rights, and to improve the quality of life of all citizens and liberate the potential of all South Africans.<sup>64</sup> The concept of multiperspectivity as endorsed in the teaching of History illustrates that CAPS-History contains principles that allow for teachers to have some defiance of the Western lens that is dominant in certain post-colonial discourses which many History teachers hardly contemplate. Such principles must be taught to learners and must be part of the curriculum. As Jenkins and Brickley have argued about the National History Curriculum of England and Wales, one can claim that South Africa's CAPS-History curriculum in essence “allows” interpretation, to possibilities and multiplicity of dissimilar meanings and knowledges, but that has to be pushed to the centre through the border crossing of cultures through un-silencing our pedagogies of teaching

---

63 H Giroux, *Border crossings ...*, p. 49.

64 DoBE, *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) Grades 10-12 History* (Pretoria, Cape Town, Government Printing Works, 2011), p. i.

History.<sup>65</sup> This implies that teachers need to research in-depth and draw silenced significant knowledges into historical narratives and allow learners to do the same.

## Conclusion

The call of this article is that we have to move away from silencing historical narratives that are significant but, due to political propaganda, are pushed to the periphery. The five features promulgated by Partington on Historical Significance are important in transformation the teaching of History and the CAPS-History curriculum. History teaching in South Africa has to be relevant to democratic principles of respect for all knowledges that are silenced. Drastic change has to occur so that we teach our History learners from different perspectives by drawing from significant stories that are aligned with the communities it serves so that the respect for humanity can take place and a contribute to a national identity that is inclusive can happen. Using Weber's "ideal type" curriculum, any re-construction to achieve the ideal is worth pursuing because curricula is ever changing for the benefit of progress, societal interests and nation building.<sup>66</sup> This calls upon teachers, lecturers, and everyone in South Africa and globally who strives for equality, respect and tolerance to defy that which undermines the "others" narratives and teach Histories that are liberating and focus on communities' narratives. As suggested by Gatsheni-Ndlovu:<sup>67</sup>

*Decolonising methodology, therefore, entails unmasking its role and purpose in re-search. It is also about rebelling against it; shifting the identity of its object so as to re-position those who have been objects of research into questioners, critics, theorists, knowers, and communicators. And, finally, it means recasting research into what Europe has done to humanity and nature rather than following Europe as a teacher to the rest of the world.*

This article is a call for recollecting, rereading and rewriting CAPS-History so it can portray all communities as they are, and not depicting them from the politicians, or colonisers' perspectives of wanting to dominate and dehumanise the other as historically insignificant. Hence, the historical thinking concept of Historical Significance was chosen as it is key in identifying what is significant. What is historically significant has

---

65 K Jenkins, & K Brickley, Always historicise: Unintended opportunities in National Curriculum History, *Teaching History*, 62, 1991, pp. 8-14.

66 M Van Manen, "Linking ways of knowing with ways of being practical", *Curriculum inquiry*, 6(3), 1977, p. 209.

67 S Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Decolonising research", 2017 (available at: <https://specimen-news.com/2017/09/27/decolonising-research>, as accessed on 6 August 2018.

always been based on Western standards and indigenous African historical narratives have been pushed to the periphery and by integrating the concept of Historical Significance into the curriculum such silenced histories will have prominence.